
Space habitat Heidelberg journeyed through the cosmos alongside the rest of the Solar System. Despite being moored at a Lagrange point – prime celestial real estate – it was still a mere speck, barely visible in the night sky.

Adrian waded through the bureaucracy of inter-Cluster policies while Matthias focused on his primary objective: delivering the illicit composite to the Technate. Officially, he was on standard leave – a perfect alibi to visit his real employer – but the challenge lay in clearing the station's numerous customs checkpoints. He was a sitting duck, pinned down until a Technate plant could secure a shift at the scanners. The delay was making him twitchy; the longer he waited, the more the operation risked falling apart.

Something else gnawed at him: the investigation had been handed over to an external team dispatched by the German Cluster. To Matthias, the implication was clear – management knew the incident was far from routine. Yet his professional intuition suggested something far more complex. He could sense the shadow of another party, or perhaps several, pulling the strings behind this strange act of sabotage.

To quiet his thoughts, he sought out a local pub. Life in the habitats followed a familiar pattern – a desperate attempt to mask the claustrophobia of living inside a colossal, rotated drum. From the office blocks to the galleries, every sector was a curated echo of old Earth, laid out with clinical logic. The Heidelberg had been built for a massive census, yet the actual population remained a fraction of that number. This disparity created a haunting sense of isolation, an emptiness that made the crowded bars near the professional sectors a necessity. Real human connection was a rare commodity – something credits couldn't buy and no standard-issue allowance could provide.

Matthias's best bet was the Welde Brauhaus – a haunt favoured by his colleagues and the surrounding office crowds alike. It was a sanctuary where one could find a decent weiss, trade idle talk, and kill time, all within a ten-minute ride of his quarters.

His frayed nerves had killed his hunger and his patience for small talk, leaving only a persistent constriction in his throat. Eschewing the crowd, Matthias grabbed a glass of the local weissbier and retreated to a free table in the bar's dimmed corner.

He claimed a table intended for a small group of four, finding himself in a space struggling to replicate the soul of a terrestrial tavern. The pervasive, low-frequency thrum of the habitat's life-support systems was completely eliminated by low-volume music and the ambient chatter of the biergarten clients. The hop-shaped lamps, the heavy flooring, the dimmed lighting – every element conspired to create a convincing, if fragile, sense of earthly safety.

Only the beer mug served as a reminder of the sterile reality of the Heidelberg. Though styled like a traditional German stein, a faint indicator light pulsed near its rim, a constant reminder that even relaxation was governed by the safety protocols. It was a small masterpiece of safety engineering: a magnetic base stood ready to anchor the vessel to the table in the event of a gravity failure, and a spring-loaded lid was designed to seal instantly against zero-G spills. It was an ancient silhouette hollowed out and filled with cold, modern necessity.

Matthias remained motionless, his gaze anchored to the dim green pulse at the base of the mug. He took periodic, mechanical sips of the beer, the flavour an afterthought to his focus. His mind was a frantic architecture of variables, calculating the exact window to slip the composite past the station's scanners. He was so deeply submerged in the tactical math that the sounds of the bar – the laughter, the clinking mugs, the low music – dissolved into white noise. He completely missed the shadow falling over the table, and the woman who had already come to a halt beside him.

"Oh, hallo again!" she started, her voice breaking through his internal math. *"We have met days ago in the transport cabin – do you remember?"*

Matthias severed the flow of the calculations in his head and looked up at the intruder. She was exactly as he recalled: the short-cropped hair, the very pale skin. Her slate-gray eyes were catching the dim green glow from the base of his mug, reflecting the light like cold glass. He felt the weight of her scanning look – a gaze that felt less like curiosity and more like an inspection.

"Ah, yes... *the days*," he reacted, shifting slightly in his chair. "*You are visiting our habitat for a first time, I think?*"

"Exactly. *I am a newbie here*," she said, her eyes were never leaving his. "*Are you waiting for the company?*"

"No, no. *I am chilling here alone today. You could join, by the way; it is a crowded place and the tables are rare.*"

"Very thank you," Anni replied, taking the seat opposite him. "*It feels... empty here. How many the inhabitants are living on the Heidelberg now?*"

She set her mug on the heavy table. It was a large, utilitarian vessel, the safety lid clicked firmly into the closed position.

"About seven hundred thousand, give or take," Matthias replied, falling into the rhythm of the small talk. "*But we are spread like the butter over the drum, so yes, I know the feeling of the emptiness.*"

"Heh. Anyway, *it is a way better than the Munster is right now*," she said. She thumbed the release on her mug, the mechanical click sharp in the quiet corner, and took a measured sip.

"I am sorry, but... *your name is?*" Matthias asked.

"Anni Wyde. *No worries, I did not know the your name either*," she said, her lips pulling into a thin, sharp smile.

