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The second day of Mikko and Virta's gathering was less formal – a time to discuss a wide range of topics, nearly anything and everything. Adrian was curious to understand how Virta was connected to his eldest daughter. It had been quite a surprise to see her, but it was even more unexpected at this pivotal moment of his career and life shift.

"Are you busy? Could I borrow a few minutes of your attention, Virta?" Adrian asked as he approached Mikko's wife.

"No problem, and I know your question. I met your eldest at a meeting about a new type of medical space station... It was a hot discussion about requirements, abilities of such objects – yes – and costs. Those things are always connected with engineering," she replied.

"Tuireen is a well known lead structural engineer for space infrastructure, you should know," she continued.

"And I am mostly an independent contractor, but it's out of my father's curiosity scope, right isä?" Tuireen interrupted the conversation, appearing suddenly from the nearest door.

"I knew that, Tuuri, but medical space stations... that is something new for me," Adrian replied. He wasn't surprised by her sudden appearance; this was an old habit of hers, something that hadn't changed over the many decades.

"Oh, that's neat. I have to go – a delivery requires my immediate attention. I will leave you both alone," Virta said with a bit of a smile.

"That is not new to me. You should contact me a little bit more often than you do," Tuireen continued.

"Hmm, I always thought that was also true for your side," Adrian argued.

"Let's agree to disagree; it's a waste of time to argue, we both know it," she replied.

"Yep yep, but medical space stations... you never mentioned them," Adrian said with a hint of a mysterious smile.

"I don't have to. And during the voicecalls, leaplinks, or even texting, you are... more human. More father. So why waste this rare occasion on stupid medical outposts? They are all quite typical and standard. Rotating modules are unified, materials are mostly the same, there is nothing new... probably there are different requirements for the quantity and arrangement of airlocks and other specific things... it's a routine. And as for you – I'm afraid you would be bored to death," Tuireen said, settling into the large chair.

Adrian followed and sat in the chair next to Tuireen's. A small table was set between them, laid with tea. Tuireen focused her gaze on her father, noticing a spark in his eyes – the one that usually appeared when his curiosity was rising. She picked up her cup of tea, continuing to watch him.

"But, what is it about you and space medical labs? I see your interest..." she asked.

"Mmm, no, nothing, but... you mentioned that you are working for different Clusters, right? I know that gaze... okay, were you contracted to design and build such a lab for the German Cluster?" Adrian replied.

He decided to look into her eyes – not because he wanted to gauge her reaction, but because this was a rare case, an unexpected meeting. He knew that after a few standard days, the space and time between them would grow large again.

"Yes, there was one... with an additional fusion reactor. The trickiest one. She was equipped with enormous heat radiators... and the logistics? She was intended to be deployed in the Outer System." Tuireen sipped her tea, holding the cup as if it were something rare and expensive.

"It was built, assembled, tested, and then disassembled for delivery. An expensive project. But the others... others were boring. The French Cluster especially—they like one good design, but nothing tricky," her voice was low and steady.

*"Interesting... what about the Technate?"* asked Adrian.

*"I don't like the Technate... I hope this small community shares my opinion, huh?"* she responded with a touch of irritation.

*"No, no worries. You wouldn't find anyone in this community who likes the Technate. Nobody loves them, and for good reason,"* Adrian replied in a calm voice.

*"Perhaps let's imitate a leaplink? I will try to switch to the more fatherly mode you like?"* Adrian suggested.

He finished his tea. They continued their discussion with warmer topics and a softer tone.

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Matthias Klein had a habit of being exactly five standard minutes late for any informal meeting. He stepped from the transport cabin without haste, ascending to the surface at the same relaxed, measured pace. He found Anni waiting near the entrance to the Welde Brauhaus. Her unusually pale skin bled into the white of her clothes – fabrics that clung tightly to her form – leaving only her short, pale-yellow hair to stand out against the monochrome figure. It felt eerie; the unusual shape of her eyes only added to the sensation. Yet, in the same breath, she was undeniably attractive.

*"Hello. How are you doing today?"* Matthias asked as he reached her.

*"Hello. Mostly the same as yesterday, or the day before,"* she replied. Her voice was soft, low, and carried a steady, rhythmic quality.

*"You promised to show me something of interest here,"* she continued, a joyful smile momentarily breaking her ghostly composure. *"I am ready. Are you?"*

*"Yes, I am. I only hope you are not yet bored with these simulated gravity things?"* Klein asked.

*"Everything that is complete is of interest,"* she replied quickly, her gaze shifting toward the entrance. *"I must go back soon to Munster."*

*"Then I believe there are at least two things you would find interesting: the waterfalls in the Unity building, and the sectors that are completed but not yet occupied. We call them the 'Ghost Town,'"* Matthias continued.

*"The Ghost Town will not remain empty for long, as more inhabitants are arriving every day. But it is finished, and I think it might be of interest to you. Let us go there first,"* he concluded.

They headed toward the habitat's transport point. The arriving cabin was completely empty; Matthias entered the destination on the console and sat down opposite Anni. For a moment, he looked directly at her face, but her scanning gaze was too much – he was unable to withstand it for long. He turned his head toward the direction of travel.

*"It is about a fifteen-minute ride, if there are no stops,"* he said. He could still feel Anni's gaze on him, steady and searching. It was a mixed sensation, something entirely new and uncommon for him.

*"You do not look like a typical engineer of the German Cluster. Are you a contractor?"* Matthias asked, his voice cutting through the heavy silence.

*"No! Why? But I have been told that I resemble my mother in appearance; she was not from the German Cluster at all,"* Anni replied with a hint of a smile.

*"The Nordic Union... and it is a rare genetic trait, this skin colour. It passed from generation to generation. You know how those things are,"* she concluded.

Matthias sat in silence, trying to recall all the faces he had seen during his long career, but he could not remember anything like her. **"Too many different Europeans; weird people still trying to keep their identities..."** an irritated thought sparked in his mind.

