
The investigation centre became the next destination for the small team consisting of Adrian, Ake, and Konrad. The addition to the group had been arranged quickly: bringing in an outside person to assist with the case would have meant drowning him or her in a mountain of NDAs and administrative paperwork just to grant system access. Luckily, Ake already had an engineer on his roster whose security clearances were fully processed.

Konrad had been idling in the communication centre, virtually unused. He was fully capable of analysing novel materials and specialised hardware – with a broad command of diagnostic tools to match – yet his expertise had gone untapped until now. To make matters worse, he was quietly furious about Ake's decision to pull him off the team working on the CX2 project and reassign him here.

The small group moved in silence, each man burdened by his own reasons for remaining quiet: Adrian was enduring the tedious transit time, Konrad felt uneasy in Adrian's presence, and Ake was preoccupied with managing his team's assignments across the Heidelberg space habitat. Adrian could sense Konrad's hostility, but it was a minor distraction at best; his attention was locked onto the dark-green box in his hand as he searched its smooth surface for microscopic crevices or seam lines. When they finally stepped into the lift at the investigation centre, Adrian decided to break the silence and foster a more productive working environment.

"Konrad, as I understood you worked with CX2 related things, but... what do you think about that weird device, huh?" Adrian started with a calm, yet flat tone. He handed the box to Konrad; it felt slightly warm after Adrian's persistent attempts to read its surface by touch.

"Is that the thing we are going to investigate today, right?" a slightly surprised Konrad asked. He cast a quick glance at Ake before taking the box.

"Here we go, folks," Ake interrupted, gesturing toward the suddenly opening lift doors.

"Yes, exactly. And... I'm thinking this device has something to do with CX2 active material. I'm not an expert in this area – so feel free to enlighten us with insights when you are ready," Adrian said as they moved down the corridor toward the lab, softening his tone into a warmer, friendly register.

When they entered the lab, everything remained untouched since Ake and Adrian's previous visit – the terminal used to inspect the digital copy of the CX2 fragment sitting in sleep mode was the only change in the entire room.

"I need to scan this box to find a clue how to open it. Very precious work, by the way, this box's case," Konrad said, his mind fully consumed by the unexpected finding as he moved toward the diagnostic scanning station.

"Seems everybody has its own toys for the upcoming hour or two, right?" Ake noted in an informal, soothing tone.

Adrian took his personal terminal out of his pocket and began reading the message he had received from Mikko. The text immediately transformed his expression, a subtle smile of satisfaction spreading across his face.

"Mmm, Ake... I found a very interesting girlfriend," Adrian said with a humorous tone. He turned his gaze to Ake and slipped the terminal back into his pocket.

"Let me guess the name... starts with... A-a, huh?" Ake replied in the same spirit. He was finding these past few days of working alongside Adrian both exciting and genuinely friendly; dropping more jokes into their banter made him feel like they were completely on the same wavelength.

"Yep, ends with... I-i. Anni Wyde – she was on the conference where Hugo suddenly dies, and she left the event not long before his death. That confirms my assumption. The only thing left is to understand how she exactly did that," Adrian concluded. He clapped his hands twice and switched on the terminal displaying the digital copy of the CX2 fragment.

"And why she did that," Ake added, sitting down in a chair not far from Adrian.

"I'm already know why, but... I need more confirmations and evidence. And my best friend Konrad will give us a big portion of them, right?" Adrian replied, his eyes busy scanning the internal structure of the CX2 on the display.

"I'm on my way, but one good news – the device's case consists from two parts. Need more time to figure out how to open it," Konrad replied. He was a little bit confused, having not expected to hear such informal, humorous addressing from Adrian.

"Anyway, it will took a time – standard days," Konrad concluded.

"See Ake – good experienced engineer, right tools, and a little bit of time will dissolve any kind of mystery," said Adrian, his mind immersed in the complicated structure of the active composite – the microscopic pipes, wiring, and structures were a true masterpiece of engineering.

"I see, you are always leaving no chances at all to divine gods," Ake replied with a smile, slightly stroking his belly as he realised how hungry he was.

"Why to leave chances to non exist things, gods are product of our sick imagination, Ake," Adrian continued, looking up from the terminal to meet Ake's gaze.

"I need to walk. Ake, are you in?" he asked.

"Oh yes, let's go then," Ake replied.

"Konrad, are you planning to continue, right?" he asked while standing up from his chair.

"Yes, I will report my findings to you directly," Konrad replied, without looking away from the scanning tool.

Meeting with her team and delegating the next steps had kept Anni's mind occupied, locked squarely on their operational goals. She had spent the last few standard hours secretly coordinating with her operatives, a rigorous process that demanded constant movement and a razor-sharp level of awareness. Once the final arrangements were set, she took a seat on a secluded bench near the medical centre.

She slipped a hand into her pocket, her fingers brushing the small box of poison capsules – a physical reassurance that she still possessed an effective, untraceable weapon. Immediately after, Anni withdrew her communication terminal.

Silence. Not even a basic delivery notification had bounced back.

That fact alone sent a freezing chill down her spine. Her heart rate spiked, and a hot, frantic flush of blood rushed to her face. Anni rapidly analysed the possible reasons for the absence of communication, ultimately landing on two grim conclusions: either she had been deliberately cut off because Jakt was under arrest, or – far more unsettling – something catastrophic had unfolded back at the Helix habitat.

Trailing right behind that thought, the suffocating dread that she was already exposed here on Heidelberg came rushing back.

Anni forced herself to regain control. Only one final step remained for today: meet Olas to get his latest update. Her rising paranoia had driven her to enforce a strict rule within her team – eliminate digital communications entirely in favour of brief, seemingly accidental encounters in public spaces.

Another thought lingered dark and heavy in the back of her mind: Matthias's fate. She felt a distinct danger radiating from the man. If Ake or Adrian uncovered Matthias's real occupation, they would inevitably assume she was just another Technate spy. From that perspective, eliminating him was no longer a reckless whim, but a necessary measure for survival.

She stood up, carefully donning her usual unbothered mask, and began walking toward one of the habitat's residential green zones.

