
The Technate's set of locally connected space structures – a pair of massive space habitats, a few orbital factories, and a handful of smaller support stations – drifted along its precisely calculated Lissajous orbit. Station-keeping engines mounted on the static sections of the structures fired with the dull, ghostly blue glow of plasma. Maintaining a presence in a premium location like the Earth-Moon L1 parking zone came at a steep price, but it was worth every credit. The Technate was no impoverished offshoot of some Cluster, Union, or Set; it was an economic and production titan of near-Earth orbit.

To maximise local transit efficiency, every single structure – habitats, factories, cargo hubs, and the completely static platforms – was tethered. They were linked by long pathways of carbon-metal composite cables, engineered with the immense tensile strength required to pull transport cars between the stations. Stretching for kilometres, these lines vanished into the black vacuum of space, visible only when the navigation lights of constant traffic illuminated the metal arteries.

A long shuttle equipped with magnetic docking mounts was making its approach toward the primary space habitat. Its trajectory was neither straight nor graceful; instead, the ship fired its thrusters in a chaotic sequence of micro-corrections, braking burns, sudden accelerations, rolls, and rotations. It was a vessel arriving from an entirely different orbital plane and velocity, having burned its way up from one of Earth's orbital rings. It was an off-schedule voyage – the shuttle was carrying high-ranking Technate officers.

Beatriss was one of them. She activated the display on her right, linking it to the shuttle's external cameras to generate a synthetic side view – a digital window through the hull, but artificially enhanced and crisply clean. The shuttle was still struggling to match its velocity with the space habitat's orbital plane. To minimise passenger nausea while looking outside, the screen intelligently stitched together video streams from various cameras, smoothing out the ship's rapid orientation changes.

Beatriss gazed out with a deep, genuine sense of pride for her root organisation, the Technate. The endless swarm of transport vehicles buzzing between the structures was magnificent; space here was profoundly alive. Even their destination, the space habitat Xenia, felt vibrant and bustling despite its legacy design. Its two counter-rotating sections were separated, spinning on a shared static spindle, with each rotating drum completely enclosed – a design pioneered by the old European habitats that had first tamed orbital space.

But the ship was still fighting its way along a correction trajectory. On its final approach to the docking area nestled between the two spinning drums, the shuttle flipped rapidly, orienting its main engine directly against its vector of travel. Beatriss cut the screen. The sudden visual tilt combined with the rising physical discomfort of the ship's jerky, discrete thruster corrections was finally getting to her.

When the docking sequence was finally completed, a procession of a few top-tier officers began their descent into the habitat's entry area. The customs and registration procedure was swift; a dedicated lane had been prioritised exclusively for the newcomers. The architecture of the central hub was complex, layered with overlapping thoroughfares – most of which were designated for various docking ports and tether transports. Only two routes led down into the rotating sections of the habitat, marked simply as Cy-1 and Cy-2.

Their destination was the second drum, Cy-2, where the bulk of the Technate's administrative power was concentrated. It took less than a standard hour to transit the hub and reach the drum's primary entry deck. Because this entry section was located at the outermost floor at the bottom of the drum, the centrifugal force generated a rock-steady, emulated gravity of 0.93 g.

Upon arriving inside the rotating section, Beatriss unbuckled herself from the transport chair and stood up. Her head still spun slightly, and she felt a distinct weakness in her legs – the physical toll of the rapid transition from zero gravity to nearly full Earth weight catching up to her.

The welcoming group was a few seconds late. Beatriss stood by her chair, counting the agonising seconds as her heart laboured to pump blood back to her brain against the sudden drag of the spin-gravity. Finally, footsteps echoed on the deck.

"How was the trip, Beatriss Nyx?" the approaching man asked.