*"I have never seen that. Interesting,"* he replied aloud.

A few minutes of awkward silence in the nearly quiet cabin were accompanied by a slight wave of dizziness as the transport turned against the direction of the habitat's rotation.

Anni decided to break the silence.

*"When are you planning your holidays?" she asked.*

*"Holidays... Ah, yes. I am planning my departure soon. Did I tell you this yesterday?" he replied.*

*"Yes, sorry if it bothers you. I was hoping this question would make you a little bit more... alive,"* Anni said, giggling. She switched off her scanning gaze and redirected it toward the front of the cabin.

*"Why did they place transparent glass in the transport cabin? Does it make any sense? There are only dull grey corridors out there," she continued.*

*"Those are for safety and emergency purposes – the same reason why the lights become dimmer during the cabin's movement. In the event of energy disruptions, those lines would likely be shut off. It is not the highest priority to supply power to them in such cases... so it keeps your eyes more aligned with the luminosity levels ..."*

Matthias was interrupted; the cabin came to a halt at their destination.

*"Heh, another safety measure. Let us go. Leave your explanation for a later time,"* Anni said in her soft voice.

They stepped out from the cabin and ascended to the surface. The sight before them was astonishing, yet eerie and frightening at the same time. Geometrically laid-out streets and small roads sat empty, clean, and unnervingly new. Buildings ranging from three-story residential blocks to towers ten stories or higher stood vacant. The silent, low hum of the rotating drum felt especially loud on these empty streets. The combination of that distinct sound, the emptiness, and the curved geometry of the habitat created a mesmerising, unearthly sensation.

The curvature created a strange visual effect; looking a few hundred meters ahead, the ground seemed to climb significantly higher. Some areas had been specifically designed to mask this feeling – extra layers and artificial hills attempted to mimic a planetary surface – but they only added to the overall complexity. The buildings were modular, yet each used a different mix of designs and colours to stand apart from the others. A single, monumental building stood a kilometre ahead along the longitudinal axis. Rising a hundred meters tall, it looked like an enormous parent monitoring the small children clustered at its feet.

*"See? Everything is exactly as I said. The entire sector is empty; only the cleaning automation operates here,"* Matthias said, his voice echoing loudly against the vacant buildings.

*"Why are you yelling? It is quiet in here... only the background hum,"* Anni replied with a smile.

*"Forgive me. I cannot get used to this kind of silence. And honestly, I was hoping to witness the cleaning automation at work here. In my sector, those drones do not always do their job well. Some litter remains in the green zones, in the grass... it is not critical, but..."* Matthias lowered his voice back to a normal level.

*"What is that tall building there?"* Anni interrupted him, pointing toward the monumental hundred-meter structure.

*"Ah, that is our destination – the Unity Centre. The waterfalls... do you remember my promise?"* he replied. Despite his lingering disorientation, he found it strange to hear such a question from a cooling system engineer working on the same habitat class.

*"I assumed you had the same structures on your habitat. Am I mistaken?"* he asked, watching her.

*"It is planned, but Munster is still in the filling stage. Not all the structures are in place yet. I have seen them only in blueprints,"* Anni replied without hesitation.

They headed up toward the Unity structure in silence, absorbing those astonishing and uncanny sensations together.

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Ake was in a hurry; the last message from Michael had been urgent and tense. He had been asked to act gently, but he still hadn't found the words to make Sojohan cooperative. His professional intuition told him this would not be easy. Essentially, he knew he had to act quickly and adapt to the circumstances as they unfolded. With this weight on his shoulders, Torenbergh made his way to the Sojohan residence. His only advantage was the element of surprise – appearing in person without the usual communications to arrange a meeting or align an agenda.

The residential area where Ake arrived was less dense – a sector for those who had invested more, and for noticeably longer. It was typical for the group Sojohan belonged to. Ake had to walk a few hundred meters to reach Sojohan's place. It was a neat, cosy structure – a two-story building located on the final layer. Its main colours, sea blue and white, made the building stand out from the layered structures Ake had passed before. Green areas with short grass and clusters of trees, all slightly bent in the direction opposite the drum's rotation, created a feeling that was cosy, yet undeniably unearthly.

To Ake's surprise, a small boy was playing near the trees – it was a rare sight, as children were uncommon on the habitats, especially in exclusive sectors like this.

*"Almost a hundred... a hundred..."* the boy was muttering aloud, his focus buried in a handheld terminal.

*"Hello, young man. What are you doing here?"* Ake asked, unable to hide his surprise.

*"I am doing an exercise my eldfather gave to me. Are you familiar with orbital dynamics?"* the boy replied, answering with a question of his own.

*"Certainly. But this must be a quite important exercise from your eldfather, yes? And his name is Sojohan, correct?"* Ake asked.

*"No. But it is nice that you know him. Tell me – are you friend or foe?"* the boy asked playfully.

*"I am planning to become his best friend,"* Ake replied with a thin smile.

*"Hah. Best friends are rare. You cannot be that, but you may try. He is inside,"* the boy replied, turning back to his terminal to continue his guesswork and calculations.

*"May I go in?"* Ake asked.

The boy wasn't particularly interested in the guest; he gave a small nod of approval, gesturing Ake toward the house.

Ake entered the building, finding the interior somewhat dated, yet sturdy and clean. White walls and lighting that mimicked the warmth of a planetary sun created an uplifting atmosphere.

*"Hello? I am looking for Sojohan,"* Ake called out into the open space of the building.

*"Please, come in. Second door on the right. I am here – and do not be shy to remove your shoes first,"* a voice replied from within.

*"I am Ake Torenbergh, a special agent of the German Cluster, acting on behalf of your daughter, Lizzie Walters, and my superior, Michael Berndt,"* Ake announced. His tone was official, yet he spoke gently and warmly as he removed his shoes.

