
Contrast between deemed comfortable light setup for sleeping in Anni's room and warm, but still bright light of the corridor slowed Adrian for a moment. While his eyes were adapting to the different brightness level, his brain was trying to accommodate a product of hormones – a splash of newly injected chemicals after a sudden and wild process. His ears got a temporary advancement to interpret a slightly wider range of sound frequencies – he could hear his own heartbeat, but it wasn't for long; once his eyes were mostly ready to accept the increased amount of light, a distinctive resonance hum of the space habitat washed away other sounds. Muscles were too relaxed, and he felt a slight weakness in them. When he made it out of the building, the ability to hear returned to its normal level, and the hum dissipated into other background noise.

"Adrian! How your dating went?" Ake's voice thundered. Adrian wasn't able to determine the tone – he guessed it was a friendly and teasing one.

Ake was staying to the left of the entrance to the building, a few operatives standing near. Ake was smiling, but this smile was touched by stress.

"Fantastically. Could your people monitor her health for a while?" Adrian asked, trying to switch to the friendly and teasing tone. He was thinking to pat Ake on the shoulder, but changed his mind, considering it an unnecessary waste of energy that was already slipping from under his feet.

"Please drink this, sir," said an approaching Hanna, handing him a small can. *"It will stabilise the chemistry of your body,"* she continued, watching how Adrian consumed the contents.

"Yep, thank you, Hanna. I was thinking you were still in the Unity Centre..." Adrian said, returning the can to her. *"So, what about..."* Adrian was interrupted.

"Yes, my people are already going there," Ake continued, making a sign to his operatives.

"Good. But I'm feeling a little weird myself – my girlfriend is very strict with the gift exchange custom. I forgot my gift in the lab; Konrad is working on this green box," Adrian continued explaining in his humorous way, hiding his fading stress.

"Ouh, you're missing a gift from her, huh?" Ake asked, mimicking the same conversational tone.

"No, she is tough, but forgiving. I received a small box with a surprise inside," Adrian replied with a sincere smile. *"I'm happy to share the contents with the lab, but... keep the box after,"* he continued, handing over the stolen small box with the capsules inside.

"Very generous woman," murmured Ake while hiding the box in his jacket. *"This thing you drank – makes you sleepy. Should we go?"* Ake raised his head and looked at Adrian's face.

"Yes, but let's use transport – I insist..." Adrian replied with a faint smile.

Michael stopped two metres away from his office building's main entrance. The air was refreshing and clean – the reason he stopped, as such a state of air always encouraged him to smoke. The schedule for the coming day excited him. A team of Technate operatives caught in Heidelberg space habitat was another good step toward solving the crisis.

When he entered the office lobby he found it empty; only one woman was sitting at the desk.

"Morning, sir. Didn't expect to see you today. That's not an office day," she said with a soft, welcoming tone.

"Mm, do you want to share a drink after?" Michael asked, slightly slowing on his way toward the lift.

"No, sir," she replied with a slightly surprised tone.

"Have a nice day!" he replied with a flat, slightly cold tone, continuing his walk.

When he returned to his office, he thought about joining Ake, or taking any other useful trip somewhere outside the Earth gravity well. He filled a glass with water and sat down in the chair – it was time for the first leaplink, the one mysterious request he had received not long ago from Everett. He looked tensely at the terminal's display, but it remained clueless before the leaplink was accepted by Everett on the other end.

"Hello Michael Berndt, Everett Sawyer here. I'm pretty sure you know who I am." The silence was interrupted by the incoming voice. Michael read the delay – almost four seconds. *"Wherever this cunt is sitting, it's somewhere at a Lagrange point,"* he concluded.

"Good... whatever. Yes, I know who you are. What do you want, Everett?" Michael replied, his facial expression synchronised with his internal tense state. He was able to predict a few options while his message was travelling between communication relays in vast space.

"To negotiate. You have something, some assets – people you had arrested... Technate people. I have something you want to keep secret. And... we are perhaps sharing the same goal, Michael. I propose a good old-fashioned thing – a trade," a very calm voice entered the room.

"Mmm, let's assume that... Everett. You are speaking too abstractly to understand. What is your proposal?" Michael returned. He quickly opened the list of recent huge trades to be prepared. He knew Sawyer – he was a Technate man, but his intentions often lay outside of Technate interests.

"Oh, don't be naive. I'm speaking about CX2. I don't want to spend a lot of your precious time, and I'm not speaking for the Technate. I want you to achieve the goal, on your terms, but I don't want to be excluded from this – a sixteen per cent share would be a great addition to my portfolio. Ah, the Technate could find out about your agreement with the Outer System, and here we both want to avoid that, see? I could solve this, but I want the Technate assets you arrested recently, and... it will cost me."

The flat, calm voice of Everett again visited the room, interrupting Michael's browsing of the recent transactions. Michael was slightly shocked. He slightly raised an eyebrow, trying to understand Everett's source of information.

"Name your price," he began his reply. He took a big sip of water from his glass. *"CX2 is far from being ready to produce, and the Technate stole one piece of it,"* he finished his message. *"I should recheck every connection on the CX2 project again,"* sparked in his mind during the communication pause.