"Welcome to you, too," she replied, trying to stand perfectly still. *"It was terrible, and..."*

She paused for a brief moment, steeling herself. *"It was such a massive waste of fuel. Why the extreme urgency?"*

"I can't tell you that right now," he answered. *"Please, get some rest first. The management committee will convene in four standard hours."*

The communication hub was swarming with people – engineers, guards, security officers – and everyone was on edge. This was no ordinary shift or standard operational mode; it was a massive, disruptive escalation of their daily activities. Every single room was under investigation. Security teams and engineers worked side by side, scouring the facility for any trace of the information leak: a hidden device, a compromised data log, an anomaly in the local logging systems – virtually anything that could expose the source. Despite being tightly organised on paper, the sheer scale of the operation made it look like a total mess. Finding an available privacy-hardened room was turning out to be no easy task.

"It's a new habitat – well, in a way. Are there any privacy-hardened rooms left that haven't been used for communications yet?" Adrian asked. He was not happy about the crowded building, or the chaotic mess of constantly shifting personnel.

"Yes, fourth floor. Why?" Ake replied. *"One of such rooms here is cleared already..."*

"Did you use that room already?" Adrian continued his questioning.

"Yes, not long before your arrival, to get updates," Ake replied. A slight discomfort crept over him; he was beginning to see where Adrian's logic was heading, and the realisation frightened him.

"Got it. That is why we are going to a room that hasn't been used yet," Adrian said, confirming Ake's fears. He added the final blow: *"Yeah. And leave your terminal with one of the security engineers to be checked."*

They moved up to the fourth floor. At every level, they were stopped for ID checks and constantly monitored, but to Adrian's surprise, the fourth floor was relatively quiet. There were still people moving around, but far fewer. At the end of the corridor, they found three newly installed, unopened hardened rooms. This entire level had been designed for the habitat's high-ranking administrative personnel, but it was an exact duplicate of the second floor – completely unused and intact. Yet, Adrian still didn't feel entirely safe. He stepped out and flagged down a passing security officer.

"Hey there, good sir. Have these rooms actually been swept?" Adrian asked, his voice tinged with a dry edge.

"Yes, exactly one standard hour ago," the officer replied, standing at attention. *"Every room was unopened – never accessed after the initial testing and installation procedures. The entire level has remained completely unvisited. Is there anything else?"*

The officer peered at Adrian, searching for identification. His eyes locked onto the green-blue badge pinned to Adrian's jacket—the mark of the highest tier of habitat administration. The sight satisfied him completely.

"No. Please, proceed with your duties," Adrian replied, offering a polite but dismissive nod. He had no desire to stand out like a black bird in a flock of swans.

As the officer walked away, Adrian quickly turned to Ake. *"I guess we should actually use one of these pristine boxes, shouldn't we? Before someone ruins the upholstery."*

Ake nodded in silence. They stepped inside the second hardened room. The room itself still felt entirely new; even the distinct scent of fresh manufacturing materials lingered in the air. Behind them, the door sealed shut with the characteristic, heavy hiss of a vacuum-hardened space.

"We came here early. The arranged leaplink with Michael is still one standard hour away," Ake began, checking his wrist.

"Oh, yes. Could you use this security-hardened terminal to access the habitat's database? Let us spend this time with a purpose," Adrian suggested. He finally felt a sense of safety; the absence of chaotic crowds was a massive relief.

"Sure, give me a moment," Ake said, his fingers already flying across the interface. He typed the name. *"Mmm, interesting. This Anni Wyde is not a resident of this space habitat. She is a guest... from the Munster, that habitat currently under construction."*

"Interesting. Very interesting," Adrian murmured. *"What was she doing here, then?"*

"That part is the most curious – I can find her entry in only one local logging system," Ake replied, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of his neck. *"And she was registered there exactly when the HEI explosion occurred. So..."*

"So! That is our client!" Adrian interrupted loudly, his eyes were lighting up.

"Let us find her and arrest her then! What a massive catch that would be, huh?" Ake replied. He had suddenly come alive; hunting down spies and getting them arrested was exactly the kind of work he thrived on.