He headed toward the indicated room. The interior did everything possible to make one feel far removed from the cluttered environment of the habitat. Expensive wooden shelves were packed with ancient artefacts: printed books, brass figurines, maps, old terminals, and high-density optical storage. The room felt filled with the wisdom of the generations who had built the modern world. Sojohan sat in a large chair, looking up from a terminal he had been reading when his guest arrived.

*"Nice kid, huh?"* Ake began.

*"Oh, yes he is. I have the luxury of seeing what three generations of the Walters have made,"* Sojohan replied.

*"He helped me with my grief. Now I am busy with this boy... we live in space, so I suppose orbital dynamics and basic Newtonian physics are a requirement for him to learn,"* he concluded.

*"And I know why you are here. Honestly, I was expecting to see Michael in person..."* the old man coughed a little.

*"But do not worry; I have made your mission easy. You should not underestimate an old man – I was involved in Cluster management, and..."* he coughed again. *"There is no such thing as an 'ex' in that world. Lizzie left me instructions on what to do if she were to disappear. Take a look..."*

He slid his terminal across the desk toward Ake.

*"She wrote it clearly: 'Follow Michael Berndt's instructions.' See? I cannot dismiss that. I will collaborate,"* Sojohan said with a faint smile.

Ake was shocked, but the feeling was quickly overtaken by relief. He was limited on time, and a more urgent mission was likely waiting ahead. He glanced at the terminal to confirm the message.

*"I have no more words. But you should know – if not for these instructions from my daughter, you would have needed a great deal of luck with that ambitious cunt, her husband... I forget the name... Alden. Poor French fellow,"* the old man continued.

*"Now you may go. But please, tell your boss: he should come in person next time,"* Sojohan concluded.

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Anni and Matthias finally reached the Unity Centre. Up close, the perspective shifted; though the building was massive, it still sat kilometres below the central spindle of the rotating drum. Matthias paused for a moment. He looked at his companion, then redirected his gaze upward, toward the distant axis of the habitat. Both objects – Anni and the Unity Centre – made him feel deeply uncomfortable.

Anni was familiar with rotating environments; she was well-adapted to the coriolis effects and the persistent dizziness inherent in such monumental structures. Yet, certain things remained beyond her understanding. She could sense that Matthias felt something was wrong – that her ability to mimic a typical engineer from the German Cluster was not as polished as she had believed.

*"Are we going inside? To the waterfalls?"* she asked loudly, her voice cutting through the mechanical hum.

Matthias snapped back from his staring and looked at her face once more.

*"Certainly. Move on!"* he replied, his response coming promptly and without hesitation.

As they moved toward the entrance of the Unity Centre, Anni reached into her right pocket. It was a simple, practised motion – feeling for the small capsule of poison. It was the same kind she had used not so long ago, back on Earth.

They passed through the automatic doors and entered the main hall – the massive space housing the long-awaited waterfall. The geometry of the falling water was incredible; it curved sharply in the direction opposite the drum's rotation, but the arc was not limited to a single plane. Small whirlpools of water would spontaneously form in mid-air and then suddenly vanish. Large droplets split apart on their descent, guided by special brackets installed along the curved waterway. Because a waterfall cannot fall straight in emulated gravity, the source at the very top of the Unity building had been intentionally offset.

Beyond the astonishing curvature of the water, the air inside was different – fresh, humid, and noticeably salty. The acoustics of the immense hall had been meticulously calculated; instead of a jarring echo, there was the pleasant roar of falling water near the centre and the calming drone of heavy rain toward the walls.

They spent several standard minutes witnessing this massive miracle, made possible by human engineering and the laws of physics.

To Matthias's surprise, two figures stood a few dozen meters away. Two women were busy in deep discussion.

*"Are you visiting the habitat's Technarch? Could I help you?"* one of the women asked as she approached the duo.

*"No, we are just walking... browsing,"* Matthias replied. *"The Technarch is working here? I thought he was still a resident of the main communications complex."*

*"Mmm. Then I do not want to bother you or your company any longer. But yes, the Technarch moved in today, just as planned. Enjoy your visit, sir,"* she replied before walking away.

*"What was that woman asking?"* Anni asked, her voice was soft and low.

*"Ah, it is nothing surprising. The Unity building is finally beginning to serve its intended purpose. If the Technarch is here, it means the administrative and management personnel are working here as well,"* Matthias replied. He wasn't shocked by the news; it was exactly what he had expected.

*"But the surroundings are so empty. Why move in so early?"* Anni asked, her voice carrying a genuine note of surprise.

*"I suspect it will not be for much longer. The new inhabitants are arriving soon,"* Matthias concluded, his gaze sweeping the massive hall.

Their discussion was cut short by the chime of Matthias's pocket terminal – a new message arriving via an encrypted channel. Matthias gave Anni a brief signal and stepped away to read the dispatch from his Technate superiors.

**"Departure secured. Estimated time: four standard hours from origin timestamp. Be prepared. Report from transport."**

The message was brief, but it brought Matthias a wave of relief; he had been waiting for these exact words. He returned to Anni, his expression schooled into a mask of professional regret.

*"I have unfortunate news. I must leave; there has been a shift in my logistics. Will you be remaining here for a time?"* Matthias asked.

Anni was sharply disappointed by the change. She had planned to accompany him back, secretly injecting the prepared poison during the pub time. Now, her window had closed.

*"No, I will stay here,"* she replied, fighting to keep the frustration out of her voice. *"You are leaving for your holidays now, yes?"*

*"Yes, finally,"* he replied. *"So, farewell, Anni. I hope we shall meet again at some point in the future."*

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The transport pod was half-full as Ake moved toward the transportation sector of the habitat. This sector was located in the northern longitudinal section of the drum – if "north" or "south" were even applicable terms in such a place.

