
Winter was finally giving up its grip on the Frankfurt am Main area; the chilling, dull weather had stepped back, clearing a path for the first warm, sunny days. It was a silent period—a brief interlude between the massive gatherings of the winter season and the frantic business conferences of the approaching spring and summer.

Michael walked slowly along the river embankment. The trees, planted in an ideal, precise line, stood naked, waiting for warmer days to coax out their leaves. The residual frost from the night had completely vanished, and everything in the city seemed to be preparing for the upcoming spring.

But Michael's mind was busy with entirely different things. He kept his pace steady, moving toward the office—the one place where he still spent the vast majority of his time.

He reached the bridge – the final landmark of his route. Crossing the span brought back memories of a distant era; centuries ago, this very bridge had been choked with crowds protesting the sweeping reforms of the newly established German Cluster. It had been a turbulent, uncertain time. The demonstrators had been fiercely anxious about the loss of their old lives, demanding assurances on medical insurance, labour regulations, and dozens of other vanishing protections. For days, the main thoroughfare – usually reserved for heavy vehicle traffic – had been completely paralysed by the blockade. When the crowds finally dispersed, they left behind nothing but a vast expanse of abandoned junk and debris.

Carrying these memories of a bygone struggle, Michael arrived at the towering entrance of his office building in the heart of Frankfurt. He paused at the threshold for a brief moment, letting the old world fade as he dialled his mind back to the pressing, cold demands of his present agenda.

He walked briskly to his office, deliberately avoiding any contact with the personnel in the corridors – the clock was ticking, and his problems were not going to resolve themselves simply with the passage of time.

Berndt sank into his heavy chair and brought his terminal to life. Two high-priority messages lay waiting on his screen, which he had intentionally left to digest after his walk: the decrypted report from Xenia and an urgent inquiry from the insurance company requiring a formal reply within ten standard days.

Michael had purposely avoided filing any insurance claim to safeguard his clandestine treaty with the Outer System. He knew that a standard loss investigation carried a critical risk of exposing the delicate operation. Yet, simply letting the case slide into a 'dead' status wasn't a perfect solution either; sooner or later, someone would dig it up.

To handle this administrative minefield, he decided to delegate the matter to Adrian. It wasn't just because Adrian was skilled with such technical anomalies, but because of his unique, external connections. While Michael possessed plenty of high-level contacts within the insurance sector himself, using them directly would require unrolling the details of the situation to far too many curious ears.

Then, his focus shifted back to the Xenia file. He had already skimmed the first portion of the document, and it had fit perfectly into the mental picture he had constructed: the Technate had indeed managed to smuggle away a fragment of the exploded HEI transmitter. That initial confirmation was precisely why he had postponed reading the second half of the report.

Instead of reading on, Michael had spent the preceding hours meticulously analysing cargo manifests, transport logs, and the emergency personnel shift schedules on the Heidelberg. In the end, his digital dragnet had successfully isolated a single name: Matthias Klein. This was the puzzle piece Michael intended to hand over to Ake. It was the perfect opportunity for his enforcer to locate and capture the remaining Technate assets, effectively dismantling their entire covert network on the habitat in one clean sweep.

He slowly opened the second part of the report, and the words struck a heavy, unsettling blow to his calculative mindset. He reread the information from the report several times, trying to detect any

tricks. The entire picture he had constructed of the sabotage on the Heidelberg was instantly shattered. Until this moment, Michael had been almost certain that everything was the work of the Technate's dirty hands, assuming the clumsy, non synchronised execution of the operation was simply the result of friction and poor coordination among the Technate's divided management board. But the report told a completely different story: the Technate was just as blind-sided and deeply surprised by the discovery of the anomalous infrared signatures in the Outer System.

The most chilling revelation was their mention of unusual activity around the Orbital Crawler, the very vessel supposed to bring the critical CX2 manufacturing equipment to the Inner System. Yet, even that worrying detail faded into obscurity in front of the sudden, devastating realisation that followed: the Orbital Crawler had departed from the Outer System almost two years ago. This meant the Technate, despite all their formidable surveillance assets, had only become aware of these bizarre deep-space signatures now.

Michael felt a hollow sensation of defeat settle over him. Devastated by the implications, he stood up from his desk and walked over to the wide glass window, where the colours of a fading sunset played silently across the valley of Frankfurt am Main.

Adrian and Ake stepped out of the investigation centre. For Adrian, leaving the digital copy of the CX2 telemetry completely unexplored down to its finest parameters was no easy task, but another part of his mind insisted that the next piece of the puzzle was far more critical. In the end, he knew the terms of his deal: he had an agreement with Michael to uncover the true architects – the people and the hidden organisation – operating behind this astonishingly advanced technology.