"A bold move, but I do not think it is a wise one," Adrian replied smoothly. He was never fond of chasing human shadows. *"If she is capable of modifying a local logging system, I see two distinct possibilities. First, it is highly likely she is no longer on the habitat, meaning a search would be a complete waste of our time, attention, and resources. Second, she is still here – but if that is the case, let us have her find us instead. Could you check if her name appears on any recent travel manifests? Any outbound flights to the Munster?"*

"Already did... and found nothing," Ake replied flatly.

"Interesting," Adrian murmured, turning his gaze directly to Ake's face. *"Could you try to track her internal movements? I mean through the official channels, of course – without violating the Privacy Protocols. Is that feasible?"*

"Yes, I could task someone from my team to handle that and ..." Ake began, though his voice carried a hint of disappointment at being reined in.

"No, no, no. Please do it right here, by yourself," Adrian interrupted gently.

"Do you believe my agents are compromised? That they are working for someone else?" Ake began to argue, his pride stinging. *"I can assure you that ..."*

"Ake, I am certain your people are completely clean," Adrian replied, his tone perfectly level. *"But their equipment? That is highly likely compromised."*

Ake fell silent for a moment. *"Agreed, then. Shall I start now?"* he asked, satisfied with the direct logic of the deduction.

"Yes, please," Adrian concluded.

The human brain remains one of the greatest mysteries in the universe – the most critical component of human biology, yet entirely capable of playing tricks on itself. Some of these tricks come from the dreams that surface while a person sleeps, which was exactly what was happening to Anni. In her dream, she was back home, safe inside her own space habitat, far away from the solar storms and the complex politics of the Inner System. She woke up, and for a fleeting moment, she genuinely believed she was

still there – far, far away from the German Cluster. Her mind remained relaxed for a brief second, before her thoughts booted back into reality all too quickly.

Anni could still feel the salt from the Unity Centre on her skin, along with the heavy disappointment of her own failure. Despite the successful operations she had executed back on Earth, these recent setbacks were crushing her from the inside out. It was fear – not a fear of death, nor an existential panic, but a fear of failing her duty. It was something far more complex and deep-seated than mere primal instinct.

She reconstructed a mental timeline of her activities over the last few standard months, desperately trying to pinpoint a mistake, but nothing stood out to her overloaded mind. Slowly, a relaxing sense of fulfilment washed over her – everything seemed fine. That clear, cold reassurance gave her the presence of mind to get dressed and review her reports and messages. But at the last second, a simple technical oversight flashed in her mind: one of the entries in the logging system hadn't been deleted. In her hurry to pull the trigger, she had completely forgotten it. It hit her like a physical blow. Instantly, a wave of heat flushed through her body, beads of sweat broke out across her back, and her heart rate spiked so violently she could hear the blood thumping in her ears.

"The entry is still in the system. How did I forget that? Stupid, stupid mistake," the thought pulsed in her head.

Her brain immediately constructed a cascade of possible outcomes, analysing hundreds of permutations in seconds. Finally, she arrived at a reassuring conclusion: **"To trace that back to me, those cunts – Adrian, Ake, or whoever else – would have to find my name buried in an immense mountain of logs. It will take them ages, assuming they even look there at all."**

This calculation instantly halted her internal panic. It was logical, feasible, and realistic. Without her name to serve as a search parameter, digging her out of the system would be an incredibly slow and difficult task; without a clue, it was nearly impossible to figure out. Within moments, her skin cooled, and the drumming sound of her rising blood pressure quickly faded away.

"I need to hunt them first, while I still hold the advantage of time," she muttered to herself.

Anni stepped out of her habitat apartments and began making her way toward the Unity Centre.

The new privacy room was busy; it could feel it in the crisp, clean air. Ake was gathering information, down to the smallest details – like who received safety eye lenses and when. Cataloguing these moments and building a timeline of past events was an effective way to kill time. Meanwhile, Adrian paced around the table, periodically checking his watch. His mind was equally occupied, but this chain of events and the sheer scale of the information went far beyond a localised hunt for human shadows.