As she walked, a cold decision took shape in her mind: if no communication comes through within the next ten standard hours, the secondary objective to retrieve the blueprints will be abandoned. She

knew a two-year journey back to the Outer System could bring unpredictable changes, but without clear, updated directives from home, pressing forward with the second assignment was a risk she simply couldn't afford.

Olas was leaning against one of the trees in the green zone, a deeply puzzled expression written across his face. As Anni approached, he gave a subtle, low wave of his hand to catch her attention.

"I failed. It was too late... I was so close, but these two mans came, and I was forced to hand the equipment to them," he started in a low, pessimistic tone.

"What? Oh, what mans?" Anni asked, a fresh wave of stress surging through her veins.

"One of them Ake – Ake Torenbergh, to be exactly. I did a report for him. I don't know the second man's name," Olas replied in the same defeated tone.

"Fuck! The second man eyes – green?" she asked nervously.

"Yea," Olas murmured.

"Fuck! Adrian his name is, he is dangerous mind for us," Anni replied, taking a deep breath to force back her mounting stress.

"You leave poison for them, right?" Olas asked, nodding subtly toward her pocket.

"It might be too late to eliminate them... too late..." Anni replied with a heavy, sorrowful edge.

She felt utterly alone inside the vast, rotating drum of Heidelberg, acutely aware that her window of opportunity to escape was rapidly slamming shut.

Ake and Adrian left the investigation centre in silence – Ake reflecting on the fresh information while Adrian assembled a complete picture from the puzzle pieces in his mind. Adrian's watch was set to the Finnish Cluster's Earth timezone – his reference point in time within the void of space. He glanced at the time as he paused near the entrance to the investigation centre.

"Mmm, Ake, it would be late evening now. What about some meat and a few calming drinks?" he asked, slowly shifting his gaze from the watch to Ake's face. He knew the answer in advance, yet he still needed the confirmation.

"Ja, but I didn't expect to hear that from you. Yes – it is time. Should we hide our weapons and mimic sitting ducks again, then?" Ake replied with a humorous tone, adding a hint of a smile after.

"Yep, let's walk then. This place... Knights something, will it do?" Adrian asked, trying to find the right direction to the place.

"It'll do. 'Knights of the Centuries' the name is; I was in there recently. But hey – we are taking transport..." Ake replied with confidence.

"Good. You lead then," Adrian interrupted, inviting him to lead their short journey. His mind was tired and too lazy to handle simple tasks in this new environment.

"Thanks," Ake replied, stepping off toward a transportation point nearby.

The transport pod wasn't empty; five other habitat residents were sitting in the cabin. Adrian took a swift, discerning look at each of them – doing so quickly to avoid drawing attention – before glancing briefly at Ake and returning his gaze to his watch. The journey wasn't very long, but to him, it felt like an arduous trip he would have preferred to avoid.

Upon arrival, three passengers left the transport with them. Adrian repeated the same careful observation. A faint smile appeared on his face, but he chose to keep silent for a while.

"Ake, just wondering – did you tell your guys to be more... hidden? I noticed one of your lads in the transport," he asked as they were approaching their destination.

"Sure, and they are working well. Even if you noticed only one man, there were two more – two left with us, and the third continued the journey after a few new passengers joined," Ake replied with

satisfaction. He made a welcoming gesture as they finally reached the venue.

Adrian left the comment unanswered. He nodded and stepped inside the 'Knights of the Centuries'. The immersive environment of the place was calming – a stark contrast to the sterile atmosphere of the transport hub and communication centre. Just like the first time, the place was almost empty – a welcome relief for Adrian's mind and ears.

Ake quickly placed their order, and they headed to a corner table in the empty room. Adrian sank into the chair, his eyes scanning the room for details, when the bartender finally brought the ales to their table. Just then, a woman stepped inside – a simple, average woman without any distinguishing features, the kind usually erased by the brain as a non-essential element.

"Mmm, the second lad is a woman," Adrian said, lowering his voice.

Ake glanced briefly in the direction of the new visitor before returning his gaze to the table. The woman sat near the exit of the room and asked the bartender to bring her something to drink.

"Hah, probably we are going to be attacked by a woman, so it is handy to have one on our side then," Ake replied with a silent laugh.

"Are you afraid one woman?" Adrian asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, not a woman, but a deadly operative. And who said she is not desperate enough to bring a full set of her cunts..." Ake replied with confidence.

Adrian took a long sip of his ale and looked around the room.

"Let's drink then. Not the worst place to meet the product of our imagination," Adrian replied, a faint smile touching his lips.

Soft music filled the room with a driving drum rhythm – a modern attempt to mimic the ancient melodies of humanity's dark ages. Ake's teammate shuddered slightly at the exact moment the bartender placed her drink on the table.

"Are you ready to share the purpose of Anni's motivation?" Ake asked. He took a sip and turned his gaze to Adrian.

"This is a sabotage, a chain of events are tightly connected. It's not a Technate, nor any other Inner System Cluster or organisation. We are so tightly coupled with each other... just enough to create unwritten rules..." Adrian began to explain. He leaned back in his chair and touched his nose.

"Eliminating top-tier could lead to big economical discrepancy, it's too risky and unpredictable. More – explosion near the rotating drum could lead to space habitat destruction – a big problem for everybody around. It looks more like Outer System dirty hands – opportunistic approach to slow down something, for some economical advantage," Adrian continued. He paused to take another long sip of his ale.

"Mmm, the first glass is always quickly dried..." he said and paused. Adrian was trying to find shorter sentences to explain the whole picture.

Ake made a subtle sign to his operative; the woman stood up to bring their next set of ale. The drum rhythm continued its slow, tense flow in the background.

"Anni Wyde is ghost. Remember what Michael said? She's registered as cooling systems engineer in Munster space habitat, but... nobody seen her there. She or her team operates with advanced technology, and this green box is a master piece of manufacture..." Adrian concluded, taking a slight pause before finishing his first glass.

"We are buying time advancing our technology and economy scale, we are avoiding a destruction by that, but humanity is feral, so it's kind of a conflict with Outer System," Adrian stopped.

The bartender brought four glasses of ale, smiled, and slowly retreated to the bar.

"Ow, are you thinking that those with whom Michael made a deal sabotaging us? That's weird..." Ake argued, taking a very long sip. He finally felt himself growing frightened; in his eyes, sabotage combined with possessing technology like CX2 at the same time was far too unsettling.