"So, what is next?" Ake asked, looking directly into Adrian's face.

"Let's visit Mair, as we planned before," Adrian replied in a flat, pragmatic tone.

"You said before medical facility is quite similar to Unity centre, so let's visit it and enjoy incredible waterfall," he continued with a faint smile.

Adrian possessed a rare ability to temporarily shelf unsettling findings while he gathered more raw information. It was a tactical delay that invariably allowed the broader picture to fall into place – a crucial part of his famous 'magic'.

"I'm not space structures engineer, but yeah, it feels structurally like copy of Unity centre, but walking there..." Ake's reply was interrupted by Adrian's gentle sign to stop.

"Yes, we will take transport, and we are running out of time anyway," Adrian replied in a friendly tone. He felt a deep need to refill his mind, to make pause, and that need moved him forward. His brain was already projecting exactly how the recent findings might be shared with Michael during their upcoming leaplink.

The transport was empty, and the only two passengers aboard were Adrian and Ake; however, this time it took a staggering forty minutes to reach their destination. Adrian sat in absolute silence, his face and mind drifting somewhere far away, and Ake decided to respect that silence along the way.

For Adrian, this commute was far from comfortable. In his mind, space habitats were places where everything moved quickly, automated yet fundamentally restricting – it was nothing like the absolute freedom of driving his own car from one major city to another back in the Finnish Cluster land area on Earth. He had always preferred to maintain control over his own movement as much as he possibly could, which made this passive commute a silent struggle for him.

When they arrived at the medical facility, Adrian stopped to straighten up. He shook his head to stretch his neck, but these physical movements were intended more to stretch his mind than his body. After a moment, he directed his gaze first to Ake, and then to the immense medical facility before

them, remaining perfectly calm and silent. Ake was slightly confused by this behaviour, but after Adrian offered a brief hand sign, they both moved toward the entrance.

Once inside the lobby, Ake decided to break the silent procession.

"As I see, you are not fond of such commute system, huh?" Ake asked in a friendly tone.

"I hate it," Adrian replied with a tint of a smile. *"Yet, I understand efficiency of that, but yeah, hate it".*

"You could wait here, I will ask where Mair is currently," Ake said, gesturing toward a spot near the waterfall.

The structure of the waterfall and all of its features closely resembled the one in the Unity Centre; however, the entrance to this facility was much more restricted. The true purpose of the waterfall, the surrounding trees, and the small park tucked behind it was different – it was all meticulously designed to help patients heal faster and more efficiently. But Adrian's thoughts were not occupied by its therapeutic purpose, nor by the incredible view opening in front of his eyes. Instead, he was thinking about the water: about the filtration systems, the high-pressure pumps, the chemical processes that added precise minerals to the flow, and the complex electronics that kept it all running – the essential core of it all, the automation. After his latest findings, all of it suddenly felt incredibly fragile. His train of thought was abruptly broken by Ake's return.

"Got room, let's move on," Ake said quickly.

"Amm, sure," Adrian replied quickly, postponing his thoughts and preparing space for new information in his head.

While ascending in the elevator, Ake kept his gaze fixed on the floor, trying to formulate the most effective question for Adrian.

"What exactly do you want asking Mair?" Ake decided to begin with this slightly rude question.

"Ah, just missing information to support my conclusion about how HEI exploded," Adrian replied, scratching his forehead.

"It will reveal some Anni's involvement with that," he concluded, lowering his hand.

Mair had spent the last few days in the medical centre mostly sleeping, pumped with a variety of expensive drugs intended to heal his body and mind as quickly as possible. The German Cluster was no sanctuary of pure altruism, but this was a situation where commercial interests intersected directly with the human element. A better environment meant a better return on investment, and the German Cluster valued its hardworking people far more than the costly wonders of medical chemistry.

Still, one question kept reflecting like a beam of light inside a mirror cube in Mair's head: he already felt well – there was no dizziness, no memory loss – yet he was still being kept in the medical facility.

"Ah, that is the room," Ake noted, pointing the way with his hand.

Adrian decided to gently knock on the door before opening it, but Ake bypassed the courtesy and quickly pushed the door to Mair's room open.

They found Mair sitting in a chair near the bed. The chair had been angled toward a large window that opened up a beautiful view of the waterfall. From this perspective – looking down from the top – the sightseeing was incredibly relaxing. However, Mair twitched noticeably the moment the door was thrown open by Ake.

"Hello Mair, Mair Vogel – right?" Ake started in a friendly tone.

"Yes, right. Who are you?" Mair asked in reply, his face surprised; he had not expected any visitors.