The incoming leaplink arrived suddenly, catching them both deep in their tasks. Michael was on schedule for the call, but he hadn't expected the investigation to already be so deeply mired in details.

"Hello, are you there? I should guess you are," Michael's tone was far from formal – friendly, yet a little demanding.

Vital information displayed on the communicator's small screen. Beside the confirmation of the caller's authenticity, a communication delay of about four seconds was blinking. Ake turned his head and looked up at Adrian, gesturing for him to start. Adrian pressed the button to reply.

"Hello. A familiar voice is still reaching us – yes, we are here. And already not empty-handed," Adrian said, starting the conversation in his distinct manner before releasing the button.

"Not the best start to a conversation. Should we share updates with Michael first?" he asked Ake. There was enough time to think and reply before the delay caught up. Ake nodded.

"Well, then it's your turn," Adrian added quickly. He was trying to keep the momentum going; a four-second delay was long enough to notice, but not long enough to sit and overthink a reply.

"Great, I would be happy to hear that," Michael's voice returned. *"My news is great too. The sheets of CX2 were assembled into their planned shape on HS-eight. We are working on every possible and valid combination of power and signals. Hopefully, soon we will possess all the required information on the composite – including peak power consumption and material modes. Mostly..."* Michael paused briefly. *"Mostly, every piece of required documentation and safety protocol is coming soon, ready for the tests and demonstration."*

Ake gestured for Adrian to look at the terminal where he had been working on the previous request.

"Take a look! I am not finished, but this is already interesting," Ake said, pointing at the screen. He then stepped closer to the communication terminal and pressed the button.

"Want to fire up a name: Anni Wyde," Ake started. *"We are suspecting her, but we are still not sure what she actually did. But there are a few facts. According to the data, she was in the communication centre during the HEI explosion. She corrupted our logs, but one entry in one system remained intact – what a silly mistake, huh? And a last-minute finding: her profile claims she is assigned to the Munster space habitat as a cooling engineer. However, before arriving here, she spent two months on Earth, which contradicts her assignment to the habitat construction. The further information is attached to this leaplink. I was suggested to find and arrest her, but Adrian has a game in mind; he suggests letting her find us instead."*

Ake finished the leaplink message. He felt it was important to highlight Adrian's decision to Michael, as he was still thinking about hunting instead of being hunted.

Adrian wasn't worried about Ake's addition regarding his decision; instead, he spent the delay seconds focusing on Ake's report.

"Wise move," Michael's voice finally returned. *"I suspect she is not alone; there are others. Technate spies... only one fact doesn't fit into the picture. Why are they moving one operative between locations that are so relatively distant? It is risky... and they are not exactly running short on... cunts stealing things. They are sniffing around quite efficiently... Be aware, those guys could be dangerous. And Ake, do you still remember anything about diplomacy? Anyway, be careful about eliminating operatives. Adrian is right – let's play with them."* Michael finished his message, returning to his normal tone.

Adrian immediately felt starvation – information starvation. His mind demanded more to keep moving. He instantly pressed the button to reply with his questions.

"Demonstration? What is this demonstration? Is it already planned? But the most important question is this: you mentioned different patterns of power and signals used to modify the composite's features. According to the shared documents, at least some of those are already known – you couldn't install and deploy HEI transmitters without that basic knowledge. Your report is missing some details, particularly the list of known combinations. Does it contain some kind of disintegration command, or anything like that?"

Once the button was released, the encrypted message began its four-second journey to Michael's office.

The communicator's screen silently updated. The encryption keys were cycling, imposing a tense stretch of almost twenty-four seconds of total silence from the other side.

Diplomacy, encryption, technical data, and past events – all of it pointed toward an unsettling realisation: the Technate might not be the party behind this sabotage. Using spies to disrupt research and development, let alone destroying critical equipment, was a bold move. It was risky, destructive, and ultimately pointless – or at least, it didn't fit the common operational pattern of the Technate. Both men inside the habitat were beginning to realise that something much deeper, and entirely unprecedented, was unfolding.