Despite his familiarity with the design of the newest Phoebe-class habitats, the older Unitaria-class was fundamentally different. In this legacy design, the rotating drum was housed entirely inside a stationary outer shell that served as a radiation shield. During the era of this habitat's construction, the lack of advanced, high-tensile materials had dictated this double-hull approach. Even subsequent upgrades hadn't changed the core architecture; it simply wasn't commercially viable to rebuild the drum from scratch to introduce a modern integrated design.

The *Astraeus* was smaller and less advanced than the newer Phoebe-class habitats, yet it remained an immense achievement – a stable structure that still commanded respect for the engineers who had designed and built it. The habitat had been pushed to its absolute limits of population and function, but that strain provided a paradoxical sense of security. It felt lived-in, active, and vibrant.

However, Ake did not share this comfort. The noise and the crowding felt like relics of a disorganised past. Moreover, the conversation with Sojohan had left a heavy mark on him; the old man's words had pulled Ake deeper into his own thoughts, casting a shadow over the stability of the world around him.

"*You are not local, are you?*" the man sitting next to Ake asked.

"*No. I am more accustomed to the modern habitats... Phoebe-class. And you?*" Ake replied, surprising himself with the sudden impulse to be social.

"*Ahh, those empty hulls of state of the art technology,*" the man said, his voice carrying a slight Greek accent. He let out a dry chuckle. "*Those giants will be full too, eventually – with the help of God, or science.*"

"*Perhaps,*" Ake replied. "*But I hope it does not happen too quickly. We need more time to adapt.*"

"*Time...*" the man mused, his south european lilt softening. "*This is the most precious resource our civilisation has, yet we still do not understand it. We try to buy it. Sometimes, we even borrow it from ourselves. By changing the environment, we are modifying time itself... just imagine...*"

Ake frowned, turning slightly in his seat. The transport pod hummed around them, a vibration he could feel in his teeth. "*I am sorry – but what exactly do you mean?*"

He knew it would be a long journey to the docking ring, and despite his usual reserve, he decided he wanted to hear the answer.

"*It is simple,*" the man began, his tone slow and rhythmic, like a teacher who had given this lesson a thousand times. "*When humanity first stepped out onto the Earth, we claimed caves. But it was not enough; it was fragile, unstable, and dangerous. So, we mastered fire and began to build our own caves – houses and structures crafted from stone, wood, and concrete. But then, we possessed the secret of the Sun: fusion. We built a more stable, predictable home here in the dark. This is the evolution of our hungry species.*"

He smiled, a warm, friendly expression that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"*Every time we moved – from the natural cave to the built one, from the planet to this gravity oasis – we gained more time. We traded the chaos of nature for the precision of engineering, and in return, we earned a longer lifespan.*"

"*Interesting... very interesting,*" Ake replied.

To his own surprise, he found the sentiment deeply moving. Ake was not a man for history books or philosophical debates, yet this stranger's words resonated with a hidden frequency. He felt a sudden, sharp pride in being part of a species that had crawled out of smoky caves to build habitats driven by the same process that fuelled the stars.

"*Indeed,*" the man said with a knowing smile. "*We Greeks started the civilisation, the philosophy... and then others took the estafette – the relay torch. Are you here for long?*"

"*No,*" Ake replied. "*These are my final seven standard hours in this place.*"

"*If you have the time, please visit our cafe – Paradromos. Thank you for listening to me, but I must go; this is my stop.*"

The mysterious man stood up, adjusted his coat, and stepped out as the pod doors hissed open. He vanished into the bustling crowd of the transport sector without looking back. For the remainder of the journey, Ake sat in silence. He found himself thinking about almost everything – the caves, the fusion of the suns, the gravity oases – and for a brief moment, his cold, sterile logic felt noticeably warmer.

Ake stepped out of the transport pod and checked his timetable. He had approximately five standard hours before his departure. He felt stalled; his mind was overloaded by the implications of the talk with Sojohan, the urgency of Michael's message, and the haunting monologue of the man from the transportation pod.

"*Poor Ake,*" a thought sparked in his head, "*you must drink something before the departure.*"

He walked for ten minutes through the dense, humming corridors of the Astraeus transport sector. The air here was thick with the scent of ozone and the heavy, fried-oil smell of nearby food stalls – a

sharp contrast to the sterile air of the newer drums. Finally, he spotted a small, neat sign: **Paradromos**.

It was a quiet storefront, tucked away from the main thoroughfare. Whether it was a cafe, a bar, or a pub didn't matter – Ake was simply looking for a place to sit and drink. The stranger's advice suddenly felt oddly homely, an anchor in a world of shifting logistics. He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

It was exactly the place he had been looking for – not crowded, with a modest selection of drinks to choose from. He ordered a whisky; he needed the amber liquid to settle his mind. The walls of the bar were decorated with ancient maps of Earth, each representing a different epoch of a lost world.

The "Digital Revolution" map showed a country known then as the USA, sitting alongside a vast territory called the Russian Federation. But the next map, labelled "The Epoch of Balance," was cluttered with a far more complex political landscape. The Russian Federation had vanished. A "Big Red" China was there, but its shape had been radically altered, and the USA appeared noticeably smaller, its borders retracted.

After his second whisky, Ake found himself drawn to this map with renewed focus. He traced the lines of numerous new nation-states that had risen from the remains of the Russian Federation, several 'Chinas' vying for space, and a massive, consolidated territory known as the Islamic Block. This map represented a distant, dusty chapter of history, yet it was amusing to realise how many tectonic political shifts had reshaped the Earth in the centuries before the Shift finally moved humanity into the stars.

This brief excursion into history pulled Ake's mind back to Michael and his recent dispatch concerning Adrian. Like Michael, Adrian was a man born in the final decades before the colossal shift in the political landscape – a relic of the old world. The name was not new; it had surfaced in the mission files regarding Lizzie Walters back on Earth.