"We are those with answers," Adrian replied quickly, stepping in to interrupt Ake's pace.

"But also, we have questions," Adrian continued, keeping the momentum swift to prevent Mair from overthinking his replies – ensuring they got a raw, unfiltered answer. *"As I understood, your memories came back, right?"*

"Yes, what the question than?" Mair replied, slightly confused.

"Before the explosion on your external inspection, did you touch something? Any plugs, or some unexpected thing?" Adrian continued at the same fast pace as before.

"No, it was like something... it happen without any action from my side," Mair explained nervously. *"My intention was to inspect data cable coming from this weird thing. I don't even touch it at all."*

"Thanks, it explains me... thank you!" Adrian replied, patting Mair on his shoulder.

"But, why am I still here? What is happening next?" Mair asked in reply, his tone deeply questioning.

"Don't worry, it's mere the medical thing to let you free from this place," Ake replied in a very friendly tone. *"And also – try to relax, you got a lot of paid hours after. My colleagues will instruct you with the following actions very soon, but for now take care and relax."*

"Am I restricted for doing my job?" Mair asked.

"Oh no, expect promotion instead, but again, my colleagues will instruct you later," Ake continued to reply in his friendly tone.

"See you later in the Heidelberg! Take care! Bye," Adrian said quickly.

Ake and Adrian left the room quickly, deciding to leave the man in that state to save the precious time they had before the leaplink. They moved to the empty elevator in very different moods – Adrian felt more enlightened with the confirmation of his theory, but Ake was the opposite, slightly upset.

"I was expecting more questions from you," Ake asked directly. *"Is it really enough, what you have got?"*

"Oh yes, my theory just confirmed," Adrian replied in his typical calm tone. *"This Anni, this pretty woman is becoming more interesting. What are you planning to do with this poor guy?"*

"Oh, additional NDA awaits him, and paid holidays – not a big deal. What do you mean by interesting?" Ake asked, surprised.

"Oh, this sneaky beautiful ass Anni not only destroyed HEI transmitter, but also was trying to eliminate this poor guy – Mair, his name is, right?" Adrian replied with confidence in his voice.

"Yes, I'm still want to see more direct evidence, but... will find it soon," Adrian concluded.

"Aha! So let's move to communication centre," Ake replied, his mood instantly improving. *"Let's share findings with Michael."*

The last ten hours Anni had spent nervously trying to communicate with her distant home; she desperately needed more clarity from Jakt regarding her next steps. His last two messages had been brief and directly contradictory.

The current operational situation inside the Heidelberg space habitat severely restricted her communication options, leaving only a single secure channel viable. After sending her first query, she waited nearly two hours, but even the standard delivery notification failed to return. Anni rechecked the estimated arrival times based on the current alignment of visible communication relays and the space positions of both the Heidelberg and the Helix habitats – the math was clear: even under the worst-case scenario, that delivery receipt should have already come back.

Anni decided to re-transmit the message, cancelling all active operations in accordance with the directive of the first message from Jakt. At that moment on the Heidelberg, a few other operatives were wrapping up their assignments – for them, the long-awaited time to return home had finally arrived. They were an old team, gathered and trained by Anni nearly two decades ago, just a few standard years before their initial deployment to the Inner System. Part of her viewed their departure as welcome news; returning home was something she herself had been desperately waiting for. However, the second message remained deeply troubling. It dictated a stark change of plans: she was to stay behind alone, tasked with retrieving those crucial blueprints mentioned in the directive.

The first step of the process was a list – a clean inventory of technical assets that needed to be scrubbed, concealed, or destroyed outright within the Heidelberg. The tally itself was brief: the HEI communication device, a few packs of standard explosives, and the poison. The standard explosives were cheap, disposable assets; Anni decided it was far safer to stash them somewhere inside the habitat's unused areas rather than risk smuggling them through transit. The HEI communicator and the poison, however, were entirely different – those two elements had to be removed completely. Transporting them off-habitat required two operatives from her team, strategically placed inside customs clearance, to handle the physical pass-through.

Anni carefully constructed a timed sequence of events to execute the withdrawal: the first group would depart toward the Martian sector, carrying the sensitive assets with them. Once there, they would lie low and await an Orbital Crawler bound for the Outer System; the remaining team members were assigned a completely different route. They would depart later for the Venusian sector, catching another Orbital Crawler several standard months after the one used by the first group.

The next move was to check the assets – she reached out to the operative responsible for retrieving those items. She decided to meet with him in person rather than use a communicator, driven by a desire to minimise risks and a growing wave of paranoia in her head. The spot she chose was the third level of the community centre – a location where nobody would expect to find her. Or, at least, that was what she believed.