The silence was finally broken by Michael's reply.

"Demonstration... that is just a word, a figure of speech," Michael said. "I was planning a major demonstration of the composite's capabilities for the Board, but without manufacturing capacity, it would be... nothing. I am attaching the technical specifications for the HEI transmitter. And yes, it contains something similar to what you asked about." Michael paused for a moment.

"But... I want to share something else. Is the name Beatriss Nyx known to you? Anyway, it doesn't matter – she is a top-tier Technate officer. She employs a few consulting engineers, and one of those guys is working for us. Expensive, but the investment is worth it. Something is cooking within the Technate; they are gathering in Xenia. I do not get frequent updates from there – the Technate's counter-espionage programs are quite polished – but I will update you when I can. I understand the Technate is involved somehow, but at the same time, it feels wrong. According to my data, there is no one else we could suspect. At least, no known factions... Do you have any other pieces of the puzzle?"

Michael's voice had shifted; Adrian could detect the underlying worry in it.

The leaplink continued. It was their first real operative information exchange, where every answer only seemed to breed more questions.

Returning to Heidelberg wasn't something Matthias Klein desired, especially after his request to get more information from the research team analysing the artefact he brought in had been declined. Instead, his orders were to continue observation and gather more intelligence. Over the last few standard days, the Technate had mandated strict communication silence. The German Cluster was rolling out a new encryption scheme, and any transmission activity carried a critical risk of exposure.

Klein checked in with Heidelberg via a standard notification citing a shortened vacation. It was a mundane message designed to serve two purposes: establish a formal reason for his early return and erase any potential suspicion.

The journey itself was a complicated, two-leg route. The first leg was an express shuttle to one of Earth's orbital rings, followed by a standard scheduled transport from the ring out to the Heidelberg space habitat. The layover on the ring between flights was long – leaving him with several standard hours to reflect on recent events.

He sat in the waiting area, his mind completely preoccupied by the asset he had just delivered – this strange artefact, this composite material. He had been permitted only a few crucial details, but they were terrifying: the material was unstable, decaying into microscopic shards. These minuscule particles could easily be inhaled, penetrating and shredding lung tissue and other internal organs. The penetration process was so rapid that modern emergency surgery couldn't replace organs quickly enough to prevent death.

The realisation shook him. He had handled that piece completely unaware of the lethally, saved only by his decades of strictly following safety protocols for unclassified substances. But he also realised something else: the original retrieval team that collected the debris had been entirely in the dark. Only the second team — a specialised unit – had isolated the storage unit and secured the area. It all felt like a secret buried within a secret. Not everyone was cleared for this data, a clear indicator of the immense, terrifying value of this technology.

The absolute and inevitable law of the universe is a constant struggle: a perpetual fight to find equilibrium, a war against constraints, and a relentless adaptation to entropy. Council Jakt Woult, like every elected statesman responsible for the survival of a remote technocratic society, was locked in his

own eternal war – a war against the brutal economics of deep-space logistics and macro scale resource management. He was severely restricted by time, energy, labour, and credits. Even with a premier team of talented engineers at his back, mere planning and development would consume half a solan. Construction and deployment were equally staggering costs, particularly here in the Outer System, where the market prices for raw solid materials were brutally high.

His vision of constructing the space factory was evaporating under the sheer weight of the effort. Compounding the crisis, the documentation and protocols for the intercepted components were critically incomplete – the direct consequence of their failed attempt to seize an additional container, a manoeuvre that had been a risky and debatable political gamble from the start. These harsh realities were rapidly pushing the undertaking past the boundaries of a complicated research and development pipeline, transforming what should have been a manageable engineering problem into a far more volatile scientific and engineering frontier for his administration.