"Matthias. *Matthias Klein is the name. I am working here – you know, the safety thing. And you?*"

He decided to switch off the line of his calculations and let his brain rest for a while. The small talk, he found, was a good way to unwind. The desired shift at the custom scanners was still two standard days away – plenty of time to play the part of a man on leave.

"Oh, about that... *I am the cooling systems engineer*," she replied, a small giggle escaping at the end. "*But I am on my leave now, looking and enjoying the finished habitat. My own is not finished yet; they are still filling it with the stuff. But the cooling system core components are already in place, so I have the time to look around and enjoy the time I am having.*"

She looked around the warm, dim room. "*Still, there are no the crowded places like this one in there*," she added with a smile.

Matthias found her voice a little low, but very calming and friendly – something he realized he had missed in his rigid line of duty.

"The Munster... *it should be very similar in the planning to here*," he noted. "*But the filling stage... it must be quite boring to take the rest in there, yes?*"

Anni lowered her head, her voice taking on a mysterious, quiet quality. "*The rest is only the sleep in there. It feels like the sleep with the machines working hard, with the drum pieces filling. Only the assembling crew is there now*," she said, her voice dropping further. "*Are you on the holidays? Or between the shifts, if I may ask you?*"

"Hmm, yes, you may. *I am planning the next holidays; they are starting within the next standard days. When are yours finishing?*"

"Oh, these are the last eight standard days in here," she replied, a note of soreness in her tone. "*The filling is at the final stage, which means the cooling systems require the review and more attention soon.*"

"Understood. *But it also means the Munster is going to be fully finished soon, right?*"

"If you mean that the hundreds of standard days is soon, then yes," she smiled, taking another measured sip from the heavy mug. "*I do not want to waste the time talking about that. Are you visiting this place often?*"

"Oh, I think that it is true," he replied, nodding to the familiar surroundings.

"Are there any other places to visit and relax that you could advice?" she asked, her voice returning to a normal volume.

"Am... yes, a lot of them. Do you want the advices?" he asked.

"Honestly speaking, I am wanting the company, too," Anni said, smiling with a sudden flash of hope. "Tomorrow?"

"Okay. Let us meet here, the same time."

They continued the small talk, their conversation adding to the liveable atmosphere of the pub. Their voices mixed with the others, dissolving into the earthly mood and the hum of the crowd, making them just two more souls lost in the vast, spinning drum of the Heidelberg.

By the time Adrian finally untangled himself from the bureaucracy of the High Court, the streets of Rotterdam were already saturated with the cold glow of night lights. He had been handed a temporary disciplinary suspension – a heavy blow that saw his access keys deactivated for two standard years. Along with the lockout, he'd been slapped with a twenty-thousand system credit fine. His permanent file was now officially enriched with a fresh violation; a minor case, perhaps, but it was a mark that wouldn't wash off.

He had just stepped clear of the court building and was lighting a cigarette when Michael reached him again.

"Adrian, it is the time to arrange the next discussion... but yes, take your time," Michael started. "I hope you are satisfied with the results, huh?"

"Mmm. Twenty thousand credits... hardly call that satisfaction," Adrian replied, his voice flat.

"It is not a big loss for you, my dear friend; do not be silly," Michael dismissed the concern with a wave.

"But the blocked key..." Adrian pushed back.

"Yes, but you will get way more keys and the data soon," Michael said, his tone turning friendly. "Could we speak in the my vehicle? This place might be heard, you know. And also, I could give you the ride wherever you are wanting to go."

Adrian gave a silent nod. He finished his smoke, crushed the butt under his boot, and followed Michael to the waiting vehicle.

"How many standard days are you needing between the assignments?" Michael asked as the doors hissed shut, sealing out the Rotterdam night.

"Few... five days at least," Adrian said, his voice sounding tired. "And... I need to feed curiosity. What the hell is this HEI transmitter?"

"Fair enough. The HEI transmitter is a piece of the Outer System technology we agreed to install on the our facilities. It is a highly integrated communication device with the amazing possibilities... but the full details await you. Five days, you said..." Michael smiled thinly.

"Fair enough. Where we meet next time? Another fancy court?" Adrian asked.

"I will send the copter. It will deliver you in the comfort directly to my office in Frankfurt am Main. Five standard days from now. Assignment official paperwork is already sent to the your terminal, as well as the compensation. So, do you need the ride?"

"Indeed. Best hotel... with a bar and a sauna," Adrian specified. "Can you arrange comfortable copter for tomorrow morning? Lahti is destination."

"Sure. By morning you are meaning..."

"10:00 local time," Adrian cut him off.

"Deal. Let us go find your hotel, but I cannot make the company for you today, sorry."

"I did not ask for company. Had plenty company today," Adrian replied, looking out the tinted window. *"Better to leave me in peace for a while."*

"Fair enough," Michael conceded.

The vehicle remained stationary for a moment while the navigation searched the local offer; then, they began the journey in total silence.