On arrival at the Heidelberg space habitat, Matthias was surprised by a broadcast message directed at all incoming passengers: **"Please register at the Community Centre within your first few standard hours. Attention: everyone is obliged to register. Thank you for your cooperation."**

It landed like a red flare in his mind – something major was happening. To avoid raising any suspicions, he decided to make the Community Centre his very first stop. Hiding wasn't an option, but the very fact that he hadn't been warned in advance actually gave him a strange sort of confidence: if this were a targeted trap meant for him, his network would have alerted him long before docking.

He felt a lingering dizziness – the journey, and this switching between micro gravity and emulated gravity, had exacted its price. Despite the fatigue, he moved quickly. Landing among the first wave of arriving passengers, he caught a transport cabin and made his way straight to the Community Centre – a place that had become noticeably livelier over the past few standard days.

He stepped into the lobby, where the air hit him – wet, slightly salty, and crisp. The registration queues were well-organised, so he picked the shortest line and stepped in. Matthias stared toward the waterfall, trying to process recent events while the stream of passing people blurred into background noise in his mind. Then, a sharp jolt of awareness snapped him back to attention. His eyes suddenly locked onto a familiar silhouette.

"Ah, this woman again," his voice shouted internally. He instantly recognised her from their last encounter in this very building – it was Anni.

"Hey! Anni!" he shouted out loud.

Anni kept moving, completely ignoring him; she was not expecting to meet anyone here. Matthias turned around to the woman standing behind him in the queue.

"Sorry, I must... please keep my place for a moment," he said, stepping out of line and breaking into a quick jog toward Anni.

"Hey! Hello again," he called out loudly as he closed the distance. He touched her shoulder gently to catch her attention.

"Oi! It is you. Matthias. What are you doing here?" she replied, her tone sharp with surprise.

"And I am also glad to see you. I have the same question for you. I am just back early. But... you told me before..." he replied, slightly out of breath.

Anni did not know what to reply. Matthias was an echo of her previous failed assignment, and she had not built a story for him. She knew Matthias was practically her colleague – a spy too, but from the Technate – however, to her, he was not. He was simply a man from the Inner System.

"Oh, I found an opportunity to stay here for a little bit longer. But why are you here in the Community Centre?" she asked, recovering her usual tone.

"I wish I knew – there is a new procedure for all arrivals to be registered here as well. A procedure for the sake of procedures and protocols, you know," he replied with a slight touch of humour.

"Interesting, I was not aware of that. Let us meet later, yes? I am busy with some paperwork here... as I said – an opportunity," she replied, offering a light giggle.

"Sure. Oh, I must go back to the queue – see you later, then!" Matthias replied quickly.

"See you," Anni replied.

She turned back on her feet and moved toward the lift. This unexpected encounter with Matthias was a clear signal to move quickly – or better yet, to leave the space habitat as soon as possible. But leaving was not an option. A dark thought crossed her mind: she could do a great service for the German Cluster by eliminating Matthias in next days. It was a rapid, wild impulse, but the more she considered it, the more it felt like the cleanest way to solve her problem.

Anni reached the third level and moved toward one of the benches placed specifically to enjoy the engineering marvel of rotational gravity, falling water, and architecture. The bench was already occupied by her team member – Olas, the man responsible for handling the assets. She sat down beside him, letting the heavy roar of the simulated waterfall cover their conversation.

"Hi, Olas. We do not have much time. What about the explosives?" she asked, keeping her voice carefully balanced – loud enough for him to hear over the water, but soft enough to blur into the background noise for anyone listening at a distance.

"Hey, Anni. I hid them. Disassembled, deactivated and safely hidden in different places... the unused sectors. It would take them a very long time to find everything," he replied, adopting the exact same quiet, calculated tone.

"Capsules?" he asked.

"Here – two packs, three in each. But... the third pack I will keep with me for a while," Anni replied. She quietly slipped two small boxes into his pocket.

"What are you up to with them? Why do you still need this poison?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"I do not know yet. The HEI communicator?" she continued quickly, shifting the subject.

"That is a small problem. It was placed for you in the communication centre, but now it is guarded... The good news is my shift is today, so I can retrieve it," he replied.

"Fuck, Olas! You should have done that already!" she snapped, her annoyance flaring.

"It was not possible to retrieve it earlier without arousing suspicion," he replied calmly.

"Fine. Do it today. See you later – we must not be seen together for too long. Bye," Anni said. She stood up and walked away briskly without waiting for Olas to respond.