Jakt had run countless calculations, logistics simulations, and project phasing models, but every iteration of this stubborn project returned the same uneasy conclusion: there simply was not enough time, available resources were too scarce, and the logistics network was entirely unequipped for an undertaking of this scale. This time, he decided to personally analyse every piece of data from the intelligence assets came from the Inner System. He spent hours wading through the summaries. During one specific iteration of the automated analytics engine – which was cross-referencing information, mapping connections, and constructing a chronological timeline – a seemingly minor deduction sparked a sudden flash of insight.

"KEG five is considered a facility built and prepared to manufacture CX2 on an industrial scale. While not fully confirmed by field intelligence, it remains the most feasible option."

The ambitious prospect of acquiring these blueprints and slashing his administration's project budget was abruptly cut short by a stark realisation. The German Cluster possessed the resources, the time, and a dedicated space facility constructed for the exact equipment he held here in his Pelagicom. His Pelagicom, by comparison, was far less resourceful, severely choked by stretched supply lines, and his elected term was shorter than the time required to develop this infrastructure locally.

He understood that for the German Cluster, reverse-engineering the technology and producing manufacturing equipment was merely a matter of time – even if it cost them a few solanes and astronomical resources. He felt the crushing weight of a looming defeat, and the only thing achieved: he had merely postponed the development timeline within the German Cluster. Jakt had tried to outplay two space giants, but he had failed to conquer economy, logistics, and his own limited term in office. It was time to recall all his deep-cover assets, yet the sudden, desperate urge to seize the KEG five blueprints completely contradicted that retreat.

He stood up abruptly, fast enough to feel the faint resistance of the clean, filtered air against his skin. He paced across the office, walking from the door back to his desk several times before finally stopping in front of the wall-mounted electronic display. Jakt switched it on. A view of the dark void, cast deep within the Sun's shadow, flooded the room.

Cut into that darkness was light – a sprawling network of crimson luminescence radiating from the cooling arrays installed across various structures: habitats, cargo hubs, communication arrays, and orbital relays. The image on the screen was digitally compensating for the space habitat's constant rotation, yet the picture still shuddered occasionally. In those brief, flickering moments, Jakt visualised a different image: the immense, deep-red glow of a factory radiator array designed specifically to produce the CX2 composite — a structure planned, developed, and constructed entirely under his term.

He lingered in front of the display for a long while. Finally, stepping away from the crimson glow of the monitor, he activated his terminal and drafted an encrypted transmission to one of his leading field operatives – Anni Wyde.

"Initiate the recall operation for all assets. Additional objective: retrieve KEG five blueprints."

The meeting room's atmosphere was tense, crowded with the highest tier of directorate officers gathered from every sector of Technate space. It was a rare assembly; for several of those present, it was their first exposure to a summit of this scale. The governance system, engineered over the decades following the Shift, was highly advanced and efficient, yet its sheer structural complexity made it difficult to fully comprehend. The Technate, like most contemporary factions, strictly adhered to inter-Cluster global protocols, frameworks, and regulatory laws – the sole mechanism for remaining integrated into the global economy. But this integration came at a steep premium: absolute systemic complexity.

The participants waited for the committee that had organised the gathering; no one in the room was aware of the agenda. Even the defence officers looked subtly adrift. Beatriss Nyx found the lack of structured agenda unsettling. She took immense pride in the organisation and the mathematical precision of its core governance system, making this chaotic ambiguity deeply uncomfortable. In all her long years of service, this was the first time she had ever experienced such a breakdown in operational protocol.

Finally, the organisers stepped into the room. The doors sealed shut behind them with a characteristic hiss. The group was led by a tall man whose skin appeared dry, thick, and weathered. He wore a dark green uniform adorned with a small emblem on the left side – four golden stars arranged in a sharp diamond formation. Beatriss stared directly into his face, attempting to read his internal state and gauge the room's trajectory. His eyes betrayed a flicker of worry, yet he possessed an underlying current of intense excitement. He stopped, scanned every face in the room, and gave a brief wave of his hand, signalling for everyone to take their seats.