"Stop your investigation on the trade made during the incident in Heidelberg – it will be enough to cover my expenses. The stolen piece... CX2 degrades without power. Consider it done; my people will cut the power. You will receive a detailed overview of our deal right after this leaplink. I will wait for forty standard hours. Sorry for any inconvenience, but I don't dare spend more of your precious time. Have a very nice day. End of leaplink." The final words filled the room.

John awakened in the same chair he fell asleep in; the same waterfall view was giving a relaxing picture to his eyes. The chair, clean and fresh air, and the waterfall view were the things connecting him to reality – the whole journey he made to Heidelberg was a blurry memory. He got a minor pain in the neck due to staying in the chair for so long. John was slightly worried about the time; he checked the time and was shocked – he had been asleep for about twelve hours. But the feeling of worry faded away quickly when he understood his current location and circumstances. He located the bathroom door – it was the first step projected in his head. On the small table near the door a small can was placed. He grabbed the can to read it; beside the typical slogans and fancy logo, a small instruction was written in a small font: **"Use to treat the symptoms: nausea, dizziness, dry mouth..."** John stopped

reading, opened it, and drank the contents.

When he was finally ready to go outside, he took the emptied can again to remember how it looked – the contents were helping.

When John made it downstairs to the lobby, where he found Adrian sitting at the small white desk drinking coffee; apparently, he had been there for a while. John approached Adrian, trying to attract his attention, but Adrian's gaze looked like a one into eternity – into everywhere and into nowhere at the same time.

"Adrian! Long time no see! I was thinking you are waiting me here..." John started in a slightly loud tone.

"Yep, waiting for you," Adrian's facial expressions began rapidly changing, his gaze and thoughts coming back. *"Sorry, I'm here waiting for almost one standard hour. That's nice you are finally here. Please sit. How are you? Coffee?"* he continued, moving away his stretched legs.

"The magic liquid from the can helped, now I'm fine. Yes, it would be nice to have a coffee to start with," John replied with a cheerful tone while sitting down in the small chair.

"I have a schedule for you today, sorry, but first things first – this case you wanted my help with. We should sort it out today," Adrian replied with a soft, friendly tone while making a sign for two extra coffees to someone at the lobby desk.

"So freaking usual for you," John replied, slightly laughing. *"I dug deeper into that case – not sure it's possible to sort it out so quickly. I found one more..."* he was interrupted by Adrian.

"Wait! We shouldn't discuss it right here. Relax. Better tell me, how is your wife?" Adrian asked in the same soft tone. He looked directly at John's face for a second, finished his coffee with one sip, and leaned back in his chair. *"Mmm?"*

"Oh, perhaps she is fine, but I divorced a standard year ago. She siphoned some funds and... well, filed for divorce," John replied with a sad note.

"Was it your sixth wife, right?" Adrian asked, trying to remember his last conversation with John – it was far away, about five standard years ago.

"Seventh," John replied, raising his head to take a direct look at Adrian's face, but he was interrupted – a compact, pretty woman brought two cups of coffee. John's attention switched to her for a moment. *"Thank you!"* he said to her.

"You are welcome, sir," she replied, walking away.

"Seventh. And you, Adrian, didn't come to my last wedding," John continued. He tried to sip the coffee, but it was too hot.

"Mmm, sorry for that. But a wedding is slightly frightening only for the first time. And it seems the average span of your marriages is not more than eight standard years, so I definitely will visit your next wedding, if you will invite me," Adrian replied while trying to cool down his coffee by blowing on the liquid surface.

"When we last met... five standard years ago. So what about you?" John decided to switch the topic.

"Yep, it's not even the whole year. What's the alternative name? You should know, John," asked Adrian, trying to evade telling about his latest events.

"Solon," John answered and tried to sip his coffee. *"Roughly twelve standard years, almost ..."* he added.

They continued jabbering about mundane things and minor events that happened after they last met.

Matthias was quite surprised by how he was treated – no chemicals, no psychological pressure, no gruelling interrogations; he felt like a minor criminal implicated in a minor trade fraud. However, his professional background wasn't sleeping; his mind was busy evaluating different options.

After hours of exhausting waiting, he was moved from the small holding room into a larger one. The dark grey walls, white floor, and long black table in the centre were accompanied only by the heavy, pressuring hum of the space habitat's machinery. For the first standard hour, Matthias's only company consisted of four empty chairs, sitting in one as he nervously shook his foot.

Suddenly, a tall man entered and silently took a seat on the opposite side of the table.

"Well, we have finally met, Matthias Klein. I am Ake Torenbergh – the man with questions, ready for dialogue," Ake started, finally moving his gaze to Matthias.

"You mean interrogation, don't you?" Matthias replied, still trying to evaluate the situation and pick a strategy.

"It depends. But let me start first. I know the full network of your colleagues sneaking around in Heidelberg, and they are all arrested," Ake replied with the hint of a cold smile. He opened a terminal, made a few taps, and slid it across the table toward Matthias.

"Check the list. I am quite sure everybody is on it," he added when the terminal finally stopped in front of Matthias.

"So what?" Matthias quickly replied while examining the list on the display. His list of possible strategies shortened rapidly; he felt a sense of failure pressing down on him, and even physically, he started to feel tiny drops of sweat appearing on his neck.