"Nope. Outer System is bigger and more fragmented, I guess. And here both space and time are playing their best role – separating us," Adrian replied in his typical calm tone.

"Yes. We are borrowing our time since we decided to abandon caves and build our own, first on planet and now here – gravity oases in a deep space," Ake replied with a slow, philosophical pace.

"Mmm, interesting idea I heard century ago... Have you being in Astraeus space habitat? Or... did you heard it from a Greek man?" a surprised Adrian asked, taking another sip.

"Ah, yes. How do you know?" Ake asked, no less surprised himself.

"I know the man – the author of the very idea you just said. Oristos. Very smart, cunning man. I've learnt a lot of tricks from him a long ago. Interesting... freaking interesting..." Adrian replied, his mind immediately beginning to assemble a deep chain of possible connections stretching far back in time.

To avoid human fatigue from the strictly functional design of the Heidelberg space habitat, the idea of green zones was borrowed from Earth's big cities. A set of areas planted with trees, curved pathways, and ponds was specifically located in the centre of tall buildings and structures. The size and types of trees, combined with their specific locations, created the feeling of a small forest. To avoid an overly formal name, such areas were simply called gartenanlage.

The gartenanlage located not far from the habitat's space port building was one of the most popular among the inhabitants of Heidelberg due to its location and population density – it was the very first area populated. This place was also one of the meeting points for Matthias and his colleagues from the Technate. One of the ponds was chosen as the most crowded spot. The pond itself was another demonstration of the mixture of design and engineering – the bottom of the pond was a screen, and depending on the schedule, different video streams were displayed. Matthias's predefined meeting time was aligned with a stream from habitat's cameras showing a zoomed view of Earth.

Matthias was starving for information – no updates, no urgent messages. His new assignment was the observation of events: investigation workflow, new orders, temporary limits. Internally, he had understood a new assignment was coming, but during the last few standard hours, he had faced dead silence in that regard. He read a warning notice near the pond: "Warning! Do not touch the water. Thin layer of polymer on the surface." and sat on a bench nearby. Matthias's gaze was directed toward the water-distorted video stream of zoomed Earth – the most crowded object in the Solar System. He was thinking about recent events; this new material was an interesting piece, however a small fragment of technology wouldn't lead to successful reverse-engineering. Because of that, he was expecting a new assignment to obtain more information about the manufacturing process. Blueprints, engineering reports, supply chain routes, contracts – anything related to engineering and manufacturing was a step forward toward repeating or even improving the technology. Another option to obtain more information was simple: purchase it, offer an immense amount of credits. But that was also a dead end for him – he didn't know any names to start with.

He was expecting to receive more information during this meeting in the gartenanlage, or at least his next directions. Matthias wasn't a big fan of observation assignments; he thought them a waste of time for an expert like him. If his superior was wasting his time, it simply meant he or she had no idea what move to make next. It was a waiting game paired with background information-gathering – something familiar to him from the very beginning of his career.

The next thing that came to his mind was that weird woman – Anni. He found a stark difference between their first few meetings and the last one. It felt as though she had been trying to get rid of him as quickly as possible during their last encounter. But it was a minor distraction for him, and he switched his attention back to the slightly distorted picture at the bottom of the pond.

"Matthias Klein, please stand up and follow us!" a voice came from behind. Matthias turned his head back as far as he could. Two tall men were standing right behind him. He turned his head to the

left to seek a way out, but it was blocked by a woman; she nodded the moment their eyes met.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No, but you are under arrest," one of the tall men replied.

"What a fail," sparked in Matthias's head. He stood up and followed.

The music in the 'Knights of the Centuries' changed to a calmer tone; the drums gave way to a low flute, and the droning low frequency background slowly faded away, making room for the sound of gentle rainfall accompanied by the quiet crackle of a fireplace. As a main theme woven from violin and piano began, the same bartender brought two large plates of hot food to Ake and Adrian's table.

"Mmm, this Oristos... do you know him well?" Ake asked, slowly unfolding the napkin with his knife and fork.

"Yes and no... not very well enough. There is only one thing I have with him in common – the age. But the first time I heard about him was about century ago, give or take," Adrian replied, observing the piece of pork and the fried vegetables arranged around the edge of his plate.

"Oh, that's interesting – another elephant! Do you think he met me on purpose?" Ake asked. He cut off a piece of meat and put it in his mouth.

"Don't know, it might be a coincidence, but might be not. He might be involved, but might be not," Adrian replied in a slightly annoyed register. He found himself hungry, just like Ake. He made a stop sign, raising his finger. The long chain of events he had just constructed was useless – Oristos was merely a remote episode, and nothing related was connected to the current case. Adrian picked up a piece of fried vegetable with his fork.

"I don't think this fact is interesting for us now. Let's feed our bellies a little first," he continued.

"Mmm, ja..." Ake replied, nodding. He washed down the leftover meat with a sip of ale.

They continued silently, both of them were tired and hungry. But their minds remained occupied: Ake was still watching for newcomers to enter the room, while Adrian was trying to forge as many connections between events as he could. Neither of them was ready to relax and spare his brain even for a little while. The quiet emptying of their plates was interrupted when Ake's operative – the woman sitting near the entrance – stood up and walked directly to Ake. She whispered something to him and returned to her seat.

"I want to share something with you..." started Ake. He wiped his lips with a napkin and casually put it near his plate, and took a sip of his ale with visible pleasure.

"We just cut off the Technate's dirty hands here successfully! Their whole team is arrested now," he continued with satisfaction.

Adrian was busy with his procedure of clearing his plate. He looked up directly at Ake's contented face for a moment, smiled, and continued with his fork and knife.

"Mmm, congrats! It was quite fast," he replied after a short pause. Adrian set the empty plate aside.

"But there are other dirty hands around. Just wondering how you achieved it so fast, anyway..." he asked Ake, picking up his glass of ale.

"It was a good old familiar pattern, you know. People make mistakes, but professionals do so very rarely. However, overly confident professionals make mistakes just as often as amateurs. Customs officers are required to report any anomalies or errors, and a few of those went unreported – that was the first hole in the wall. Also, Michael provided me with the name of one of the men. Well, long story short – analysis, clues, surveillance, and a few chemical tricks did the job," Ake replied. He took a long sip of ale and signalled to bring more.