He remembered the imagery from the file: the day her vehicle had struck the concrete pylon in the Finnish Cluster territory. As he sat in the dim light of the cafe, Ake felt a puzzling connection – a synchronicity that seemed statistically impossible in a world of such staggering scale.

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Anni watched Matthias walk away, her disappointment sharp. The window for a clean operation had slammed shut. She cycled through alternative plans, but each carried the same fatal flaw: they would expose her to both the German Cluster and the Technate.

Provoking those two titans was not an option – it was too dangerous, and any reckless move could jeopardise the safety of other Outer System operatives embedded in the Inner System. For Anni, the Inner System was a shark tank – a vast expanse of controlled space held in a precarious balance by three major factions and a dozen minor ones. She was a stray particle in a high-pressure machine, and right now, she was haunted by her own failure.

Anni knew it was only a matter of time before the Technate's industrial grip tightened on the composite. Avoiding that had been the mission's core objective; every other plan to sabotage the German Cluster's developments hinged on it.

She found a bench near the entrance, using the ambient noise of the waterfalls as cover. It was time for a brief report. She pulled out her terminal and typed a single, cold line:

**"Technate in possession of morphing hull segment. New directives required."**

This time, she didn't need to find a dedicated communication hub; the link was already established. But as she waited for the response, she realised she had fallen into the same trap that had ensnared Matthias: the cage of waiting time.

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The last evening before the final day of the gathering was quite lively with various discussions. A cosy atmosphere, lit by soft yellow light, was welcoming for debates and storytelling.

A man of bulky build, dressed in deep dark blue, was leading the discussion. It was Koenn – the Technarch of an orbital facility famous for its advanced automation equipment. His jurisdiction was responsible for everything from precision maintenance drones to the complex, self-replicating computational nodes that formed the backbone of the Union sector's digital infrastructure.

*"And I've found that our self-maintenance solution has invented – quite brilliantly, I might add – new, more optimised and sophisticated patterns..."*

He paused, his voice trailing off slightly; he was already a little affected by the potency of the local ale.

*"Our engineers were able to unpick how it happened, eventually, but our economists are still struggling with the decision: is it an extra product we should be selling, or should we keep it as an internal part of our own solution?"* he continued, gesturing vaguely with his glass to emphasise the conundrum.

*"Mmm, machines evolve... is it safe at all? You might ask that, of course,"* he said, neatly anticipating the questions already forming in the minds of his audience.

*"I've been working with this technology for more than a century now, and I've learned to see the truth of it. Think of machines as the trillions of microbes living within our own biological vessels. We feed them, we treat them, and in return, those little chaps maintain our internal chemical balance. Do they care about us? I think not. And so it is with the machines: we build them, we fuel them, and most importantly, we provide them the means to propagate – though in a strictly balanced way, mind you. We depend on one another, but make no mistake: they don't care about us,"* he concluded, a look of profound self-satisfaction settling over his features.

*"Oh yes, we saw those 'improvements.' While it was only a six percent increase in construction speed, you were trying to charge us for far more, truly challenging our budget,"* Tuireen interrupted. She was smiling, her tone was more of a friendly jab than a genuine offence.

*"My dear Tuireen, for the last few decades you were working for the German Cluster – the very heart of the Union, the strong and wealthy brother to us all. We must support one another, mustn't we?"* He emptied his glass of ale with a satisfied thud. *"And which case was this, exactly?"*

*"The orbital factory – KEG Five,"* she replied succinctly.

*"A notable project. A very complex and surprisingly austere structural design – quite the challenge. But tell me, is she still 'cold'?"* Koenn asked in reply, reaching for a fresh, full glass.

*"Yes, it's still a cold new factory,"* Tuireen replied. *"I designed the superstructure, but not all the equipment is on-site yet, so it's been sitting in deep-freeze for a while."*

*"Hmm, why cold?"* Adrian stepped into the discussion. He found the topic fascinating; any new endeavour by the German Cluster was a piece of the larger puzzle.

*"The fusion core hasn't been ignited yet because the station is incomplete. Some critical equipment still hasn't been supplied – hardware I'm not even cleared to know about. Commercial secrets, apparently,"* Tuireen explained. She looked at him curiously. *"Why do you ask?"*

*"Because I'm about to be on the same path as you,"* Adrian replied. *"I'm starting a contract for the German Cluster myself. Every detail about their current developments is interesting to me."*

*"My dear friend, I know a few things even more fascinating than that! Let me share,"* Koenn interrupted. He was still in the middle of a storytelling binge, and he found an audience like Adrian and Tuireen – technical, observant, and curious – to be his absolute favourite.

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The morning sunlight played with the sleepy, frozen water – droplets of newly thawed water mixing with lingering ice crystals. This process created a shifting pattern of light and distortion across the facade of the office building Michael Berndt was heading towards. The massive door of reinforced glass welcomed him with the typical hum of its mechanism.

During his short walk from the entrance to the elevator, he noticed two men lingering at the lobby desk – one was occupied with the guest information screen, while the second was speaking with the office assistant.

*"Ah, here he is, just arriving,"* the office assistant said quickly, pointing toward Michael.

*"Michael! Could you please meet our guests?"* she asked loudly.

Michael stopped. He hadn't been expecting guests, representatives – honestly, anyone at all, with the exception of Adrian. His eyebrow rose slightly, marking a sceptical interest in the newcomers. He turned in their direction slowly, making little effort to hide his lack of enthusiasm for the meeting.

*"This gentleman is a High Stockeon of our orbital operations – Karlis Falkner. And his assistant..."* She paused as Karlis made a gentle sign for her to stop, offering a polite smile in her direction.

*"I had assumed a Technarch of such a high level would have been informed of today's emergency meeting,"* Karlis said calmly.