The glare of the hotel reception was a physical weight, a stark and clinical brilliance. The design was a study in aggressive contrast: snow-white floors against dark brown furniture, and yellow-veined marble walls that threw back sharp, clean reflections. The absence of any visible light sources only amplified the effect; the illumination seemed to bleed directly from the surfaces, creating a world that felt entirely too sterile.

These colours, these lights – it was the embodiment of everything Adrian found intolerable. To him, the lobby was a sign of the inevitable changes ahead, a visual reminder of the sacrifice he was making in his journey to uncover new unknowns. He was trading his comfort for access.

The light was too much for his exhausted eyes, and he quickly abandoned the idea of visiting the lobby bar. He didn't have the energy to sit among the high-contrast furniture and reflect on the pivot his life had just taken through the agreement with Michael.

"Adrian Porinen. Room booked... or should be," he said, his voice low and grating. It bothered him that a hotel this expensive still used humans for such a simple task; it felt like a deliberate, inefficient luxury for him.

"Ah, yes. We have your reservation right here, Mr. Porinen. Room 55G1, at your service, sir," the service man replied, his smile was a masterpiece of professional hospitality. *"Do you have any baggage, sir? Any assistance required?"*

"Baggage... yes. I will care for that myself," Adrian replied, a tired smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. *"It is all in the head, you know? Too fragile to trust to someone else."*

"A business trip, then?" the man asked, his tone remaining perfectly level.

"No. Criminal business. You have very cosy court in this city," Adrian dead panned. *"But do not worry, my criminal career ended without any chance to start. So, just tired traveller. Nothing more."*

The service man didn't flinch, his training holding firm. *"It sounds as though it has been a very long day, sir. If you take the elevator to your right – that is the most direct route to your room. Please, do not hesitate to call from the suite should you require anything further."*

"No. But I need few beers. Not your strong local ones, something light. And I do not want interruption until morning. No extra things," Adrian finalized, already turning toward the elevators.

Adrian moved toward the elevator, squinting to shield his eyes from the relentless, expensive glare of the hallway. The hotel was one of the highest-ranking facilities in Rotterdam, its materials screaming of wealth and luxury, yet Adrian found none of it comfortable. To him, the ostentation felt like a premonition – a reflection of the heavy, uncertain assignment he'd just accepted from Michael.

He found his room easily, and to his surprise, the interior did not continue the sterile hostility of the lobby. It was anchored in dark, warm tones; a mixture of soft fabrics and solid surfaces that finally allowed his nerves to settle. Still, his first act was to reach for the controls and dim the lights even further.

His order arrived almost immediately. The sauna was already humming, radiating a dry, expectant heat – perfectly prepared for his arrival. Adrian uncapped a bottle and poured the contents into a glass. He stayed still for a moment, concentrating on the play of carbonation. He watched the steady stream

of CO2 bubbles rising from the bottom, listening to the faint, rhythmic popping as they reached the surface.

"Well... to new heights, clumsy criminal Adrian," he said aloud, his voice was raspy in the quiet suite. He raised the glass to the empty room and drank.

The morning in the Rotterdam hotel was a first of its kind. After decades of mostly autonomous work – unnecessary investigations led mostly by nothing but his own relentless curiosity – Adrian was now forced to work with someone else who led the agenda. Despite their mutual interests, this fact was annoying, and the first morning in the clinical glare of the suite was only amplifying the feeling. Just one standard day ago had been a previous era; now, a new one had arrived. He had fallen asleep quickly, his mind overloaded with the events of the previous day, but the new day dictated a new step.

Morning had always been a time for the simple and the mechanical; it was a ritual that had anchored Adrian across centuries of waking up in unfamiliar places. Even here, in the expensive quiet of the hotel suite, he sought the familiar weight of routine to settle his mind. After decades of mostly autonomous work, he was now a man following a shadow agenda.

The fact that Michael Berndt was now pulling the strings was a persistent irritation, and the clinical brilliance of the hotel only seemed to amplify his unease.

He unlocked his terminal, gray light was cutting through the dim warmth he'd set the night before. He found Mikko's address and typed with deliberate intent:

"Good news is on the way – I'll be at your party after all. See you soon."

He paused, thinking of the twenty-thousand credit fine and his deactivated access keys and this new era. After a moment, he added:

"Let's leave the bad news for another time."

As a man who placed a high value on the rare bond of a good friendship, Adrian knew he couldn't return to Finland for the gathering with empty hands. With only an hour remaining before his 10:00 copter was scheduled to arrive for the long transit back to Lahti, he headed downstairs into the lobby.

He squinted as he stepped back into that clinical, aggressive glare – a luxury design where the light bled directly from the marble surfaces in a way he found utterly intolerable. He sought out the same service man from the night before.

"A copter was arranged for the name Adrian Porinen – could you check that?" Adrian asked, his voice was low and grating from the long night.