"Mmm, I hoped to hear something else, but let me continue. You stole a part of the exploded construction – a very secret construction. Only a few personnel were aware of it. That is a serious violation: industrial espionage. We know how you did it, and why. As for the 'how' – you may check the next page on the screen," Ake continued in a calm, flat tone. He folded his arms and rested them on the table.

"One question bothers me – why were you here at this exact time? How did you know it would happen?" Ake asked at the end.

"It was a message. Just a message about the probability that something could happen. There's nothing to hide – I knew something would happen because of the message, but what exactly, I had no idea," Matthias replied. He understood that hiding this information was pointlessly unnecessary now; the most critical details had already been unveiled before this conversation even started.

"Mmm. And the source of this message?" Ake asked, attempting to penetrate Matthias's mind as he observed his demeanour.

"Our standard channel. Nothing special," Matthias replied, struggling to understand the angle behind the questioning. To him, it was too routine to even bother asking – every operative used a secured channel.

"Perhaps you could share a name? Who approved your operation – and your team's presence here?" Ake pressed, tracking Matthias's every subtle shift.

"Pff, that's hardly a secret: Beatriss Nyx. And..." Matthias trailed off. Dropping the name of a top-tier wasn't dangerous, and again, it felt too obvious. But the second name gave him pause. Still, it was just a name.

"And?" Ake asked, raising his right eyebrow.

"You know who she is, right?" Matthias tried to evade.

"Yes, that was to be expected. But please continue – you stopped at 'and'," Ake held his ground.

"It's a minor detail, really. She mentioned some of the info would come from a guy named Everett," Matthias replied, convincing himself the name meant nothing; there were plenty of operatives going by

Everett.

"Everett... last name?" Ake continued.

"I have no idea. Honestly, I could give you any random name and you'd have the same statistical probability of finding the right guy – just pure statistics, nothing personal. A last name would narrow it down, sure, but there are no guarantees. It's not that I'm keeping secrets, but I can't share a last name or even an occupation simply because I don't have them," Matthias replied, his voice tapering off toward the end.

"Industrial espionage it is, then... regardless, thank you. You will be staying here for a while. I am not serving drinks, but I could do you a favour and request some," Ake replied with his cold smile. He stood up slowly and headed toward the exit.

The court in Helix was a very tight and hot dispute. Jakt was able to find supporters, mostly from the people born here – in the Helix space habitat, the ones who didn't change their home. His defence was built upon his idea to make the Pelagicom prosperous and to give a huge economical advantage by manufacturing a new composite material. After standard hours, the court took a break and Jakt was moved to a locked room.

"You have a visitor," the voice spread through the silence of the room.

One of the members of the Pelagicom trade union entered the room. He looked around and leaned against the wall near the door.

"Oh Jakt, you ruined your career, man," he started in a flat tone.

"Our agenda was to stop German Cluster from certain advancements, but..." he continued.

"But I decided using this situation to take step further – for our benefit," Jakt objected.

"Oh yes, using Geshgal-ki technology to steal Geshgal-ki technology, and using it without authorization... What did you expected?" the man asked.

"Not what we get..." Jakt started to answer, but his visitor cut him off.

"We lose credits, a lot of investments. We helped you with voices before, but now we drown you in court," the man replied, his tone rising slightly.

"But it was your idea sabotaging German Cluster, and as agreed, I took it into my plans," Jakt objected again.

"Yes, yes, and you should stop right there, but you poked your nose far away. No excuse, Jakt," the visitor replied.

Jakt lowered his head. He knew his arguments were worth nothing to this man, and that his overly ambitious, opportunistic plans were far from well-calculated.

"I recommend you to migrate. You will find no place here, Jakt," the visitor replied, his voice dropping into a flat, calm register.

Jakt shuddered slightly at the very thought of migration.

"And why do you think it was our idea, huh?" the visitor asked as he stepped out of the room.

John Berg started to observe the privacy communication room when the door closed with a hissing sound behind him and Adrian. The functional design was switching John's mind into an official, more working mood.

"Yep, as I said before – let us discuss and figure out our business first," Adrian started, taking a seat in one of the chairs.

"Ah, yes. You stopped me earlier in the lobby, but I have found something else. Very interesting for you, I hope," John began, deliberately postponing the reveal. He knew Adrian's curious nature all too well.

"Then better to share it now. Don't be shy," Adrian replied, smiling.

"I was looking into other cold cases, just to see how such things are handled... We provide insurance for several Clusters, and Technate is one of them," John continued, his eyes were still scanning the room.

"Technate? Why is that connected?" Adrian asked. He returned to his calm tone, but his facial expression changed.

"It matters little; it could be any other Cluster. Regardless, that is not the point – I found the exact same weird signature in the logs attached to the case," Berg replied, turning his gaze to Adrian.

"A Technate research station was insured with our company. It suffered damage, and the crew of ten died – a silent failure of the magnetic radiation shield," John continued, picturing that slow, invisible, and agonising death from radiation overexposure.

"Much expensive electronic equipment died with them as well – it was decided to scrap the station later... But no one filed a proper claim, and... this type of failure caught my attention. The magnetic shield failed, yet the emergency system remained unaware. Everything indicated that all was fine until it was too late," John concluded, his tone was heavy.