*"I can only speculate – is this a Stock and Trade committee matter?"* Berndt replied, his tone both confident and sceptical as his gaze shifted rapidly from Karlis to his assistant and back. *"If so, I fail to see how I should be involved."*

*"Precisely. And for ninety-nine percent of our meetings, that would be a correct assessment. However, not for today's,"* Karlis replied in that same unshakeable, calm tone. *"I am very pleased to meet you in person, Michael... Berndt. Shall we proceed to the meeting area? It was quite a journey from the orbital ring on such short notice. Let us move."*

They moved toward the elevator in silence. Michael was puzzled by the encounter.

*"What business does a Stockeon have in my sector?"* Michael asked, gesturing for them to enter the lift first. *"Trade? Stocks? Or are you here because of a loss in profit?"*

*"I cannot speak for the entire committee, but personally, I lost a great deal after the explosion on the Heidelberg habitat. Preventing such incidents is part of your responsibility, I presume?"* Karlis replied, his tone remaining perfectly level.

*"But that is not the reason for this meeting – nor could it be. My responsibility is to balance and, when necessary, manage the market. And I do so... without incidents."* He cast a quick, sharp glance at Michael's face before turning back toward the elevator doors.

*"I take your point,"* Michael said, his voice dropping to a softer, more cautious register. *"But may I ask – why were you waiting for me downstairs?"*

*"That was done intentionally. There was no formal invitation sent to you, after all,"* Karlis replied, a touch of irony colouring his voice this time. *"Beyond that, dear Michael, I know little else. But personally, it is a pleasure to meet a man who lives only a few kilometres from me, yet travelled hundreds of thousands of kilometres to be here."*

*"Mmm, fascinating. The pleasure is mine,"* Michael replied, matching the ironic edge. *"Quite the surprise for a morning."*

*"At least you enjoy the pleasure of mornings, evenings, and nights. They change throughout your year and are perhaps a bit chaotic – our habitat time brackets are far more organised... and enjoyable, as well,"* the Stockeon admitted.

*"After you,"* Michael said, gesturing toward the opening elevator doors.

They proceeded toward the private meeting room. It was a short walk through a corridor flooded with morning sunlight. Berndt looked at the brilliance cast by that gigantic fusion reactor known as the

Sun. **"It seems I will spend hours in this room,"** a brief, sarcastic thought sparked in his mind. **"I only hope to see the sunlight again by the afternoon."**

The private room was already full; Michael counted roughly two dozen top-tier officials.

*"We have all been waiting for you. But before we begin – if you would be so kind as to leave all electronics outside. And dear Karlis, as we agreed: no assistants at this meeting,"* said a short man with greying hair.

Michael recognised him immediately. He was another legacy, a man from a long-passed era: Stefan Stolle. He was one of the pillars of the German Cluster High Board. His assets were immense, his authority undeniable. Stolle was known for proposing strictly logical solutions, yet if a situation remained unclear, he would retreat into the shadows, calculating the most probable outcome before stepping in at the crucial moment. He made mistakes, like anyone else, but rarely – and when he did, he ensured they remained hidden.

*"Michael, Karlis – please proceed with the scan,"* Stolle continued.

Michael understood the procedure and the gravity of the meeting: an internal leak. Someone, or perhaps a group, was compromising the Board's most sensitive information. He and his companion followed the security protocol and found their seats. The door closed with a distinct hissing sound; the room was specifically designed to block not only electromagnetic radiation but even the slightest microscopic air vibrations. No windows, no corners, no place to hide.

*"I wish to introduce our Technarch, Michael Berndt, and..."* Stefan coughed slightly and made a gesture for silence as they settled.

*"The committee wishes to brief our newcomers on our agenda. Firstly, I must apologise for the short notice, or..."* he gazed sharply at Michael's face, *"the total lack of notice."* He clasped his hands on the table and fixed his gaze upon them.

*"Secondly, I must warn you all: we have been compromised. Our communications – or, more likely, certain employees – have leaked information regarding our operations, activities, and internal events."* He looked up, watching the room's reaction with predatory care.

*"My third point: our Global Security Officer has already been dismissed. That branch of our organisation is currently in a very fragile state,"* he continued.

*"It is a matter of great delicacy to engage an external investigative organisation. Since we already possess a highly specialised branch for such... unique corporate operations,"* Stefan looked up, his gaze locking onto Michael as he pointed a finger with unmistakable intent, *"I propose a solution: Michael Berndt shall be assigned to resolve this matter."*

A silent wave of indignation rippled through the sceptical members of the Board. It was almost invisible, yet palpable – a sudden shift in the room's atmosphere that everyone felt.

*"Before the voting begins..."* Stefan interrupted. He coughed slightly, unclasped his hands, and made a gesture for patience. *"Before the voting begins, I wish to share the information we already possess... freely, openly, and without any hidden games."* He looked across the Board members and pointed toward Michael once more, emphasising the word 'hidden'.

*"Our security branch was not completely useless. More likely, they simply lost focus, or perhaps were working with outdated patterns. Regardless, the investigation focused primarily on external threats – other Clusters and Circles. No Cluster within our Union has any interest in this, and as you all know, we already share enough with the Union as it is. The Technate..."* he allowed himself a thin smile, *"the Technate is not interested in this. Yes, those people are prepared to steal every blueprint we own, but they have no interest in sabotage or dirty play on the market. Their industrial might in Earth's orbit would starve without our demand. Minor Clusters are too weak, even pathetic, for such things. As for the Clusters from the Asian Unity... I would invite some of them here to explain, but they are external investors; you take my point."*

He paused, letting the silence settle over the room.

*"Yes, stock prices fell sharply after news of the explosion broke, and we were forced to intervene in the market simply to stabilise the situation..."* Karlis joined the explanation.