"Certainly, sir. I have the confirmation right here," the service man replied with a flawless, professional smile. *"You have approximately one hour before departure. Might I offer you some breakfast in the interim, sir?"*

"No. Better tell me – where could I find a souvenir? Specifically, something about the Grote Kerk or Sint-Laurenskerk. Something truly historical," Adrian said without pause, his mind already drifting to the ancient structures he'd seen.

"Not a silly scaled replica of modern times. And... find me a pack of your local beer."

"Of course, sir. There is a specialist shop nearby called 'De Overblijfsel.' It is roughly a ten-minute drive and is the only establishment of its kind open at this hour. I can have a taxi waiting for you at the entrance immediately. Is there anything else I might assist you with?"

"Ah, yes. In case I am late, please inform the copter pilot of the delay. It should be paid," Adrian replied, thinking of his new arrangement with the German Cluster.

"Direct any claims to Michael Berndt – you will find all the required information in the order."

"Very good, sir. I shall ensure the pilot is notified. And shall I have your baggage brought down for the copter?" the service man asked.

"No. Just forget it. No baggage today," Adrian replied,

It took exactly ten minutes to reach De Overblijfsel. The building itself wasn't something extraordinary; it was a manifestation of ancient city preservation. Like many others in this district, the structure had been lifted to escape the risen sea level, yet every detail – every stone, every metal decoration – remained intact. The entrance to the shop was located beneath the first floor, tucked away from the clinical glare of the modern streets. A small set of stone stairs led down, their surfaces unpolished and rough; it was ancient stone bearing the deep scars of centuries past.

The store was split into two parts. The first was standard, organised to allow the usual stream of visitors to buy common things; Adrian wasn't interested in items that were cheaply mass-produced, considering them boring and not worth any attention at all. He moved instead to the second part, hidden from common eyes – a beautiful mess where a variety of different, non-standard objects were placed.

His eyes were immediately attracted to a long glass box. Inside, several slightly different replicas of a gothic church stood in a row. A description on the back of the case read: **"Laurenskerk in Time"**. Each replica was marked with a specific year, showing the building's evolution. Furthermore, the material of the replicas changed depending on the year – a tactile detail that appealed to Adrian's appreciation for ancient history and the technical evolution.

"I see your interest in this... yes?" a man said, emerging from the shadows of the shop's cluttered rear section.

"It is very expensive, but you should notice – each small replica is crafted from its appropriate material," he continued, stepping closer to the glass.

"The first is carved from the original stone of the foundation. The second, which you see is slightly ruined, is cast from the very metal used to shell Rotterdam in the ancient times... and the latest, the one that resembles the building as it stands today, is made of vloeisteen. So, what do you think? Is it worth it? Yes?"

This blend of history, aesthetics, and engineering was exactly what Adrian's relentless mind had been seeking. Though he was never a man for shopping, he could already imagine the glass box resting beside him on the copter back to Lahti, a tangible piece of art to accompany him back. Even with the twenty-thousand credit fine weighing on his file, this felt like a necessary acquisition and best gift for the upcoming event.

"No. But I will take it, right now. Please pack it, and... I don't have luxury of time today, if you understand me," Adrian replied with a stone face.

He returned to the hotel exactly on time – not a minute later, nor sooner. He carefully carried the glass box of replicas, this tangible piece of art, toward the ordered copter. The second box, filled with the local beer he had secured, he delegated to the pilot to load into the storage bay.

During the lift-off, he had mixed feelings. Like the mix of architecture beneath the copter – the ancient, historical buildings moved piece-by-piece to the heights to save them from the risen sea level, now surrounded by the cold logical structure of the modern city style – it was a clash of two opposite emotions.

He felt a heavy sadness about the passed times, the times of recently ended era. Yet, competing with that nostalgia was a relentless curiosity about the new things to come. The HEI transmitters, the unknown party, and the fact that Lizzie Wolters now represented a third state of living being for him – it was a lure he couldn't ignore. Even with his loss of autonomy, the need to strip away the mystery of these new unknowns was already pulling him into the deep.

Mikko and Virta had been consumed by the preparations since the very morning. While Adrian was navigating the clean streets of Rotterdam to carry his catch back to the hotel, Mikko was busy orchestrating the arrival of provisions. The usual rhythmic calm of their home had been replaced by the rare bustle of coordinating their upcoming anniversary gathering, with Mikko managing the logistics for the delivery of local food and drinks.

The event celebrated Mikko's two-hundredth standard years anniversary, a milestone significant enough to summon a wide circle of individuals from their solitary routines. Circle was the precise term – a network of professionals bound by constant communication, and sometimes by genuine friendship that remained a much rarer commodity. The guest list was a diverse occupation: engineers from varying domains, researchers in bio-tech and physics, and safety experts. They were unified by a single, defining trait: their long lifespans. Because such gatherings were rare events, occurring perhaps only once or twice a decade, they served as intellectual crucibles. This was the reason an investigation expert could comfortably support a discussion or provide a rigorous argument regarding the latest breakthroughs in particle physics; with centuries at one's disposal, the boundaries between professional domains naturally began to blur.