"Oh my, poor guys... and such a waste," Adrian noted, letting out a heavy sigh. But the complete picture had already formed in his mind.

"When did this happen? Were the control units manufactured by Bouclier Digitale?" he asked after a brief pause.

"About four standard years ago. TRB-Eagle-2032 was the station name. I am not certain – more likely the control units were Technate-made, using Bouclier components. Why do you ask?" John said. He took a seat in the chair and stretched out his legs.

"I want to get all the information about this case, John. But one problem at a time, yes?" Adrian suddenly switched back to a cheerful tone.

"It is forbidden to share – this is strictly classified information for the insurance company," John objected, stretching his neck slightly as he anticipated the chance to propose a complicated, somewhat non-legal deal.

"Well, I have a deal for you. I know you have a deal too, but mine is... better. This potential case of yours – the German Cluster insurance case – you will solve it, with my help," Adrian continued, his voice was deliberate.

"But I..." John started, but Adrian cut him off with a gentle wave of his hand.

"All the bonuses are yours – and you need them, since your last ex siphoned from you. But I want all the information about this TRB-whatever case you mentioned. Let this be our secret deal. So, does that work for you?" Adrian pressed gently.

"You know what? Yes. And beers are on you," John replied. His own proposed scheme had been much more illegal anyway, so he agreed without hesitation.

Stefan Stolle was enjoying the play of the sun on the terrace. It was an early morning in Nurnberg; he had decided to stay on the planet for a while while the latest developments were settling down. His time of enjoyment on the terrace sipping morning coffee was coming to an end – Michael Berndt requested a call. Stefan knew Michael's ability to solve complicated problems, but he wasn't a man who preferred reporting on every small step.

He stepped into his office and initiated the connection.

"Morning, Michael. As I understand, you have already advanced far enough with our situation to give a report, yes?" Stefan began, curious about the outcome though entirely unsure what to expect.

"Morning, Stefan. We have eliminated the entire Technate team operating in Heidelberg, and we are very close to finding the leak. However, I am not calling to give a report... I need you to do me a favour," Michael paused. It was a direct connection, and he waited for a prompt response.

"Pardon me, Michael, but what favour?" Stefan replied, slightly caught off guard as he laced his fingers together.

"This investigation regarding the trade made during the Heidelberg incident – I want to take control of it as well," Michael replied, his voice calm and carrying clear confidence.

"Mmm. I was thinking Karlis could handle it. But why?" Stefan replied, still trying to make sense of the request.

"It is deeply connected to our latest findings, sir. But tell me – is Karlis making any real progress on that case?" Michael asked in response.

"No, he is just marking time. There are no updates from him at all," Stefan replied, standing up. He took a few steps toward the door as he began to realise Michael's point.

"Do you think Karlis lacks information you have already obtained? Or is it something a little more complicated?" Stefan asked, following up with fresh questions.

"I cannot share that just now, but I want to take on this case as part of my current assignment. Can you transfer the case to me?" Michael replied, pressing for a decision.

"Yes, but what exactly are you planning to do with it?" Stefan replied, his curiosity fully piqued.

"I want to close the case, release the funds under that trade, and trace it back to the roots," Michael replied. The decision was a single shot hitting two targets at once.

"Consider it done. But Michael, please keep me informed," Stefan confirmed, taking his seat once again.

"What about communications? Are they secure now?" Stefan asked.

"With the right precautions... yes. But you will receive a complete report on that later," Michael replied calmly.

"Very well then. I will expect to hear from you soon. Goodbye," Stefan concluded, ending the call.

He realised Michael was launching another manoeuvre, but Stefan found his motivation crystal clear and fully aligned with the Cluster's objectives. Regarding Karlis, however, he was far less certain. Ceding more control to Michael brought relief on one side, but added complexity on the other – a delicate balance between two choices.

Stefan opened a new message to the Board Internal Committee and composed a brief request: **"Please provide me with a comprehensive list of all trades and major transactions confirmed by or executed on behalf of Karlis Falkner."** He leaned back in his chair once the message was sent.

Ake was slightly tired when he made it to the investigation centre; he had arrived a little earlier than agreed with Adrian. Despite his exhaustion, his mind was filled with a specific pleasure – the satisfaction of fulfilment. Torenbergh had collected a vast amount of information, and his team had tracked and identified everyone Anni made contact with. The network was now known. Between this uplifting mood and a gnawing hunger, he was experiencing a very light dizziness.

Ake recognised Adrian from a distance. Once again, Adrian was on foot, though now his posture was upright and his stride brisk. As he closed the distance, his face showed no lingering sign of the strange state Ake had witnessed earlier.

"Hi. I am on time, and I have many threads to connect. But... is there anything from the lab regarding the capsules I gave you?" Adrian asked, his voice returning to its characteristic flat, calm register. His eyes stared off into nothing – he was looking at the data projected directly onto his eye lenses.

"Hey, ah – you mean your little gift?" Ake asked with a chuckle, gesturing for him to enter the investigation centre.

"Please save the jokes for beer time. Yes, that is what I am asking about. It is rather interesting to know what I am missing in my veins," Adrian replied, his voice remaining completely flat as he followed inside.