He remained calm, but his face betrayed the immense pressure – the literal headache – he had weathered. *"This is not the first incident to trigger a market drop. This New Factory, announced years ago... the deadlines continue to slip, and ..."*

He was cut off by a subtle gesture from Stefan.

*"This information has already been distributed to you, but the reason for this private meeting is the understanding that this sabotage comes from within. Shortly before the explosion on the Heidelberg habitat, an order was placed to sell a massive volume of stock related to Phoebe-class development and deployment. Shockingly, this order was placed by one of our own Cluster trading organisations."* Stefan made an intentional pause to let this information settle among the Board members.

*"As you know, Michael is already taking care of the Lizzie Walters voting ..."* He gazed at Michael. *"For the greater good, I hope,"* he concluded.

*"The voting period begins immediately. Execution time is eighty-four standard hours. Information regarding this vote and any insights from this meeting are strictly for your heads only. Do not share this information with anyone,"* Stefan stated.

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Frankfurt am Main looked layered, chaotic, and busy from above. The copter entered the city's airspace from the north, its route corrected several times – the skies were crowded in this area. Sunrise was imminent; the low angle of the sun created a sharp mosaic of light and shadow against the foreland of the mountain range where the city sat. Frankfurt was already transitioning into night mode; the lower levels relied on bright artificial lights, while the tops of the skyscrapers still caught the natural glow of the nearest star. To Adrian, the scenery recalled his last visit to a space habitat – a layered, vibrant image of a busy centre where people and machinery worked in tandem to sustain life.

*"I want to take a short walk on the ground level,"* Adrian said to the pilot. *"Could you drop me somewhere close to the destination?"*

*"Yes, sir,"* the pilot replied after a brief delay, his hands were busy with the controls. *"I can get you within 360 meters on foot. It's almost a straight shot."*

*"Perfect. That's exactly what I need,"* Adrian replied.

The street wasn't lit with clinical white or harsh blue; instead, it was bathed in a calm, soft, warm yellow light – a surprising relief for Adrian. The air was clean, fresh, and thin – tasteless and neutral. Adrian tucked his hands into his jacket pockets and walked calmly toward the office building where Michael was waiting for him.

Upon arrival, he looked up. It was one of the tall skyscrapers, the think centre of the German Cluster. **"That's a place where massive amounts of information converge and decisions are made,"** the thought sparked in his head. He moved toward the massive glass entrance with the expression of a man preparing for a deep dive.

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The board meeting was over, a marathon of a discussion where critical decisions had to be made on the spot. It had been gruelling, exhaustive, and dense with details – the recent events had sent ripples through every branches: trade, economics, engineering, safety, and security. Michael offered a curt goodbye to the board and stepped out of the private meeting room. As he moved toward the elevator,

his mind was already mapping out the next steps, though he knew he'd need a sounding board to refine them.

Karlis managed to catch Michael alone near the elevator doors.

"Dear Michael," Karlis began, a hint of a smile appearing as he spoke. *"I was just wondering... what will become of these fifteen percent of Lizzie Walters?"*

"Karlis, I must presume you are not lacking in procedural knowledge," Michael replied calmly. *"Do not worry about such things; simply keep your own business in order. And I do hope you choose the right path with your votes."*

Stockeon found nothing to say in reply. He reflected that people like Michael were the primary cause of his headaches on the market; their failures were often used as an excuse to manipulate trading just to keep the Cluster's economy stable. Everyone understood that Michael and his branch had to keep working, yet Karlis never missed a moment to bite at him with a sharp word or a pointed sentence.

They both descended in the elevator in silence. The tension was just as palpable as it had been during the ascent that morning, but this time, it was utterly speechless.

Adrian decided to remain in his observer role, staying low as he sat on a sofa in the building's lobby. He stretched out his legs, crossing one foot over the other. From his vantage point, he watched the silent procession as Michael and another man stepped out of the elevator.

"Ah, that is a best friend of yours, as I can see, Michael," Adrian remarked, watching as the second man exited the building.

Michael was not surprised by Adrian's appearance, nor was the commentary unexpected. On the contrary, it was both anticipated and welcome; Michael found himself lacking independent people he could trust.

*"If we could assume there is a very thin border between friendship and hateful rivalry... then yes, we are the best of friends in this world. Welcome, Adrian!"* Michael replied, his expression remaining serious even as a smile touched his eyes.

"How was your travel?" he asked.

"I slept the entire way here, so I assume it went well," Adrian replied briefly. He looked up at Michael, trying to read his current state of mind.

"That is very good. Then I suppose you are ready for a discussion. Please, follow me," Michael said, returning to his characteristically calm voice.

"Yes, more than ready. I am excited to learn more – so, following you," Adrian replied with a touch of irony as he pushed himself up from the soft sofa he had been submerged in.

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One of the Technate's orbital laboratories was playing host to a very happy, excited, and curious team of engineers and researchers. The long-awaited prize from the Heidelberg habitat had finally arrived.

It arrived in a specialised box made from carbon composite. The piece itself was encased in a soft, glue-like substance to preserve its original shape and protect it from contamination or other external risks. This soft shell was transparent, and at first glance, the material within looked like a dark resin or a dense polymer substance.

The material, still encased in its shell, was placed inside a decontamination chamber. The glue-like substance had been designed specifically for this purpose; it required a specific light wavelength to become easily removable. Along the edges, the material itself was already degrading, producing a fine, microscopic dust of black and dark brown. It was clearly a composite of some sort, twelve millimetres thick, relatively soft, and easily bent into any shape. However, one frightening feature of this unknown piece of engineering stood out: during the bending process, the metal-carbon composite

of the laboratory tools suffered visible damage. This seemingly soft material left deep carvings in one of the hardest composite known to the Technate.

Matthias was far more interested than usual. He sat in the rotating section of the orbital laboratory, waiting for the initial results.

*"Any updates so far?"* he asked one of the team members.