The communication centre was still crowded with people – engineers, guards, technicians; this picture reminded Adrian of an ant hill in the middle of summer. Everybody was in their place, doing something, everybody had a designated function, and nothing was spontaneous. Ake, however, was not so impressed with the scene. Instead, he was pushing to reach the communication room as soon as possible, eager to discuss the latest findings with Adrian – before the leaplink, to avoid any big surprises.

They moved in. The first level was almost cleared and investigated, with only a few rooms left.

While moving toward the lift, Adrian suddenly stopped Ake with a silent hand gesture – he heard a dialogue with raised voices nearby. Adrian looked at Ake's face and signalled for him to keep silent and listen. There was an argument happening in the adjacent room.

"That is my finding, I should report it directly," one engineer said, his tone rising. *"And that is my shift and my fucking duty!"*

"Engineer Olas, that is protocol – everything must be described right in here!" another voice argued back.

"Oh, I will do that on my behalf! Period!" Olas's voice snapped back in response.

Adrian made a swift gesture to interrupt the dialogue, pointing Ake forward with a faint, tight smile.

"What is going on?" Ake stepped into the room, his low voice instantly cutting through the noise.

Olas had not expected anyone to interrupt his attempt to grab the small, dark-green box he had found attached to the wiring cabinet. His heart rate spiked so fast that he could hear the heavy thud of blood pounding in his own ears.

"I found a device that should not be here. That is our task here, sir. Who are you?" Olas asked, trying to keep his tone calm and strictly technical.

"Habitat administration – your bosses, man," Ake replied in a warm, informal tone, flashing his credentials.

"What did you find? Exactly," Adrian interrupted with a calm and flat tone.

Olas knew he was at a dead end. He had no choice left except to play the dutiful, oblivious engineer.

"This box. It was attached here, see?" Olas replied, pointing toward the open wiring cabinet on the wall.

"Give me that, please," Adrian asked, holding out his hand.

Olas handed over the dark green box. *"Sure, here it is,"* he replied.

"Very thank you for your surprising finding!" Adrian replied with a faint smile, making an effort to sound friendly.

"Eh, do not forget to file a detailed report about your finding... Olas, right?" added Ake.

"Sure, sir. Could I go?" Olas asked, nodding quickly.

"Yes. And this report part is about both of you," Ake replied, looking around and taking in the state of the room with its detached wall panels. *"Is it finished?"* he continued, pointing at the exposed wiring.

"Yes, mostly. Another team will install the panels and clean up the mess, sir," the other engineer replied.

Adrian and Ake looked at each other for a brief moment, turned on back, and left the room.

The automatic doors of the lift in the communication centre closed with a soft, almost pleasant sound, making the limited space of the cabin feel secure enough for Ake to break the silent pause Adrian had held since they left the room. Adrian was staring down at the newly acquired dark-green box. Aside from a small electrical connector, the casing was unremarkable and boring, yet he kept turning it over and over in his hands.

"I found your strategy very effective, Adrian," Ake interrupted the silence right after the doors closed.

"What?" Adrian asked, without taking his eyes off the box.

"Your idea to leave Anni free worked. Even more, I did not arrest this cunt who was trying to steal this very box that is in your hands now," Ake replied, unable to hide his satisfaction. He paused to let Adrian process the information.

"And this strategy also strangely helped to locate Anni today..." he continued, but was cut off by the opening doors.

"Mmm. It should always work. As you said before – there is always more cunts than one," Adrian replied, trying to conceal the mixture of surprise and achievement. He made a gesture for them to continue down the corridor toward the secure communication room.

"Yes, but you missed one thing..." Ake replied with a smile and a warm, friendly tone.

Adrian kept a silent pause while they walked the rest of the way to the room prepared for the upcoming leaplink with Michael. Once they stepped inside and the heavy doors slid shut, Adrian broke his deliberate silence.

"What thing?" he asked, looking straight into Ake's face.

"Ah, here is the thing – Michael calculated one of the Technate dirty hands, Matthias by name. Following your strategy, my guys were keeping an eye on him... And know what?" Ake asked, his tone lifting with satisfaction.

"This Matthias knew Anni. Yes, we lost eyes on her, but... looking for one led us to the second. And the big bonus – looking at Anni right after that led us straight to this cunt Olas we just met!" Ake continued in the same energetic tone, searching Adrian's face to catch his reaction.

"Mmm. That is weird. So you think I am wrong, saying Anni is not involved with Technate?" Adrian replied in a calm voice, raising an eyebrow.

"Neither of us is right... whatever Cluster or organisation Anni is working for – might be they are cooperating, huh?" Ake replied, though processing the thought struck a blow to his confidence.

"Don't think so. Anni was destroying, and Technate was trying to steal, as they are usually doing," Adrian replied, moving his gaze back down to the dark-green box.