"Yes, and I am quite glad you are missing this thing in your veins. Otherwise, we would all be missing you. That is a sophisticated poison – targeted, leaving zero traces in less than one standard hour. It was banned by inter-cluster treaties centuries ago," Ake replied, his tone turning serious.

"It is nice. Ideally checks out," Adrian replied imperturbably, offering a brief smile. *"I guess you are already tracking all the people who were working with Anni, huh?"* he added.

"Sure. One click and they are all arrested," Ake replied in a pleased tone.

They continued their way to the lab in silence. Ake was trying to match the brisk gait Adrian had set.

"But one question: all this paperwork with your friend John Berg – is it worth it?" Ake asked as the door opened into the lab room.

"It is necessary to share some information, and I hope good advice from an insurance company is always worth something," Adrian replied. He had expected this question, but his mind kept his part of the agreement with John – no trace of surprise appeared on his face or in his tone.

"I heard Michael solved a problem with John's help, and my guess was that it was a one-time action," Ake replied, trying to make sense of the situation with John Berg.

"Mmm, it is better to ask Michael. I agreed with John to solve a problem for Michael, but the details..." Adrian replied, cutting himself off when he saw Konrad.

"Hello, any news?" he greeted him. *"Details of this deal are not known to me... And honestly, that is boring,"* Adrian added to Ake, turning his head back toward him.

"I admit you are right about that," Ake replied. He understood that John was meant to solve a single problem, and that Adrian had not received any new information.

"Hello. Yes, this is a impressive piece of engineering. It is a multipurpose device, and while we are missing the control component – and or connector – that was not something that blocked me from understanding the capabilities and purposes of this box," Konrad replied in a flat tone. He looked tired, but his eyes gleamed with interest.

"It contains the functionality to interface with CX2 – something we do not have. Basically, it was a great addition to our data on CX2. But! This box is also capable of generating very specific signals..." Konrad continued, but Adrian cut him off.

"Microwave range?" Adrian interrupted, shifting his gaze to Konrad.

"Not exclusively, but..." Konrad replied, trailing off into a pause.

"The material signatures? Any traces of manufacture?" Ake broke the brief silence.

"Ah, I have results regarding that – the casing is a very interesting composite, made somewhere in the Outer System according to the analysis. The electronics packaging is also from the Outer System, but the chiplets... most of them are widely used off-the-shelf components from Bouclier Digitale. The most exciting aspects are the precision of the device casing and manufacture and its firmware," Konrad concluded.

Adrian smiled; his mind had finally built the complete picture – the last facts had aligned with the events and information. He looked around in search of the most comfortable chair, and once he found one, he raised a hand in a wait gesture and walked toward it.

"Hah, it makes this Outer System very, very interesting. Ake, you caught a network of Outer System operatives – my congratulations! Second time, huh?" Adrian said a little louder as he settled into the chair.

"First! That is the first time. The Outer System has no deals in here..." a surprised Ake replied. He was not as selective in his search for a chair and chose the nearest one to sit down.

"Had – to correct you. Now they have a sabotage deal in here... And not only here, but on Earth too... Could we discuss all of that later? What about the Technate guys?" Adrian replied, his tone rising slightly.

"Yes. And the Technate – the Technate were simply doing their usual work," Ake replied, visibly shaken. It wasn't just the last findings that stunned him, but the larger picture coming together in his head. The Outer System had never been caught operating in the Inner System before. To Ake, the Outer System was a remote fringe of human space – a region where no faction would burn resources on sabotage in the Inner System. A one-way trip took two standard years with zero escape options... The whole thing was far too complex.

A full-rage headache hit Anni the moment she finally awoke. Her vision was slightly blurry, matching the hazy memories of the last few hours she was trying to recall. She spent almost the first standard hour on the sofa, trying to reconstruct the recent chain of events. Once Anni realised that she had met Adrian, she stood up and hurried to get dressed.

Besides her missing memory of recent events, the box of poison capsules was gone. That only added to her headache – her pulse skyrocketed and her body temperature rose. Anni tried to understand why she hadn't been caught yet, but since that wasn't low-hanging fruit to figure out, she pivoted to other priorities – it was time to escape, time to change her plan and schedule. Anni found painkillers and, quickly swallowing them with water, held back the panic. Relief came relatively fast. Her next move was to find transport to any other space habitat outside the German Cluster – and now she had nothing left to smuggle.

"I shouldn't meet anyone from my team, and I cannot stay here any longer. I failed, but I cannot remain. An arrest might be waiting, but it is worth trying to get out of here," she whispered to herself.

She checked her terminal, hoping to read messages from home, but outgoing messages were still undelivered. Once she grabbed all her necessary belongings, she booked a transfer to the Cartagena space habitat – the fastest way to escape Heidelberg at this hour – and exited the apartment. The real challenge would be catching the Orbital Crawler, with the next viable window nearly two standard months away.

On her way to the space habitat's transfer hub, she tried to act normal. Remote echoes of the headache still tried to reach her, but her body was moving almost automatically. Near the entrance to the transfer hub, she decided to sit on a couch away from the main doors.

"I wouldn't recommend sitting here now. Better to check in early," a suddenly approaching Adrian said.

"What?" a shocked Anni replied.