"Or very stressed professional people... so yeah, agreed. What are these chemical tricks you mentioned?" Adrian asked in a calm, friendly tone.

"Aah, chemical bliss for those trying to hide information and say nothing. But we were only able to successfully use it once; these cunts have an antidote... Most of them were very careful and took measures, but we caught the first one by surprise, leaving no chance for countermeasures," Ake replied, and emptied his glass.

"Oh! I was thinking things like that were banned... You know what? I want this thing – one dose," Adrian said in a serious tone. He put his glass back to the table and moved his gaze to Ake's face.

"I can authorise one for you. Why do you need that?" Ake asked. He was surprised; in his world, Adrian was more about machinery, technology, and complicated mind games, but this...

"I want to repeat your success," Adrian replied with a laugh. *"But seriously, I want to confirm some facts. More information is what I need. Also, I need your help – the sitting ducks should sit close to the hunter."* He finalised his reply with a smile.

"Organise a surprise meeting with Anni for me, but first authorise your chemical magic stuff for me. Deal?" Adrian finally asked.

"That's a dangerous move! But I like it ... to make it safer. When?" Ake replied.

"Standard twenty hours," Adrian said quickly.

"Deal. But it's dangerous. Could we continue our ale? Probably the last time with such company," Ake reacted in a humorous and friendly tone.

"Sure, I'm not in a hurry now..." Adrian replied in the same tone and smiled.

Unscheduled rapid transport shuttles were an expensive and privileged means of transportation, however that didn't mean guaranteed comfort. Space navigation itself was a nightmare – everything was in constant motion. Even if two objects were relatively static to each other, their and surrounding routes were not. Moving from the Orbital ring to a space habitat at a Lagrange point was more like moving between two islands relatively static to one another, but surrounded by other moving islands with constant traffic flowing between them. Fuel limits and orbital planes only added complexity to the entire situation.

John was using express transport for the first time in his life. He had expected to enjoy his time in the express shuttle, but instead, the vehicle's rapid trajectory corrections and shifting accelerations left him with a constant lump in his throat. Other shuttle's passengers seemed to fare better – or at least it appeared that way – and some were even sleeping. John tried to cope with the sensation at first, but eventually decided to spare his mind and accepted a sleeping pill.

He was woken by a rapid change in acceleration upon arrival – a very minor deviation in trajectory had led to this unpleasant manoeuvre. He couldn't sleep any longer; it was their final approach, though his eyelids remained heavy. He took another pill intended to give him enough energy to make it to the space habitat, a decision he would regret later.

When the chaos of rapid corrections, inverted manoeuvres, and sudden deceleration finally stopped, John felt safer – the only single wish in his head was to leave the shuttle and feel gravity again. Simulated, but gravity nonetheless. He was surprised when the other passengers let him exit first.

"Let the man pass first, he is a newbie," one of the passengers said.

After a short journey from the static hub of the habitat, John finally arrived inside the rotating drum. He tried to stand up from the transit chair several times without success. His last attempt was supported by a woman – Ake's agent.

"Sir, do not worry. I'm here to help you. John Berg, right?" she asked him in a calm tone.

"Yes, but I was expecting to meet Adrian – Adrian Porinen," he replied.

"I know, and you will meet him very soon. Let me help navigate you to the Unity Centre; he awaits you there," she replied in the same calming tone, helping him take his first steps.

He felt dizzy, and the semi-transparent information projected from his eye lenses only reinforced the sensation. However, each step felt better than the last, and by the time they reached the transportation point, John was able to walk on his own without any support.

"Oh, looks like you did not limit yourself only to a sleeping pill. How many?" she asked, turning toward the transportation terminal.

"Only one. What's your name?" John replied.

"Call me Hanna. Are you okay now?" Hanna asked in reply.

"I feel like a piece of shit, but otherwise I'm fine," John replied, giving a thumbs-up. *"How long does it take to get to this centre?"*

"Ah. Hopefully not so long. It's twenty-three standard minutes estimated, see?" she replied, pointing to the transport terminal display.

The transport arrived one standard minute later. They descended below the streets of the drum and sat in the cabin. The cabin was empty, sterile, and brightly lit; only Hanna's brown hair brought a touch of colour to the space. The movement of the internal transport was also optimised, but despite that, it was far from pleasant – especially when the cabin turned and moved against the direction of the drum's rotation.

They exited from the transportation point. John was still walking slowly and a bit clumsily – he wasn't a frequent flyer to orbital space. However, when they entered the Unity Centre, he felt a wave of relief. The air felt more natural; the humidity level and a slight touch of saltwater near the unearthly shaped waterfall helped him concentrate. John stopped and took a few moments to ponder over the waterfall – it was his first time seeing this engineering marvel.

"You should feel better now, John, right?" Hanna interrupted his sudden meditation.

"Oi, yes, yes. It's far better now, but still dizzy," he murmured in reply and nodded.

Adrian was sitting with Ake near the entrance to the centre. He had decided to wait before approaching John, positioning himself for the only possible approach – from behind. He stood up and walked over to John, who was still staring at the waterfall.

"Heh. Long time no see, John!" Adrian interrupted, gently patting John's left shoulder.

"Finally! Hello, my friend, but I was expecting to see you a little bit sooner," John Berg replied, slightly surprised.

"No, in that case I would deprive you of the chance to meet Hanna," Adrian replied with a smile. He was a little bit worried about the upcoming event he had set in motion, so he couldn't help resorting to simple jokes.

"Also, I want to introduce you to my new colleague – Ake Torenbergh," Adrian continued as Ake approached to shake John's hand.

"That's all for now. You need to rest, and Hanna will help you with your accommodation. I hope to see you later, refreshed," Adrian concluded. He was already imagining the upcoming meeting with Anni, and a part of his mind wanted to fast-forward straight to it. He understood the associated risks, but his obsession to unknown and curiosity – built up over centuries – were simply stronger.

Hanna and Berg made their way to the room in silence. John was too exhausted; everything that had happened since landing felt like a movie, unreal.