Events of this magnitude were a logistical nightmare. Because every attendee operated on a rigid, long schedule, the date and time had been etched into their calendars standard years in advance. In a world governed by cold logic and calculation, finding a window for everyone to gather in the same place physically was a feat of engineering in itself.

Yet, despite the centuries of planning, the final days before the anniversary were always hectic. For Mikko and Virta, the rhythmic calm of their home had been replaced by the bustle of coordinating provisions.

There was, however, a long-standing tradition that offered a rare crack in the rigid protocols and policies: the unexpected guest. It was considered a common courtesy to surprise the host or another attendee with a visitor whose presence hadn't been announced on the events feeds.

Despite the brooding, dark grey skies and the damp chill in the air, Mikko felt a rare sense of ease following Adrian's latest message. He looked out toward the small copter pad just a few hundred meters from his backyard. The landing surface was clean, slightly elevated above the street to avoid any clashes with the surrounding buildings and the glare of the city lights. Copter traffic was sparse here; Mikko and Virta's neighbourhood was a quiet residential area, tucked away just on the edge of the city centre.

"Hey Mikko, you will hear that specific noise soon – the switch from the airplane mode to the heli when... ahh, how many guests are planning to use the copter today?" Virta asked, interrupting his staring at the pad.

"A few. Adrian and Koenn, and... somebody else. The pad reservation contains three records of upcoming landings", he replied, his eyes finally drifting from the clean, elevated surface of the pad back to her.

"Okay, and when is the closest?" Virta asked again, her voice was carrying the same familiar warmth she always had when they met after a long separation.

"Should be almost here", he replied again, a slight, ironic smile was touching his lips.

The stillness of the residential area was finally fractured by the low-frequency thrum of approaching rotor blades. It wasn't merely a mechanical noise; it was the physical protest of the damp air being compressed and torn as the heavy craft began its deceleration.

A sudden, sharp shift in the acoustic pitch signalled the transition – the distinctive mode-switch from high-speed air plane cruise to vertical thrust. Emerging from the brooding grey clouds, the black, slick fuselage of the copter looked like a masterpiece of aerodynamic evolution, a centuries-refined descendant of ancient flight machines.

On the elevated pad nearby, the navigation lights shifted their rhythm, glowing in a steady, alternating pattern of red and blue to guide the final approach. The craft hung suspended for a few minutes, its down wash ruffling the nearby pine trees, before it began the slow, precise descent toward the clean landing surface.

The first arrival was Adrian's. As the hatch hissed open, he stepped out from the copter clutching a box with a protective intensity that, even from a distance, signalled its significant value. It was his gift, piece of art he found back in Rotterdam.

The pilot leaned out to hand Adrian a second box, offered a crisp, professional farewell sign, and immediately initiated the lift-off sequence. There was no luxury of time for small talk; the regional air traffic schedule was an absolute calculation, governed by routes planning that demanded the pad be cleared for the next scheduled arrival or emergency landing as soon as possible.

As the craft's engines whined, transitioning back into its ascent, Adrian stood alone on the clean, elevated surface, a weary relic returning to the pristine sanctuary of his home with a head full of new questions and mysteries to solve.

Michael felt a profound sense of satisfaction with the outcome of his discussion in the privacy-hardened room. For a man who lived by absolute calculation and cold logic, individuals like Adrian were dangerously unpredictable. They represented the unknown variables in his complex calculations – the kind of anomalies that could not be solved through a digital profile and caused a persistent, worrying friction in his strategic planning.

Though he held the title of Technarch, Michael was under no illusions: he was still an employee – a high-ranked one in a system that spanned the Inner system. He remained answerable to the management committee of the German Cluster, reporting to a board of professional masks that valued cold logic and efficiency.

Every credit spent and every shadow-budget allocated had to be meticulously accounted for, creating a constant, grinding pressure. This oversight was the friction in his work, a reminder that while he managed the gears of special operations, he was still bound by the rigid protocols of the very system he served.

Despite the complexity, things were under control – with the exception of the missing space containers. Michael initiated a leaplink conference, bridging the connection between the Outer System representative resided on the Mars orbital ring and a cargo outpost at the L4 Jupiter Lagrange point. The communication windows were as optimal as physics allowed: a fifteen-minute one-way trip for data to reach toxic cold rock orbit, and forty-nine minutes for a signal to pierce the void to the edge of the L4 swarm near the Jupiter.

Following the previous day's proceedings, Michael found himself back in his office. He had a ten-hour leaplink ahead of him – plenty of time to sift through the data and extract the information his superiors were still withholding.

"I am warmly welcome the all the participants of this the leaplink. I thank you for the your effort to participate in the this discussion", Michael began, his voice flat and precise as it traversed the enormous chain of relay stations in the void of space.