"Do not say anything more – you are being traced. Take this card for future payments. I know you do not trust me – at least, I would not – but believe me, it will be useful later," he continued, handing her the card.

"Now go," he said in a quick tone. He gazed at her for a moment and quickly walked away.

Once Konrad left the lab room to get some rest and sleep, Ake stood up and walked over to the table where Konrad had been writing his research report. He drummed his fingers on the surface in a rapid rhythm and turned toward Adrian's big chair.

"So, what do you think – is it a good time to arrest these cunts from the Outer System now?" he asked Adrian in his typical tone.

"I would say yes, but it is your area of expertise. You know it better," Adrian replied calmly with a faint smile.

"How did it go with her?" Ake asked with genuine interest.

"Quickly. I was on time, as we agreed. She is still experiencing the aftermath... that was strong chemistry you gave me. She slept too many hours, but anyway... she took the payment card. Not sure if it will work..." Adrian replied in his neutral, flat tone.

"She is being followed by our operatives, and we have plenty of friends in the Cartagena space habitat. Even if your plan fails, we will continue to track her. But I still feel uneasy letting her go – she killed that poor guy Hugo, and Lizzie," Ake continued, sitting back in his chair.

"And she destroyed the HEI transmitter, yes. But we must learn one vital fact – who hired her for this job. Isn't that interesting?" Adrian replied, shifting his gaze to Ake's face.

"That is the objective, yes," Ake replied and sighed heavily. "But it will be tricky to follow her into the Outer System – it is a remote area..." he concluded.

"You have about two standard months before the nearest Orbital Crawler..." Adrian replied, raising his eyes to the ceiling as his mind turned to other unanswered questions.

"There is a lot of work to locate the others from the Outer System – the space habitats, the planet..." Ake continued. "So perhaps your idea will be helpful to do that," he concluded with one more heavy sigh.

"Yep yep," Adrian quickly finalised.

The second and final part of the court hearing went badly for Jakt. He completely lost his authority and was dismissed to his apartment; from this moment on, he could only rely on his own funds and supplies. When he returned to his apartment, his thoughts turned to his team of operatives in the Inner System. He had already recalled them, but the final assignment he gave Anni remained a problem. He wanted to cancel it, but communications in Helix were cut for a time being – and even if they worked, he had lost the keys for secure communications.

He sat down at the table, lowered his head, and clasped it in his hands, trying to find a solution to this last problem. But suddenly, his internal thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. He slowly stood up and opened it. Jakt did not pay attention to who had come – he simply returned to his table.

"Sorry to interrupt you, but I bring you the last portion of good news you have to hear," the same man from the Pelagicom trade union he had seen during the hearing break began. It was an unexpected guest – at least, Jakt had not expected to see him or anyone else from the trade union so soon.

The guest silently approached the very table Jakt was sitting at, pulled out a chair, and sat down on the opposite side. He reached into his jacket's inside pocket and set a small card on the table.

"Very first news – you are free to go. This is your clearance, the last thing we can do for you," he said, sliding the card across the table to Jakt.

"Good," Jakt said, slightly raising his head. He looked directly at his guest and took the card, then returned to his previous position.

"Helix communications are unlocked now, and the committee is recalling all our operatives from the Inner System back," the guest continued in a soft, calming tone.

Jakt raised his head again and placed his hands on the table. He looked around, then fixed his gaze on the guest's face.

"This is really good news," Jakt replied, looking away again.

"Sure. And now it is your turn. As I said before – there is no place for you, Jakt Woult. Within one standard month, our organisation expects you to board a transport cargo ship to the Central Trade Hub, away from Helix Pelagicom," the guest replied with unyielding calm.

"You said the sabotage idea was not yours – whose was it?" Jakt asked as the guest stood up and walked toward the exit.

"You are an outsider now, I cannot say that to you. Your best operative knows all the details, but... without communication, I would recommend you forget about that. Continue your career somewhere else – probably in logistics... Farewell, Jakt," the guest replied, closing the door behind him.

Heidelberg's area where the communication centre was located got a dimmer light according to the schedule; the cautionary measures were removed in this section of the space habitat. The communication centre was still guarded, but it wasn't crowded as before – the technical personnel were busy restoring the rooms and wiring channel panels.

This time, Adrian was enjoying his walk to the centre. His mind was full enough with information to feel at ease for a while, and his eyes weren't struggling with a brightly lit environment. In the middle of his journey, he realised he would be late for a bit, but he decided not to push forward – it was a rare moment he wouldn't throw away so easily. The last finding shared by John was a strong piece of the event chain he had been working on for a long time.

"Oh, you are a little bit later than we were expecting," Ake met him with the phrase near the entrance to the communication centre.

"Mmm, since when are you 'we'?" Adrian asked him in reply, softening his tone.

"Never mind, I was referring to our leaplink with Michael. And... honestly, I was expecting you would share information before the leaplink, but now it seems we don't have much time," Ake replied as they continued to the communication room.

"I wish I could, but the last piece of information reached me right before the leaplink, and the final point came to me just on my walk here," Adrian replied in his typical flat tone. *"Are we using the very same room today?"* he asked, trying to evade unnecessary questions.

"Ja," Ake replied shortly.