"I will leave you alone in this room, but if you need anything, use this terminal to connect," she said, pointing to the small table near the sofa. *"Because of that second pill, you will probably have trouble falling asleep, but it will not last for long. See you later. Take your time."* She smiled and exited the apartment.

John tried to fall asleep, but he couldn't. He moved to the bedroom to find a more comfortable spot, but it didn't help. Finally, he found a window with a view of the waterfall. He pulled a chair over to the window, sat down, and returned to staring at the waterfall. Eventually, he fell asleep in the chair.

The courtroom in the Helix space habitat had an oval shape; it was cleanly lit and somewhat cosy – the main purpose of the court was not to punish, but to find solutions, next steps, and root causes. However, it was Jakt's first time sitting there in the role of the accused person. Before this, he had never even imagined himself seated at the dark yellow table with its reddish accents. He had been arrested for incompetence – one of the most serious crimes in his position. Top-tier officers and managers possessed immense power, but any negative consequences arising from incompetence were strictly monitored.

Formally, he was still a Counsel, but his authority had been transferred to an expert group. According to procedure, he had lost all access to communications, and his recent orders had been rescinded – the expert group was in control now.

Jakt was worried; he felt hot, and his palms were sweaty. He was trying to find a logical, detailed explanation for his failure, but it wasn't easy. This was only the first stage of the court's review process, so not all accusations had been presented yet. The commission of experts was slowly gathering in the room, but the tension was already palpable – Helix was still isolated from outside communications. Jakt was sure that in closed rooms elsewhere, the financial consequences were being calculated. The threat was not an existential one, but an economic downfall was a formidable force – a long, slow death. People could emigrate to other Pelagicomes, trade routes could be dismantled, and industrial activity could grind to a halt.

But the most worrying thing for him was still the unknown counter strike from the German Cluster. It was far away, but distance was no longer a reliable shield – such immense power could strike back years later. The only thing he was relieved about was that the German Cluster had not gained access to the CX2 manufacturing technology, meaning the Helix Pelagicom remained one of the most powerful players in the materials market. But his overall plan – the whole idea to exclude the German Cluster from the scheme by manufacturing CX2 here in the Helix are – had failed.

Waiting for the expert commission to gather and finalise the further accusations made him nervous, so Jakt shifted his focus to past events. He was trying to figure out – or at least make a educated guess about – whether the Geshgal-ki Pelagicom had continued trading with the German Cluster afterwards or not. It was a pivotal moment for his defence in the court, because if that trade had stopped for a significant time, a major part of his plan had actually worked.

The non-trivial choice of passenger tickets to the Venusian orbit area was a reminder of the ongoing race – a race of market orders, information, and ultimate outcomes. That choice was also what provided an uneasy balance between time, price, comfort, and the final result. Oristos was sitting in his office located in the Astraeus space habitat – an old place. During his long life, he had made a lot of choices with varying degrees of success. He didn't possess the mastery of always making the best choice; his main weapon was the ability to turn a failure into a benefit. He knew his decision to share delayed data early had led to unpleasant consequences for a group of people, one of whom had already sent a leaplink request. That was why he chose this time to make another small choice.

"Oristos! I have a few questions for you," the leaplink started, carrying the nervous and slightly tired voice of Beatriss Nyx.

He slowly gazed at the terminal screen to catch the details – the most interesting part was the communication latency delay. Oristos had already obtained everything he planned from the Technate, but he was a man who never poisoned a well he might need to drink from again.

"I know you are all trying to be brief and efficient, but I was expecting some formal greetings for an old man like me. Hello, Beatriss! You can ask me now, but please – one question at a time," he replied in a calm tone. He was trying to prolong the conversation to disarm her. Meanwhile, Oristos returned his attention to selecting the tickets.

"Hello. Then I will definitely be brief with my questions – why did you share the information about infrared signatures so early?" The office room filled with Beatriss's nervous voice after a few seconds of silence.

"Ah, early? How early? Did we even agree on an exact time? You got your delay to steal a piece of technology from Heidelberg, right?" Oristos continued in a calming voice. His mind was busy with long-term logistical plans, and only a small part of it was engaged in the discussion. *"Ah, what a good find – a direct ticket from Astraeus to the Tenala space habitat,"* sparked in his head when he saw the ticket offer.

"The agreement was to share this when it would be appropriate for both sides. Going back to my question – why so early?" the same nervous voice filled the room again.

"I know you got what you wanted – so the time was appropriate. And please don't ignore my question," he replied, while pouring water into his glass. *"What is wrong, then?"* he added at the end.

Beatriss had lost her leverage; she had assumed Oristos wasn't aware of the success of her operation, but now her position was far too weak. Her last chance to extract more information from Oristos was risky.

"Nothing wrong with that. But may I ask why you didn't tell me details about this material?" She knew sharing any information about Everett's involvement would be a disaster.

When Oristos received the message, he raised his right eyebrow and smiled, continuing to review the various options for getting to the Tenala space habitat. *"It was not part of our agreement, and I guess your experts are smart enough to figure it out... Is something wrong, Beatriss? You sound nervous..."* he concluded.

"Everything is fine – almost. Next time, our agreement should be more detailed," Beatriss's voice echoed back into Oristos's office a few seconds later.

"Your plan was to claim the German Cluster with a technology share pact; for that purpose, you needed time and the best resources of your department to steal the evidence. I gave you that precious time. Now the race is in your hands, right?" Oristos replied. He was beginning to realise that the Technate's – or rather, Beatriss's – plan had not been executed perfectly, but for his own game, that wasn't particularly important at the moment.

"Yes. Sorry, Oristos, but I have to go. End of leaplink," Beatriss replied – she had decided that continuing the dialogue was a waste of time.

Oristos smiled when he received the last message and the leaplink closed. He knew her plan carried a probability of failure, and he knew other parties were involved. Introducing a new power to the situation was a choice that served his own benefit. As for those other parties and powers involved, Oristos was certain he would gather that intelligence later.

"Direct! I have never flown that way – let it be direct," he murmured as he ordered the ticket. He had made another minor decision.

Adrian watched John and Hanna leave. Once he lost sight of them, he took a deep breath and caught a faint trace of fruity hops. This flavour reminded him of his recent discussion with Ake about their next steps – and the chemical solution he had requested.