*"It's definitely something new – and promising,"* the engineer replied, speaking slowly and calmly. *"We're about to scan the piece with an electron microscope. Expect the first report soon, but further details are classified, even for you, Matthias. Be patient."*

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The environment of Michael's office was clean, silent, and official in its own way. Michael gently gestured for Adrian to take a chair – the same one where Ake had sat only days ago.

*"I must be cautious. Please, leave your electronic devices in this box,"* Michael said, holding out a container.

*"And now, we shall isolate this room from any external observers,"* he continued. *"I will explain why in a moment."*

*"Understood. No need for obvious explanations,"* Adrian replied, placing his mobile terminal into the box.

The large window closed, as did the door, shutting with a distinctive hiss – the sound of total isolation from the outside world. Additional lighting switched on as the electromagnetic insulation circuits began their heavy work.

*"I hope you do not find this uncomfortable?"* Michael asked.

*"Oh no, you are just firing up my curiosity. So – my questions first?"* Adrian replied, crossing his feet the same way he had in the building lobby. *"Pretty comfortable to digest something new, I would say,"* he concluded.

*"Whisky?"* Michael asked directly. He was still feeling the stress from the Board meeting.

*"I am not the biggest fan, but I could not resist anyway. Yes, please,"* the reply came with that same steady pace.

Michael poured two full glasses of the amber liquid and invited Adrian to take one. *"Questions... yes, let's begin there,"* he proposed.

*"Two things: the HEI transmitter, and KEG five..."* Adrian took a sip of his drink, his eyes filled with a spark of genuine curiosity.

*"KEG five! Your sightseeing has long perspective lines,"* Michael replied, his voice became slightly louder, though still friendly. *"But let me explain everything step by step..."*

*"HEI transmitters first, then?"* Adrian interrupted him.

*"Exactly. As you might gather from the name, it is a high-performance communication device. Do not ask what HEI stands for; that is a name that comes from the Outer System, much like the transmitters themselves. We are utilising about sixty percent of their communication capacity, and those units are compatible with our standard protocols..."* Michael paused to let a small amount of his whisky settle.

*"And the other forty percent goes to...?"* Adrian asked. *"The Outer System, I would guess."*

*"Yes, we have an agreement. As you know, we must outpace the Technate. Most of the near-Earth orbit is already under their industrial possession. Access to Venusian capacity is managed via the Union – specifically the Nordic sector, your territory. Meanwhile, the parking spaces and resources near Mercury are occupied by the French Cluster, the Atlantic Set, and the Asian Conglomerate. It is a very tight situation. Those areas are claimed, even if they are not yet fully utilised. Only the edge of the Inner*

*System remains in our full possession. To maintain our balance even within the scope of the Union, we need an advantage..."* Michael made a gentle sign for silence, softly knocking his fist against the table.

*"That is the dirty point, you see. It leads into the shadows,"* Michael said. *"Because of the Inter-Cluster Agreement, such trades and contracts with the Outer System must be public. And they are – almost all of them... except for this one."* He coughed slightly, his eyebrows furrowing into a sharp V that made his face resemble an eagle's. He looked directly at Adrian. *"It is a very delicate situation. Someone destroyed one of the HEI transmitters on the Heidelberg habitat on the very same day the Lizzie accident happened."*

*"Hmm. I am following, but... how is Lizzie connected to all of that?"* Adrian asked, taking a generous sip of the whisky. *"It looks like well-orchestrated sabotage. However... you mentioned before that Lizzie is neither dead nor alive. That sounds strange."*

*"However, Adrian, I do not know everything... but yes, she is on the path to revival. I hope she will be returned to the list of the living. Lizzie was involved in this shadow trade with the Outer System; as you can understand, it is a trade, not a voluntary gift from the mysterious Outer System Union. She was conducting research... and more importantly, experiments. The results are shared with them – that is our agreement."*

Michael stopped to refill the two nearly empty glasses. His palms were slightly wet; he took a small towel to dry them. *"Do you need a towel as well?"* he asked Adrian in a calm, friendly tone, feeling a visible relief in finally explaining the situation to someone else.

Adrian sat there, shocked. He slowly slid his glass from left to right, the friction between the glass and the table surface grounding him as he digested the information.

*"Yes, that would be kind of you,"* Adrian replied. *"However... what is so special about these HEI devices? Besides their communication capacity?"*

*"Advanced technology – the hull is made of an active supporting composite. It is beyond anything we have, but here is the primary constraint of the agreement: we are not allowed to share it. That makes this entire contract fully incompatible with Inter-Cluster policies..."* Michael looked toward the bronze replicas of orbital stations at the far end of the table. He took a sip of whisky and continued.

*"But there is a loophole in the agreement – nothing is said about locally manufactured technology. That is where KEG five comes in. It was designed to be the factory that would produce this material on an industrial scale. But the required equipment was never delivered... we were exposed."* He shook his head slowly.

Adrian was still in shock, but the puzzle was finally coming together – or so he thought. One question was still missing a clear answer. *"Wildly interesting,"* he said. *"But what do you want from me, Michael?"*

*"Oh, a few things. First, find a way to resolve the situation with the insurance company. Second, find these cunts – we have to eliminate this threat! Anything you need, you have only to ask. You will also be supported by one of my best agents: Ake Torenbergh. And please remember – this is delicate business. The Board must not be informed."* Michael leaned back in his chair.

*"And I am afraid you will have to spend some time on the habitat where it happened. I am certain those bastards are still trying to operate there – to steal something else, or perhaps to break what is left,"* he concluded.

Adrian felt a heavy load settle onto his shoulders – the weight of responsibility mixed with the crushing volume of new information. But the deal wasn't complete yet.

*"Mmm. And in return, you help me find out who the other cunts are... the ones from the Outer System. Deal? Right?"* he asked.

*"Yes, I expected something like that from your side. Deal!"* Michael replied, taking another sip of his whisky.

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