They made it to the communication room quickly enough to make the pause feel organic and natural. Once they entered the room, Adrian decided to take a spot at the corner of the table; he moved a heavy chair from its standard place and quickly sat down.

"You were asking about the Outer System operatives' motivation and targets. I got a reply for you, but it comes with a question," Adrian continued while tracing Ake's movements in the room. His intention was to direct every bit of sound vibration energy straight to Ake's ears.

"And did you read Konrad's report? I supplied him with some extra information. I wanted you to know that before the leaplink, but the other story is long enough that we shouldn't start it now. How much time is left before the leaplink?" Adrian finished his explanation, continuing to trace Ake.

Ake sat in the middle of the table – the most comfortable place from his point of view. He turned his head toward Adrian.

"Almost one standard minute. I've seen Konrad's report, but it is too technical, and honestly, it's more your domain. And... did you also find who ordered this sabotage?" Ake asked, his eyes filled with interest.

"Don't overestimate my abilities. I'm not a magician, and there is no magic in the universe. I found a pattern while collecting information..." Adrian replied and moved his gaze to the communication terminal set on the table.

Ake shifted his attention to the terminal and initiated the leaplink. Once the connection negotiation ended, a painful 3.8 seconds of delay displayed on the screen.

"Greetings from Heidelberg, Michael. Any specific agenda?" Ake started the leaplink.

While the message was moving through the vast distances between different relays, Ake shifted his gaze back to Adrian and said, *"Wonderful, then you should be first."* Adrian nodded in reply.

"I prefer your side to start. But before that, a few updates: the insurance case is solved. Bouclier Digitale shared a detailed report, and they have a plan to fix the vulnerability. It is far less dramatic – whoever was exploiting this was fed with slightly outdated information. This design is still widely used, but it's at the end of its life cycle," Michael's voice filled the room.

"It makes sense. This sabotage was made by Outer System operatives, so... this delay makes sense. But they somehow got the proprietary information from Bouclier in the first place," Adrian started his reply in a calm, but still slightly warning tone.

"Without this knowledge, they couldn't do anything technically, which makes me sure it was a human factor. Someone shared this proprietary information, and then..." he coughed a little. *"Then they found it and used it to produce such devices. The distance, research, and manufacturing time are the things that made this fragile thing land on a pillow. However, the French Cluster should figure out who shared it and how,"* Adrian concluded. He flexed his wrists with the characteristic crack of the bones while the message was traversing the vast distances.

"They are already on it, and as I know, you are wise enough to understand this information isn't public... Ake, how are our Technate friends doing? I know that sounds weird, but I want you to release them – the transport and schedule are attached. I traded them to secure the stolen CX2 and to avoid any long-going consequences..." Michael's voice finally replied.

"Ok boss, I see it makes a lot of sense," Ake began with a note of disappointment. *"But we caught a second spy network here. Outer System origin is. Now we know who killed Hugo and Lizzie, destroyed the HEI transmitter, and many more... It's all attached to this message,"* Ake continued.

"Yes, but there is a question for you, Michael. I found a pattern while looking into these specific events..." Adrian added.

"Now – the interesting part," Adrian said while the message was transferring through the network of communication relays. He gazed at Ake for a moment and quickly returned his gaze to the table.

"I want those bastards here; let me interrogate them personally, one by one. What is the pattern?" Michael's voice came into the room after ten seconds, his tone slightly tense.

"This team of operatives was messing up in quite specific places. I found one more interesting insurance case – a Technate research station was destroyed using this exploit too. A terrible death because of failed magnetic radiation shielding," Adrian started, pronouncing the word 'research' slightly slower to draw special attention to it.

"Hugo and Lizzie were about to announce their research results," he continued in the same deliberate rhythm. *"And with your case about the cargo containers and the HEI transmitter – I would assume some other research is hiding, right?"* This time, Adrian pronounced 'research' even slower than before.

"Manufacturing, Adrian – and a trade deal with the Outer System. It's broken now because of the destroyed HEI transmitter. Hmm, the goal was to break this agreement and... stop us from

manufacturing..." Michael's voice came back again.

"We should find other cases, other signs of their activity during the last standard years. I'm sure there are more to find," Ake noted, looking at the communication terminal's screen.

"Let me guess... Michael... manufacturing of the CX2 composite, right? I'd bet a lot that I'm right," Adrian added with a slightly playful tone. *"But we still don't know who they are working for. What is the purpose of their actions, and who is orchestrating this behind the scenes? I am not so sure these cunts could reveal this information during interrogation, but... the first clues might be there,"* he continued in his typical flat, calm tone. He raised his head and looked toward Ake's position near the centre of the table.

"We agreed that you will provide resources to obtain this knowledge. Now it seems to be in your best interests too," Adrian concluded.

"Done. I like your guesswork, but I don't believe it was a guess. Leave the logical explanation of your 'magic' for a later time. There are a few details to discuss," Michael's voice returned to the room.

They continued their discussion, sharing information about the initial findings and newly resolved puzzles.

The interactive map of the whole Solar System hung directly before Oristos's eyes, the designated route for his new cargo vessels highlighted in a bright green colour. He looked at the route, imagining the fulfilment of his long-term strategy to break the monopoly of the Space Crawler project. It was a plan decades in the making, costing him dearly.