"Too many events in the last few hours, huh?" Ake asked, gesturing the direction.

Adrian chose to stay silent while they walked toward the room, but the purpose of the walk was clear to both of them: Ake had prepared the chemical solution Adrian requested, and handing over such things in public was not a wise idea.

"And upcoming events too. Did you bring it?" Adrian finally asked once the room door closed.

"Yes. And as I might guess, you are not an idiot who avoids reading instruction manuals. So be careful with this stuff," Ake continued in a friendly tone. He took the capsule out of his pocket and handed it to Adrian.

"Sounds... cautious. Is there anything beyond the manual?" Adrian replied while hiding the capsule in his jacket.

"The dosage description is vague. The capsule contains a solution meant to be dissolved in one litre of liquid – I would assume that will be ale in your case. However, it should be adjusted according to weight and other biological parameters, but... that is nearly impossible under these circumstances. Well, there are no guarantees. And one more note – the capsule has a slider that regulates the output from its nozzle. I would recommend starting with half," Ake said, his tone suddenly shifting to a more serious one.

"I'm pretty sure they are using other chemical compounds to suppress the effect, but... this stuff remains active for about six standard hours, give or take," Ake continued in a low voice. He gazed at Adrian's face for a moment – it reminded him of his past assignments made to his operatives to be close to Adrian. Ake was quite experienced in such operations, and safety was always one of his top three priorities.

"Mmm, got it. Last question – where do I meet Anni?" Adrian asked in a flat tone, already predicting different outcomes in his head.

"At the moment, she is sitting in one of the green zones, residential area twenty one," Ake replied, looking down at his terminal screen. *"So, head over there, and I will direct you,"* he added with a smile.

"Ah, so freaking funny. I don't need dating advice, Ake," Adrian replied with a calm, friendly joke. He raised his hand in farewell sign and walked out of the room.

"Two more standard years to wait," Michael murmured almost aloud. He stood by the window, hands buried deep in his pockets, gazing out at the night sky over Frankfurt am Main. After a moment, he checked the status of the cargo container holding Lizzie's cryogenic preserved body. He still considered it a mistake that he had been granted the clearance to conceal the details of her research, but the fragments he did know gave him quiet confidence in her eventual resurrection.

Michael rewound his memories to one of his final discussions with Lizzie. She had given him clear instructions in case anything ever happened to her. It had been a fair mutual agreement – she wouldn't reveal his dealings with the Outer System, and he wouldn't interfere with her research. The only question that still bothered him was why this research was so deadly important. He lacked the details to answer it. Moreover, this was not the first sabotage he had faced, but this one was far more complicated: the events might be connected, but the motivations were not.

He tried to focus on the sky – not to find a particular star, but to locate a space habitat – yet the city's light pollution blocked the view. He sat down in his chair and opened the terminal. The first priority was to request a leaplink with Ake, as the demand for updates had grown urgent enough. The second was a schedule check. One line on the agenda caught his attention more than the rest:

"Leaplink request: Everett Sawyer"

It was unexpected. Michael knew of the man, but had never dealt with him directly. Sawyer was a shadow figure within the Technate – a person of deep knowledge and cunning motives.

"Mmm, something must have happened within the Technate. Should I accept?" the thought sparked in his mind immediately.

He pondered it for a moment, then accepted the leaplink request.

Ake's predictions regarding Anni's movements were spot-on. Adrian made his way toward the correct sector of the space habitat.

"She is very close; hopefully, you can see her already," Ake's invisible voice directed him through the communication.

Adrian gave a slight shake of his head. He was unable to reply out loud, but he saved a choice phrase for Ake for later. Despite Ake's confidence, Adrian couldn't locate her immediately; it took a few moments to spot her behind the green zone trees. He was positioned behind her, and to make his approach unexpected, he quickened his pace along her walking path.

Adrian overtook her and stopped, looking around as if by chance. Once he caught sight of her, he smiled, feigning an unexpected yet pleasant encounter.

"Ah, hello! I wasn't expecting to see you here. How is your sightseeing going?" he began.

For Anni, this encounter was the absolute last thing she expected – and something she would have much preferred to avoid. However, she knew that acting evasive might reveal her true occupation, or at least make her look suspicious.

"Nice to see you again! Just browsing here, but I didn't expect to meet you here either," she replied, wearing her typical smiling mask.

"Nice. I have some free time, and it's a good moment to find something to eat. Perhaps you could join me in this search?" Adrian replied with the friendliest tone he could manage at this time.

"If you insist, yes. But you lead, and you are welcome to choose the place then," she replied with a light giggle. Slipping her hand into her pocket, she touched the small box of poison capsules.

"My friend is quite busy now, but he recommended a place nearby. He claims it's very popular here," Adrian replied, anticipating her next question. He noticed she was more stressed than last time, and her attempt to hide it amused him.

"Then we are free to go there," Anni replied, trying to appear calm. Adrian's tone and manner of speech were so unfamiliar to her – almost alien – yet strangely calming.

Adrian gestured in the direction they needed to go. He glanced around, trying to spot Ake's operatives, but couldn't pinpoint any of them. Anni noticed his eyes moving; she was tracking his every motion to figure out if he already knew who she was, or if he was still in the dark.

"Are you expecting someone else?" she asked with a slight trace of a smile.

"Yes. Honestly, I was expecting to meet John here, but he doesn't seem to be around. Likely he is still recovering from the long journey. I was busy with some arrangements before his arrival, you know. It's always a boring thing to do – simple, but exhausting," he replied in a near-flat tone, gazing into her eyes. The slate grey colour of her gaze felt cold, predatory, and beautiful in a way. Her movements, her manner of speaking, her hair, and her skin tone – it was all unusual, something intriguing.

"What arrangements?" she pressed on, her voice dropping to a slightly lower register.

"Pff, paperwork, orders, accommodations... John is an old friend, and I couldn't trust those little things to anyone else," he said, shifting his gaze back toward the path ahead.

"Oi, that..." she replied. She began to think the probability of him already knowing her identity was lower than she had initially calculated; in her mind, this man was simply bogged down with administrative logistics and bureaucracy before getting around to any real investigation.