"But I have the serious question regarding the order NRAPL4W 1000238. My concern is about the missing cargo. It was agreed about the seventeen standard containers; however, we got the only the four of them. We are explicitly hiding the any further the investigation due to the our the agreements..." he made a pause.

He was needing to complete the all the phrases with the maximum of the speed to maintain the

clarity, but he was still forced to wait for a very long time for each of the replies to leap back across the void. Michael described the all of the legal complications and the procedural loopholes.

"Please describe any complication before the crawler loading. EOM" he finished his voice message.

The delay wasn't new to him, but the nature of a leaplink was inherently taxing; it demanded a strange kind of mental suspension. Participants had to stay anchored in the conversation while the void swallowed the minutes – total silence between replies, yet the thread of the discussion had to remain unbroken. Michael had adapted well, using the gaps to extinguish other fires. This time, he turned his attention to the cargo outpost holding the four recovered containers. He located the secure channel, cycled the encryption keys, and quickly typed:

"Assemble a scanning crew. Conduct non-invasive inspections on the containers in holding. Confirm once the procedure is under way."

The first response blinked onto his console six minutes later:

"Order confirmed. Scanning in progress."

Michael wanted to walk into this marathon discussion fully armed. His strategy was to fill the vast silences of the leaplink with a series of urgent directives, orchestrating as many moving parts as possible while the signal travelled.

Almost exactly fifty minutes later, the void was finally broken by an incoming voice transmission:

"Export of all high-precision equipment to your area is prohibited. This directive was in effect during the crawler load. Refer to the original manifest; data attached. No further clarification will follow. End of link." The flat, almost mechanical drone of the outer system representative severed the connection, leaving the silence of the office feeling heavier than before.

The atmosphere of the gathering was welcoming and liveable, yet underscored by a bustling, productive chaos. Everyone was trying to soak in as much of it as possible. This was no mere one-day affair or a solitary evening; the event stretched across several standard days. Yet, despite that longevity, the timeframe felt far too short to greet everyone, debate the latest findings, or catch up on the lives of those who had been separated by gaps of many standard years.

Mikko and Virta's place was a massive, two-storey residence, anchored atop an ancient bunker carved into the granite plate. Decades ago, it had been filled with the clamour of children – the quintessential big family home – but during this gathering, the atmosphere felt different.

The two friends, Adrian and Mikko, decided to withdraw from the noise to share recent events in the privacy of Mikko's working room. It took less than a standard hour for Adrian to recount what had actually happened.

"So, now I am on a new assignment. Like it or not, but that was my choice," Adrian concluded.

Mikko was struck by the decision, though he understood the motivation. After all, such immense curiosity was bound to lead to something like this. Adrian sensed the mood and used the moment to offer a gift.

"You are losing your attention to detail. As you can see, I did not come empty-handed. Here is a box; any ideas?" Adrian asked.

"Ah, a box. Yes... ideas? Well, is it some rare ale or something of that kind?" Mikko replied.

"No. The box of ales was already taken by Virta; it should be cooling by now. This box – this is a gift for you. I want you to open it," Adrian said, sliding the object across the desk toward Mikko. *"I insist. Do not waste time. Open."* He added a small, knowing smile.

Mikko looked into Adrian's deep green eyes for a moment before his attention shifted to the package. He unpacked it quickly, revealing a shiny, transparent glass box. Inside, small replicas of the Laurenskerk

church sat in their places – static, inert. They created a feeling of frozen time, each one representing a specific era of its design.

"I did not expect something like this. Thank you," Mikko said, truly surprised.

"It looks like slices of a timeline – an evolution. I do not know how you found this in such a short time, but you know what? It is very much your style. I will take care of this piece of art. How did you find it?"

"Honestly, I do not know. Mostly by accident," Adrian replied. "But it does not matter. I am happy you like it."

"Yes. I will put it in the big living room," Mikko said, standing up. "Let us go back to the other guests, should we?"

"Yes. I suspect you have invited a surprise guest for me?" Adrian asked as they moved toward the door.

"No," Mikko replied shortly. "Virta did."

The most prominent and massive member of the Head Trojan swarm was the celestial body designated **624 Hektor**. It had been discovered many centuries ago, a silent relic of the early solar system. This great asteroid was not a single monolith; instead, it was a sculpture shaped by gravity. Three massive fragments and even a small moonlet formed the structure of the object, held together in a slow, eternal tether.

Beyond the official designation, another name was used to identify this object: **Hmak 4**. This name originated from the Outer System and remained cryptic to those planning the expansion to the Jovian L4 point. It was highly practical to have trillions of metric tonnes of raw materials available – metals, silicates, and water. Everything required to reorganize matter into meaningful shapes and purposes was present here. It was considered a no man's land, much like the rest of the Head Trojan swarm.