"However, I am surprised in a good way you did manage to locate those cunts so fast," he continued, his tone flat but appreciative.

"Give me a few more standard days. What about this box?" Ake asked, his gaze also shifting to their new finding.

"Very precious work. I can not feel a gap to understand how to disassemble it. Also, its power is dead – meaning it relies on external power. And this connection – we are missing one part. Need a lab later... could we return after the leaplink to the lab we were in before?" Adrian asked, suddenly shifting his gaze back to Ake.

"Em, sure. After the leaplink – it should start in about one standard minute," Ake replied, surprised by the abrupt pivot.

Michael returned to his office – a space that had become a second home, the place where key decisions had been made for decades. He felt a mountain of unsolved issues weighing heavily on his shoulders. With the sun about to sink fully below the horizon of the Frankfurt am Main valley, he gathered all the ongoing problems into a list, attempting to decompose each one into small, manageable tasks – though it was anything but simple.

Michael opened his terminal to check the time and prepare for the leaplink with Ake and Adrian – he felt the same need he had weeks ago: to share information and discuss it with competent people. Real help did not always come from others, but sharing information, talking things through – that had saved him many times.

Everything was ready for the connection. He pressed the leaplink button. The communication delay was an annoying 3.4 seconds – hardly helpful when his mind demanded a live, real-time discussion. For

a brief second, he even entertained the thought of visiting the Heidelberg space habitat in person, but it was a foolish idea born purely of impatience – a rare flaw for him.

"Hello Michael! Happy to be on time. Adrian and Ake here," Adrian's voice came through the void of space from the distant habitat.

"Hi folks, hopefully you have progress. This time, let me build the agenda for our conversation: I want to start with the urgent questions – one by one. Next, I want you both to share your latest findings. And at the end, discuss my finding – the one I am trying to break," Michael said in a warm, friendly tone. He was trying to be brief and effective – the best way to handle a leaplink.

"Confirmed. Shoot, boss," Ake's voice disrupted the seven second silence of the communication delay.

"Firstly – Adrian, how about this issue with the insurance contract? I have received a formal letter about our unclaimed cargo loss. Is it under control? Have you found a technical or other way to solve it?" Michael asked, standing up to fetch a bottle of whisky and a glass.

"In progress. I would say you are very lucky. This case came to the hands of my friend, John Berg. Moreover, he has something in mind about that. I guess you are going to spend some credits... ah, if the case contains some bills for investigation purposes, it will be more believable. Overall, I would not be worried about this... issue," Adrian's voice filled the room after the delay, finding Michael pouring the amber liquid into his glass.

"Since I started with you, Adrian – I found our small car accident with Lizzie closed. Just wondering what happened with that. Ah, and thank you for that," Michael replied, standing near his chair and sipping from his glass as he turned toward the window.

"I don't know if you are sitting in your beautiful chair, but I would recommend you do that right now. And you should send your regards for this case to Mikko. I am sending you the technical details of his findings with this message. But shortly – we are all in deep shit. Not just right now, but for years and years before this very moment. Mikko found out how this weirdness happened; he connected with Bouclier Digitale, the producer of those chips. It isn't magic – it is a very complicated and layered sabotage instead. Someone possesses very proprietary information from Bouclier, and last but not least – someone possesses a very sophisticated microwave technology to trigger the debug mode on these things. In the document, you can find a huge list of devices where this CPU is used. I am sharing it with you and Ake now, so this is something to think about... Michael?" Adrian's speech filled the room again.

Berndt sat down in his chair and took a long sip of his whisky before refilling the glass.

"Hmm. Honestly, I was expecting something like that, but hearing it from you, Adrian, makes it chilling. I should check on Bouclier's plans to deal with that, though there is little more I can do personally. But, as an engineer – do you see a quick way to solve that problem?" Michael asked, switching back to his typical, calm working tone.

He finally felt unsafe, even sitting inside the most secure building in the German Cluster. To him, a single fault in technology – a single breach of deeply proprietary information – was a pathway to countless others, hidden and not yet uncovered. If an actor could execute this once, and it was neither an anomaly nor a stroke of luck, they could repeat it at will.

The seven second communication delay felt deeply unsettling now. Yet it didn't spark panic; instead, it transformed into a sharp motivation to find out who was responsible.

"Yes, the proposal is attached. You should forward it to the engineering team to develop and investigate further. As I said – it is not magic. It is a specific region on the chip and very known frequencies. Just block them. Needless to say, I am not an expert in this area, but you have a direction," Adrian's voice returned to the room, his tone calm, technical, and flat.