"What is the name of the place we're going to?" she asked, pulling her hand out of her pocket.

"Domingo, the name is. But don't judge me too harshly – have never been there," Adrian replied with a smile.

"Ah, I've seen that place! It is very close to my temporary place," she replied, a hint of surprise in her tone.

"Of course – Ake did a good job finding the best places and routes," sparked in Adrian's head. "And? Is it good?" he asked with interest.

"I've never been there either," she replied quickly. Anni recalled that the place was usually crowded and definitely popular – even a member of her team had mentioned it. It was a comforting confirmation.

"Sorry, but I should mention – I'm not so talkative while walking," Adrian noted, glancing back at her face for a moment.

"Okay," she nodded.

They made it to Domingo in silence. It was a relief for Anni – a gift of time to think. Her guess was that Adrian was just warming up, but deep down, the lingering probability that this encounter was deliberate kept gnawing at her. Her brain was exhausted from recent events, and her mind was practically begging for rest. The total lack of communication with the Helix area only added to her mounting stress.

Domingo was crowded, but not nearly as noisy as Adrian was expecting. The venue itself occupied the building's first ground level, offering visitors several rooms capable of seating fifteen or so guests on separate tables, but the main point of attraction was the inner yard. The yard itself was quite cosy, hosting only five large tables arranged around a small water fountain, while carefully placed trees obscured any reminder of the space habitat environment outside.

They walked through the entire place, but found only one small round table in the first room. Capable of fitting just three people, it felt cramped after catching sight of the inner yard.

"Ach, the only place available. I was thinking you reserved something in advance," Anni said, breaking the long period of silence.

"Why? That's stupid to reserve something when you're planning to be alone... Anyway, this is a table for three, so you could invite your friend," Adrian replied, lowering his tone on the last sentence with a smile.

"Friend? Ah, so you could do that too," she replied, giggling. She tried to parse the hidden meaning behind his mention about a friend, pinpointing some kind of psychological test.

"When we first met, you mentioned a friend you were waiting for. Just wondering..." he replied, opening venue terminal to browse the menu. He kept his eyes fixed on the display, ignoring his surroundings and Anni.

"Ah, that friend. No, not today. Could you recommend something to order?" she replied, her mind was tracing back to Olas and the rest of her team. "They couldn't see us together... or could they? Anyway, the probability is low, and I did mention a friend, that's true..." An overlapping streams of thoughts collided in her head.

"Lamb steak... that is what they offer... and the best companion to it is a HighPitch weissbier... yep, never tried that, same for you? Regarding this friend of yours – friends have one distinctive feature: a name," Adrian continued in a very friendly tone. He was trying his best to be a calmly person. He didn't look up at Anni, remaining busy with the terminal screen.

"Yes, the same for me, please. The name – could I leave that for later? And lamb... interesting. Are there actual living goats on this space habitat, what do you think?" Anni decided to switch the discussion topic.

"Goats? I don't know, but sheep – yes. They claim every item on the main menu uses local supplies, excluding spices and specialities..." Adrian replied, raising an eyebrow. He caught her mistake, but chose not to push further her on it. He smiled again and looked up at Anni's face for a moment. *"And an extra Weissbier for me,"* he added.

Adrian quickly placed the order and closed the terminal. He raised his head, looking directly into Anni's eyes, and once he caught her gaze, he casually scanned the room.

"Well, practical matters – I will pay now, and the rest is your turn. Will it do?" he asked, continuing to look around.

"Fair enough. Agreed," she replied. Anni remained in full scanning mode – tracking every movement, gesture, and shift in Adrian's voice.

They paused the conversation, but the awkward silence was soon interrupted by an automated delivery pod arriving with their order.

"That's a minus. Don't get me wrong, I strongly support automation, and a lamb steak is fine being delivered by this automatic guy, but... beer is better served by a human," Adrian continued discussion, arranging the plates and glasses on the table.

"Why?" Anni asked, this time with genuine interest and a hint of a smile.

"That's simple. You mentioned that you are in cooling systems, right? Ah, doesn't matter, but – this guy," Adrian began his explanation, pointing to the pod moving away. *"This guy delivers too ideally, but a human does not. With each human step, beer vibrates, releasing CO2 in a random pattern... It's not about taste, but mostly about aesthetics, you know,"* he finalised his explanation and took a long sip of Weissbier.

"Shake it very gently and take a long sip," Adrian advised once he finished the first half of his glass with that single long sip.

Anni found nothing alarming in his explanation. In fact, it was strangely soothing – something far removed from her current troubles, like a quiet retreat where she could just rest and feel safe. She decided to follow his advice.

"Right, Lead Cooling Systems Engineer. Interesting... I had never even considered that," she replied in a noticeably softer tone.

They continued their conversation about automation, cooling systems, and aesthetics while eating the lamb steak. Anni's guard dropped slightly, but every time she caught herself sinking into Adrian's soothing rhythm, she forced her focus back up. It was a constant struggle between a thoroughly exhausted mind and her professional logical part.

Adrian finished his steak first. He set his plate aside and drained his second glass of weissbier.

"Mmm, the next round of this wonderful weiss is on you," he noted, placing the empty glass on the table.

"As agreed. But I want to bring the glasses myself – to randomise the CO2 pattern," she replied with a light laugh. Her mind required a pause.

Anni finished the last bite of her steak. Once her plate was clean, she neatly stacked their dishes to free up space on the small oval table.

"Will grab the same weissbier – HighPitch, right?" she asked, standing up from the table.

Adrian nodded, watching her walk toward the bar. He looked around again, hoping to pinpoint Ake's operatives. He felt much better now, despite being surrounded by the crowd.

Anni returned with four full glasses, followed closely by an empty automatic delivery pod. While she settled back into her seat, Adrian loaded the empty plates and glasses onto the pod.

"More space now. Cheers!" Adrian raised his glass slightly before taking a long sip.

"Yes, *random patterns*," Anni repeated the gesture with a light giggle.

"Isn't it amazing to bring an entire ecosystem – animals, trees, soil, insects, fungi, bacteria – into a space structure like this? To make it home?" Anni continued the conversation.

"Anni, I was already beginning to think you are an engineer to your core," Adrian replied with a trace of a smile.