However, the side hidden from the Sun's radiation was not completely dark this time. A deep reddish glow, which in some places shifted toward a hotter, yellowish hue, illuminated the regolith of the celestial body. The silhouettes of the radiators were sharp against the void due to the intense contrast; at this location, only two major sources of light existed: the distant Sun and the radiator-glow. Still, one could discern small specks of other light – the rhythmic pulses of marshalling engines from standard space containers. Thirteen of them, aligned in a row, were docking with a transport ship in the shadows.

The big living room was full, as were the adjacent rooms. The old house seemed happy to host such a large gathering once more, its sturdy walls absorbing the hum of many voices. Mikko and Virta were busy welcoming new arrivals; several guests had been delayed and were only now appearing at the door, much later than expected.

Adrian took a glass of ale – he was never particularly talkative in public while his throat was dry. His eyes scanned the room, searching for something unusual – or more precisely, for a new face he did not yet know.

He did not have to wait long. Virta returned, accompanied by a new guest. She signalled for silence, ringing a bell to draw everyone's focus. The lively conversations and heated discussions came to a halt; it was time for an old tradition of this small, compact society: the surprise guest. This was a ritual – a formal procedure for introducing new members. It was not always successful, as occasionally a candidate might reject such an invitation; regardless, this was how the group grew in number: slow and steady.

"Please, pay attention, please. I would like to introduce a guest – a surprise guest!" Virta announced loudly.

"Today, this is a surprise guest for Adrian Porinen. Please welcome Tuireen Porinen – his daughter and the lead of space structures engineering. She has made quite a journey from the Mars Lagrange," Virta continued.

A tall, athletic woman stepped into the room. She was dressed in new, contemporary Earth-style clothing – the kind of typical set bought in a hurry on the Earth orbital rings. Though functional, the garments emphasised her strong, hourglass forms. Tuireen had inherited the same dark green eyes as her father, and her gaze was heavy with authority.

"Ah, thank you, everyone, for meeting me here!" she began, her voice low and resonant.

"I am a newcomer to this circle, but like my father, I have much to tell about the Shift and everything that followed," she continued, her tone softening slightly.

She scanned the crowd until she intercepted those same dark green eyes. Adrian was stunned to see his eldest daughter; it was truly unexpected. The moment he had heard her name, he had choked a little on his ale.

"But I must apologize. First, I must see my father first..." she concluded her brief introduction.

Tuireen walked directly to where Adrian stood. She came to a halt in front of him; she was taller than her father, and she had to lower her head slightly to meet his eyes. For several seconds, they simply stared at one another. During this silence, the people around them grew quiet, watching and waiting to see what would happen next.

After a long moment, they finally embraced, hugging each other tightly. With the tension broken, the crowd immediately returned to their lively conversations and heated discussions.

"Hey, isä! So long time, no see," Tuireen said, her voice low and mild.

"Yep, yep. Quite a time," Adrian replied.

The Porinen family was not known for being talkative. Father and eldest daughter rarely met – not because of any animosity, but because they both loathed the moment of separation and the weight of unspoken words. Adrian and Tuireen shared much in common, having weathered the same events, crises, and shocks that had rippled through the Porinen family over the years.

"How are you, Tuuri?" Adrian asked.

"Heh, still the same. Divorced, and constantly moving to manage and lead. And you? You look tired and smashed. Is it the new findings? Or have the years of existing on this globe pushed you hard?" she asked.

"I do not know exactly. Why not the third option? Both the findings and the years are pushing me hard. Let us find something to eat and drink. And how did you manage to get dressed like this? The last time I saw you, you were wearing a habitat suit," he replied with a small smile.

"I had three hours of waiting time on the Northern Orbital Ring. My assistant messed up the logistics. And yes, let us go; I am quite hungry and thirsty," she replied.

The commemorative plinth stood like a silent sentinel at the arrival bay: **"Unitaria-class space habitat: 278 years of continuous improvements"**. It was the first thing Ake saw upon docking at the Astraeus. He lingered before the historical inscription for a moment, his eyes tracing the weathered etching: **"128BS – 150AS: 6 design revisions and upgrades"**. The text was carved in common English, French, and Greek – a dignified nod to the old linguistic alliances of the inner system worlds.

The Unitaria had been the first true pioneer of its kind. Even to a layman's eye, it looked modest compared to the modern giants like the Phoebe-class; its rotating drum was a sturdier, shorter thing,

stretching only twenty-one kilometres in length and eight in diameter. It was a relic of an era when humanity's reach was still finding its grip.

But Ake had no appetite for engineering history today, or the pride of dead designers and engineers. The only reason for his lingering was a nagging preoccupation – the echo of a small talk he'd shared with a green, talkative engineer during the commute. That conversation, more than the plinth, was the true cause of his delay.

The most troubling part was the delicacy of the task: bringing Sojohan Wolters into alignment with the agenda Michael had set. In the blunt shorthand of their circles, it meant bringing the man under total control. It was a grim prospect. Sojohan was already hollowed out by grief, drifting in a state that looked dangerously like clinical depression – an unpredictable variable in an already fragile situation.