The latest strange events were a stroke of great luck for him; whatever or whoever was involved in them had played along with his plans without even noticing. Market prices had just begun a jumpy dance, creating the perfect moment to introduce a new Outer System route. His next step was a gift – a sign of his achievements that he planned to present himself. He intended to personally open a remote agency for his new operations in the Outer System Trade Hub. Oristos had already prepared a commercial plan for the Protectorate and reached an agreement with the Trade Hub.

It was a long-awaited journey. From the Tenala space habitat, his trip would begin aboard a newly built vessel. A set of delivery contracts with the Asian Conglomerate and the Atlantic Set was already settled. He wasn't excited about a two standard year journey through deep space, but the result at the end made it well worth it.

He packed various belongings into his bag, closed the terminal, and moved toward the exit of his apartment. Near the door, he stopped and looked around. *"I will be back here in five standard years,"* he whispered, and stepped outside.

John Berg managed to finalise all required paperwork and procedures sooner than he had ever expected. He arrived at the arranged meeting spot early, standing right under the signboard reading *'Knights of the Centuries'* when he spotted Adrian walking toward him.

"Hi! Finally, it's time to celebrate!" Adrian began in an uplifting tone, trying to hide his exhaustion from the last few standard hours.

"Hoi! Celebrate? What?" a slightly surprised John replied. *"My paperwork? Or our small deal?"* he continued, guessing.

"Everybody is allowed to choose what to celebrate today," Adrian replied with the hint of a smile, making a welcoming gesture to enter the venue. *"This is quite a lovely place,"* he concluded as they

stepped into the pub.

The place wasn't crowded, but a few people were sitting at the tables, and only a few of them paid any attention to the newcomers. The background music was soft, but rhythmically carrying the sound's energy to mask the space habitat's characteristic hum.

"I must admit, this place is a lovely one, you're right," Berg said as they entered one of the pub's rooms.

"Indeed," Adrian replied, pointing toward a served table. The centre of the table was occupied by Ake, who was slowly sipping a beer when they arrived.

"You know this guy already; I met him for the first time not so long ago, back on Earth on the day of the deadly car accident," Adrian started the conversation once everyone settled at the table.

"How's your paperwork?" Ake asked John. He slid a beer mug over to John and smiled.

"Done. NDAs and other formalities..." John replied, taking the beer mug. He flipped open the mug's lid and took a long sip. Once finished, he set the mug down on the table. *"Why?"* he asked.

"Ah, never mind. But it means you are able to relax. And I was just wondering about your agreement with Michael Berndt – what is it about?" Ake asked in a friendly tone.

"NDAs, remember? I couldn't share the details with anyone, literally," John replied, taking a short sip. *"And according to the Trade Circle regulations, the insurance contract terms and details can't just be shared. There are only specific cases when it can be revealed. I want to share, but I just can't do that..."* he explained.

"I see, no worries. But I always find these regulations interesting. Circles are just organisations operating independently, not tied to any Cluster, Union, whatever. They are not allowed to enforce regulations, yet we are paying them to produce, evaluate, update, review, and create regulations," Ake replied in a soft, friendly tone.

"It's part of the system. If you want to live in the system, trade, consume, produce... you'd better follow them. Otherwise, nobody will deal with you... I thought you knew the theory," Adrian replied. He flipped open the lid of his mug and raised it. *"Cheers!"* he added.

"I know the very basics, but the whole system we are living in is quite complicated. It regulates itself... somehow," Ake said and took a long sip.

"There is no need for anyone to know how the whole system works; basically, you just need to know how your part works," John said, turning his head toward Adrian. *"I'm sure Adrian also doesn't know the whole system,"* he ended with a smile.

"Mmm, you are right and you are wrong at the same time. I know how it works in general – the system mechanics and relationships between parts – but some processes are hidden from me, some of them are already forgotten, and some knowledge is vastly outdated. Because our system lives in the same universe we are living in, so it abides by a very generic constraint: the most permanent thing is change," Adrian replied, and a smile lit up his face.

"When I think about that, sometimes it feels like we humans are not in control – the system, the core of our civilisation, is in control," Ake shared his thought and finished his beer.

"I hope it's not just a feeling... anyway, it requires more beer," Adrian replied with a humorous tone. *"Further plans, guys?"* he asked.

"You know mine, a lot of travel..." Ake began to share his steps, but he was interrupted by John.

"Regarding this travel, while I was waiting for Adrian outside this pub, I read the news: the Greek Protectorate announced a new route between the Inner and Outer Systems. The monopoly is broken!" Berg said in an excited tone.

"Any names mentioned in the article?" Ake asked, switching his focus to the news.

"Yes, Technarch of the route operations – Oristos Xenakis," John replied after a small pause.

"Mmm, I'm planning to dig deeper, but first I want to go back to Earth for a while," Adrian said, deciding to avoid commenting on the news.

"Are you not excited about the news? This is deep space we're trying to conquer," Ake asked, trying to understand Adrian's motivation.

"I'm intrigued by it, it's interesting. But the space void isn't something that shows you the stars – it's a perfect mirror showing how small and insignificant you are," Adrian replied, maintaining his calm, slightly friendly tone.