"I got it. Ake, did you map the network of those dirty hands from the Technate? And what about this person, Anni?" Michael asked. He took a long sip after that, waiting for the reply in the silent

office, where only the soft, almost imperceptible hum of the environmental control system filled the space.

"That's in progress. I'm keeping my eyes on them all, boss. Guess all of my eyes will be busier and busier. Unfortunately, I have to deliver some bad news – the CX2 piece has been stolen. Not sure yet if Matthias did it or his fellow cunt, but it was definitely Technate's dirty hands. As for Anni... there is another complication. There is another faction involved, though she is not working alone. Furthermore, we just stopped an attempt to remove evidence – a piece of their inventory. We found it in the communication centre – a box Adrian is trying to figure out right now. The report is attached to this message, too."

Ake's cheerful voice filled Michael's room, replacing Adrian's calm, technical report with a livelier narrative.

Michael knocked his fingers rapidly against the desktop a few times, took another sip, and continued.

"Very interesting. What kind of box? How was it found?" he asked, his tone lifting slightly this time. He raised his glass, staring into the amber liquid while waiting for a response, the communication delay growing more and more irritating by the second.

"It is a box. A dark-green piece of technology, very precisely made and completely different from typical disposable shit. One connector of some sort, cold to the touch, and seemingly dead without external power. It was found by a guy who works with Anni – this second force messing around here. Ake is waiting for a report on how it was found, and I am waiting for a lab to investigate further," Adrian's voice visited the silent room again, filling it with a clear, concise description.

"Mmm. Interesting. How can you be sure it is not active now?" Michael asked, trying to picture the object based on what Adrian had said seconds ago.

"Engineering intuition – something you can trust," Adrian's voice filled the room once more, this time with a faint trace of dry humour.

"But seriously – firstly, nothing has happened so far. Secondly, if this device was intended to listen, that guy wouldn't have been sent to retrieve it. Ah, and personally, I wouldn't worry too much about the Technate bastard team – they are predictable as hell. But this other team working with Anni... well, she definitely has a very beautiful arse, but she is just as dangerous. She has already tried to kill, and I am sure she has done it before... However, there is more to come on that later," the final part of Adrian's message made Michael frown.

"Aha. We should discuss this matter, but first... well, I want to discuss my findings, which are somehow related to the insurance case. I received a report from the Technate – they convened an emergency meeting of sorts to discuss deep-space scanning results. They discovered heat signatures around the orbital crawler while it was departing from the Outer System – the one that delivered our CX2 containers," Michael said.

He paused, took a sip from his glass, and after a moment decided to send the message unfinished over the leaplink. Michael intended to stir up Adrian and Ake's minds first. He refilled his glass once more while waiting for a reply.

"Don't want to mimic you, boss, but interesting. Very interesting – why now?" Ake's voice came back after the delay.

"That's a very unsettling question. I have a few ideas, but first I want to hear yours," Michael replied quickly.

"There is a lot of data from deep-space scanning. Data can be analysed at a different pace, so... again, no magic. Unless... someone delayed this information intentionally... which makes this a political question, not an engineering one..." Adrian's voice broke through the silence of the room.

"Yes. But I checked how the Technate gathers information for this sector of the Solar system – you two should be sitting down for this, too – the Technate outsources this service to our beloved Union."

There are a few Clusters providing them with that data, which means... we have another riddle in the dark," Michael replied, his tone calm, yet edged with a subtle, growing anxiety.

"Michael, I suggest you start finding clues within our biggest insurance companies. And if you can – check the orders for big cargo spaceships made during the last few standard years. Usually, these things are connected. Every route for such massive pieces of machinery is calculated far in advance, requiring deep-space scans to ensure a debris-free path," Ake's voice broke the silence, still carrying that cheerful, confident tone.

"Mmm. You have almost solidified the idea I was trying to grasp, Ake. Adrian, what do you think?" Michael asked. He felt the reassuring sensation of control returning as his mind began building a plan. For the first time during this leaplink, the communication delay felt almost manageable.

"Mmm. Ake is right, but I would recommend moving insurance companies to the bottom of the list," Adrian's calm voice confirmed Michael's own intention to leave insurance companies for last.

"Great. Let's discuss the details of your findings, and... Adrian, I guess we should discuss this new passion of yours... Anni, right?" Michael asked, returning to a less formal, more friendly tone as a faint smile touched his lips.

They continued their discussion – a second, deeply informative leaplink.

The dark arrived with the creeping frost of a fading winter in the suburbs of Lahti. Mikko was returning home after a long walk – he needed space to process all the information he had gathered over the past few days. When he reached his two-story house, he found his wife's car parked outside. A few of the main windows radiated a warm, yellowish light onto the slushy mix of snow and ice – the last stand of the winter weather.