Torenbergh struggled to find the right words to address the situation regarding Sojohan daughter, Lizzie. He needed a bridge between the professional necessity of his mission and the personal Sojohan's wreckage, but the words wouldn't come.

Compounding the pressure was the silence of the German Cluster board. As long as they remained mute, the future was unwritten; a vast, unsettling array of options remained pinned to the table, and none of them were particularly kind and gentle.

The first rule Ake had been given was quite clear: connect with Michael directly. Since it was his first time aboard this habitat, he instinctively began to decompose the mission into smaller, manageable components. He prioritized them with a cold, logical precision, preferring a reliable and steady progress over a hurried one. In unfamiliar territory, caution was the only currency that mattered.

He sought out a privacy-hardened communication room. By slaving his personal communicator to the terminal as a dedicated encryption bridge, he ensured the link was secure. In this sector, the Greek Protectorate of the Southern Europe Cluster adhered to the Privacy protocols with a rigid, bureaucratic discipline – a common, dependable constant in the whole Inner System.

The *Astraeus* was an old machine with an intricate, layered design; finding a specific building or even a whole sector was a task of three-dimensional navigation. For Ake, the population density was a further complication. Despite her size, the habitat was heavily packed, hosting 1.3 million people within her spinning hull.

"So, that is the future for all the Phobes..." the thought sparked in Ake's mind.

He moved through the crowded transit hubs with a measured step, his eyes was calculating the wear on the bulkheads and the sheer mass of humanity pressed into the vertical layers. It was a world that had grown too small for its inhabitants, a glimpse of a destiny that even the newer, grander Phoebe-class might one day face.

His terminal synchronized with the local map in less than a standard minute. He entered the query: **"Nearest global communication point"**. To his surprise, the terminal lagged for a moment – a brief, uncharacteristic stutter in its old processing – before returning the address: **"Area 23, Lane 6, Layer 5"**.

Along with the location, several navigation options appeared on the display. The shortest route was estimated with exactly 42 standard minutes. Ake looked at the timer and then at the crowded corridor ahead of him. In a newer Phoebe-class, such a trip would take half that time, but here, in the dense, layered reality of the *Astraeus*, forty-two minutes was the price of design complexity.

Michael sat at his desk, his thoughts heavy. He was quite puzzled by the latest leaplink's outcome; it was the addition of one more unknown variable to an already complex equation. Despite his deep knowledge and the immense reach of his network, he had missed this – an oversight that gnawed at his

professional pride.

Intelligence levels in the Outer System were habitually low, the data-streams thin and distorted by the sheer distance of the void and absence of the polished policies and protocols applied in the Inner System. Yet, he had managed to place a few agents there a decade ago. He stared at the muted glow of his terminal, wondering if one of those long-dormant seeds had finally sprouted, or if a new shadow was beginning to fall across his maps.

"Damn the void. This bloody place – it consumes so much of the effort, the people, and the machinery," Michael said, his voice a low rasp against the silence of his empty room.

He had acquired a new, powerful figure: Adrian. But Adrian was an independent unit – highly intelligent and motivated, yet he lacked the absolute, ingrained loyalty of an Ake Torenbergh. For this unit, a new assignment had emerged, a mission that would require Michael to reveal a significant amount of intelligence to Adrian directly. It was a steep price to pay for speed, but things were moving with a momentum more rapid than he had originally calculated.

Michael looked at the data-scroll on his desk, the light of the terminal casting long, sharp shadows across his face. He preferred to keep his secrets boxed and buried, but the Outer System was a mysterious beast, and Adrian was the only blade sharp enough to cut through the coming storm.

"Anyway, at some point in time, he will uncover our operation with the Outer System, but he will solve this puzzle..." the thought sparked in Michael's mind.

The heavy, frightening silence of the office was finally broken by the expected chime of the terminal. The display flickered to life, the text sharp against the silent room:

"Incoming voice comm: Ake Torenbergh. Round-trip delay: 3.3 sec. (sp)".

"Hello. Just arrived to the Astraeus and ready. Any updates?" Ake's voice came through the communicator after the 1.7-second one-way delay, sounding tinny and far away.

"Yes. Now, I want you to finish your current mission within five standard days." Michael made a deliberate pause, letting the deadline hang in the air.

"After that, you should move your head to the Heidelberg habitat. Your new mission there is to assist Adrian Porinen – he will lead the special activity to solve this mess with the HEI transmitters and our broken supply of equipment from the Outer System. His access level is high..." He made another small, calculated pause.

"Yes, please – find those cunts messing with our agenda! Please confirm. The detailed information is being sent to your terminal now. EOM." Michael ended the voice message even as he initiated the authorization, pushing encrypted profiles and mission-critical information to his trusted agent.

"Confirmed, boss. EOC," came the reply from the other end of the leaplink.