The comment instantly spiked her awareness and pulled her back to full alert. "What's wrong?" she asked, a slight note of surprise in her voice.

"I guess you need a decade or more of engineering habits to feel it different. Well, it hasn't been amazing for a long time. Many centuries ago, in ancient times, our civilisation was playing with big wooden ships. We spent months on them, calling them home; we used to bring animals, fungi, and bacteria onboard... All of this," Adrian waved his hand around, "is just scaling and complexity – the next level of the same thing. It is the core of engineering," he concluded, taking another long sip.

Anni relaxed a little after his explanation. It wasn't a threat; it was just a discussion – nothing more, nothing less. They continued talking for a while.

"I need a break – a few standard minutes," Anni interrupted, pointing to her first empty glass.

"Understood," Adrian replied nodding.

Once she walked away, he stood up, cast a quick glance around, and moved closer to Anni's second glass. He slowly slipped the capsule out of his jacket pocket, feeling for the dosage slider by touch.

"Hurry up, she's heading back," Ake's invisible voice cut in through the communications.

"Fuck! Great timing, Ake," the thought flashed through Adrian's mind. He set the slider to half – or at least, he hoped he had dialled it to the right position – held the capsule over the open glass, and pressed the button. Just as he did, he spotted Anni making her way back. He decided to intercept her.

"Now it's my turn," Adrian said, stepping toward her.

"She was trying to add something to your ale, but she changed her mind. She put it back in her right pocket," Ake informed over the hidden communication on his way back to the table.

They finished another round of weissbier, the conversation flowing smoothly. Suddenly, Anni felt a strange sensation in her head – the tight grip of stress melted away without a trace, replaced by a wave of deep relaxation. Her head felt light, and her surroundings grew noticeably more vibrant.

"And about my friend's name... *Jakt* name is," she said, surprising even herself. Anni began to realise something was wrong, but the thought remained distant background noise – a faint echo from the logical part of her brain.

"Mmm, that's your later? *Jakt*?" Adrian replied. He was caught off guard himself, feeling like one of the early chemists witnessing a volatile reaction for the very first time. He noticed her movements had grown slower, fluid, and overly smooth. Adrian had seen plenty of drunk people, but this was entirely different.

"No, *Jakt* is another... friend. Don't have a friend like *Jakt*. You'll grow tired waiting for him..." Anni replied. A part of her mind was screaming at her to stop, but she was completely powerless to resist.

"Are you okay?" Adrian asked, his tone became more serious.

"I don't know... but isn't that a question for you?" she replied, letting out a soft, erratic laugh. "You should walk me home, you know."

"Okay. Lead the way," Adrian replied. He realised the compound had taken effect, but in a deeply bizarre fashion – neither the instruction manual nor Ake had described a reaction like this. Watching Anni in this altered state was disquieting, yet undeniably intriguing. He was eager to see what else she might let slip.

Anni fought to stay silent the entire way back to her apartment, relying strictly on hand gestures. A fading corner of her mind still managed to maintain a fragile grip on her physical actions, but keeping

her mouth shut was becoming an agonising effort. The moment they stepped inside her apartment, that final stronghold of restraint completely collapsed.

"Names... You don't know Jakt, but you should know another name... Lizzie Wolters..." Anni blurted out, shattering her own silence.

"Maybe. How do you know her?" Adrian asked. He was hit by a clash of conflicting emotions: dread at watching chemical agents dismantle a mind so thoroughly, paired with raw curiosity as the intelligence landed. Deep down, a small part of him even began to feel sorry for her.

"I? I just did something to her that prevents you from ever knowing her," Anni replied, the gruelling struggle inside her head raging on.

"If you return my green box to me..." she continued, before the remaining shreds of her logical mind slammed the brakes. But the drug-compromised part of her brain was not ready to yield – it simply redirected into a different realm of bizarre behaviour.

She gestured for Adrian to sit on the sofa. Once he complied, Anni crossed the room, stopping barely a meter away, and went still for a long beat.

"Shh! No more questions!" Anni said, unzipping her jacket and slipping it off.

Adrian decided to hold off on further questions, completely disoriented by her behaviour. He scanned her face and then lowered his gaze – focusing intently on her right side, where the jacket and its hidden pocket had been set aside. Another unsettling detail was her coordination; she showed no signs of dizziness, and her physical movements remained remarkably precise. The contrast was deeply baffling.

Anni stripped off her clothes with quiet, methodical speed before gesturing for Adrian to do the same. He stood up, complying with her silent directive.

"Mmm, I would like to make an exchange, but see – I don't have the green box with me," Adrian pressed, attempting to steer the interrogation back on track.

"Of course you didn't bring it with you," she replied, placing her hands on his chest and forcing him back down onto the sofa.

She remained completely silent throughout, while Adrian tried to piece her disjointed words together. It was an uphill battle – his own mind was now clouded by an entirely different kind of chemistry. As he held her by her back, another strange sensation caught his attention: her pale skin was dry to the touch, yet the centre of her back felt hotter. "Something is wrong with her temperature regulation," the thought echoed in his mind.

Abruptly, she came to a sudden halt and collapsed onto the sofa. Adrian helped her settle, pressing his fingers against her skin to check her pulse – it was entirely steady and normal.

"Even you couldn't get all the information out of a woman from the Outer System..." Anni whispered, her voice trailing off as she drifted into a deep sleep.

Adrian watched her for a while, feeling a faint pang of guilt. It had been an unpredictable blend of chemicals – on top of the Ake's chemical thing he had administered, he was certain Anni had injected something else into her own system back at Domingo. He was also disappointed in how his own strategy had played out: he had gathered fragments from her words, but many details remained missing. And the intimacy itself had felt too wild, too sudden, and entirely surreal.

"Ake, told you – I don't need your dating advice," he joked in a quiet whisper.

After checking Anni's pulse one last time – it remained perfectly normal for someone in deep sleep – Adrian got dressed. He cast a quick look at her naked body before pulling the blanket over her. He then picked up her clothes, laid them over a nearby chair, and systematically inspected all her right-side pockets. His fingers caught a small box containing three capsules. He took it, verified her breathing one final time, and quietly left her apartment.