As he took off his boots, he heard activity in the kitchen – the clatter of dishes and the faint smell of fried fish.

"Virta, is that you deciding to pay some attention to the kitchen?" he asked loudly, heading toward the kitchen.

"Yes, are you expecting someone else, my homesick husband?" Virta replied, giggling.

"Nope, just you, but I wouldn't be against..." he started to reply, trying to play around with her phrase.

"Against what, Mikko?" she replied with a smile.

"Heh, that's why I love you – you are always interrupting my stupid jokes," Mikko replied, smiling.

"Love? Hah, still love me after so many decades, really?" Virta welcomed him into the kitchen with the provocative question, giggling a little.

"Oh, okay, call it a habit to love you, or whatever you want to call it," he replied and kissed her.

They sat at the table. Two portions of fried fish, tea, and a few side snacks were already served.

"How did your day go?" she asked first, gazing at his face, waiting for a reply.

"Like every recent day, you know. I'm still trying to settle in with the latest findings," Mikko replied with a sad note.

"Oh, that thing... it reminds me of your old friend Adrian. How is he, by the way? Is he still rotating in the Heidelberg drum?" Virta asked in her friendly tone.

"Yeah, he finally found a lot of fun in there. Sometimes I think these recent events were waiting for him for a long, long time, and he was waiting for them – so they've finally met," he replied calmly, a humoured tone in his voice.

"Ah, nearly forgot – I mentioned him on purpose. You asked me days ago about this Anni Wyde. It took some time to get the list of visitors for that conference. How did he know about her being there?"

she asked, genuine interest in her voice.

"What? He didn't know that. As I understood it, it was just his... you know, typical wild guess. Adrian's style. So, she was really there?" Mikko asked in reply, visibly surprised.

"Yes. Anni Wyde, research assistant or something like that. I did some digging for you – she left the conference a few standard hours before Hugo died. An important detail, I would assume," Virta replied, giving him a small smile.

"Freaking important. I should message Adrian about that right now," Mikko replied. He pulled out his terminal and immediately began typing a message to Adrian.

Beatriss was completely exhausted after the urgent meeting, and she was slow to adapt to the new environment of the Xenia space habitat – the air was different, the distinction between day and night was absent, and the most challenging aspect of the place was the complicated geometry of the rotating drum; the surroundings were just one more factor adding to her strain. She followed an internal navigation system to reach her apartments, using eye lenses as visual guidance interfaces, but the discomfort of wearing these artificial additions felt far heavier than any convenience they provided.

When she opened the door to her temporary apartments, her ears caught a low, melodic humming coming from the hall – it wasn't an artificial sound; moreover, Beatriss had heard this melody before. She hated this habit of the man fate had entangled her with a decade ago; even the man himself wasn't a pleasant person from her perspective.

"Everett! What are you doing here in my apartments? And please, stop that humming," she said in a tired tone. The humming wasn't loud, but it was as irritating as usual.

"I am very interested in our agreement... and the investments made. You know, with that amount of credits, I could build a profitable cargo station or invest in gravity infrastructure... a space elevator – I've always been fascinated by that thing. A mind-bending structure. Put one on Mars to help extract raw materials from the planet, and... the profit might double within two decades, huh?" Everett – a tall, thin man with an ugly, broken nose – replied. He decided not to continue his melodic humming.

"What is your concern? Please, stop this bullshit," Beatriss replied, leaning against the wall of the hall.

"The information reached our Routewarden a little earlier than we agreed – it makes some things complicated for me," he replied.

"Do you want to open an official dispute?" Beatriss replied mockingly.

"Don't be rude, ma'am. I'm your best source of information, and I wouldn't poison the well. But... that wasn't the purpose of my visit. One thing I want to share with you directly – the piece you successfully stole from the Heidelberg space habitat is an active material called CX2. It's toxic while not powered. Consider this piece of knowledge a gift. The final one regarding that matter," Everett replied in a low, calming tone. He smiled as he took in Beatriss's surprised face.

"Bye! Don't forget the terms of our agreement next time," he continued, moving away toward the exit of her apartments.

Beatriss waited until the door closed with a distinctive click, and right after that, she collapsed onto the sofa in the hall. She wasn't happy to meet Everett, and more importantly, she felt no need to justify herself to such a sneaky, cunning person. Beatriss preferred to keep information safely away from him – she wasn't the one who had sent the information about the heat signatures to the Lead Routewarden; she had only asked to hold onto it.

"Shit, Oristos... why did you share this information earlier than we agreed, you fucking fox," she whispered, closing her eyes.

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