"Hello, I'm the Lead Routewarden of the Technate," he began. "For many of you, this probably sounds... uneasy." He paused, clearly out of his element in this kind of setting.

"Anyway, according to the logistic safety act, it's my responsibility to gather the top tiers and share an alert..." He paused briefly to draw a deep breath.

"And make a decision – the best one we can. And depending on the current state of your respective domains, that decision will have to be executed. Defence, logistics, intelligence, structural engineering, economic departments... you're all here." He slid his hands into his pockets.

"My responsibility is to monitor the deep space – logistics routes, debris, and orbital trajectories. I don't need to explain the parameters any further," he paused deliberately. The cold silence of the room instantly broke into a low hum of quiet, surprised voices from the participants.

"Sir, have you detected a new object enriched with rare minerals on a hazardous trajectory towards..." one of the top tiers began, but he was sharply cut off by the routewarden.

"No, that's not it. Even a discovery like that wouldn't justify gathering you all here," the routewarden countered. *"Instead, we tracked infrared signatures – definitely artificial – in the Outer System. One of them was a close call. It passed near a space crawler. And since the space crawler project is a joint venture where we hold nearly a fifty percent equity stake..."* The room plunged into absolute silence once again.

"This was unreported; the Technate was never informed. And the second signature, detected later, is originating from an unclaimed sector – free space, heading straight toward the Trojan swarm. According to the provisions of that logistics safety act, we are all here to determine our next move," he concluded.

After the hours-long leaplink with Michael, Ake and Adrian spent their time tracing any minuscule activities that did not fit the norm. They constructed a massive list of interconnected events – pre-

decessors to the HEI transmitter explosion, alongside anything related to Lizzie Walters' death, or, as Adrian joked, her shift to the third state. Adrian remained unsatisfied with the recent data and findings Michael had shared; this intelligence could have been disclosed much earlier. *"I don't think Michael was planning to share everything at the start, but current events, or some variable unknown to me, forced his hand,"* he silently concluded. "Oh man, we are in deep trouble."

Regardless, the output of their recent hours was substantial. The entire shift team on duty when the HEI unit detached and exploded had been grounded. Additional security personnel was deployed around Mair, the nearly fully recovered technician who had been involved in the incident loop. Ake had also deployed a specialised cell of his own agents to locate and track Anni Wyde with orders to report directly to him; he was no longer content to simply be hunted – he wanted to hunt, ensuring they were prepared to execute an interception when required. To conclude the investigation session, Adrian suggested a deep audit of the customs personnel, alongside a comprehensive review of the habitat's entire inbound and outbound registry systems.

"We should also leaplink the Munster habitat's Technarch, just to query them regarding this Anni Wyde whereabouts and her profile data," Adrian concluded, stretching his arms until the joint popped with a sharp crunch. He leaned back in his chair and continued, *"Privacy protocols... that's a double-edged sword, you know. So much data is entirely locked down, out of everyone's reach. It's going to be quite a challenge to isolate those cunts who killed Liz – let's shorten her name,"* he said, pausing to gaze down at the pristine, unblemished material of the floor.

"Heh, I begin to think you are not into the people hunting, are you? And I guess you were never involved in a hunt before – I mean in the ancient meaning, like a bear hunt or a fox hunt. I hope you follow what I mean, ja?" Ake asked, his tone laced with a faint drop of hope.

"Nope. I was never interested in hunting animals," Adrian replied. *"That's an expensive entertainment reserved for those wealthy enough to casually descend into Earth's gravity well just to walk through a forest, kill a damn animal, and..."* He cut himself off with a brief cough. *"Well, some people descend into the gravity well to hunt the most dangerous game – the animal with the most gifted component: a brain. So, no, I am not naturally into it, but trying to catch these bastards makes me feel like the apex hunter."* Adrian's mood was already downshifting into evening mode. He stretched his arms out once more, though this time his joints remained completely silent.

"It seems we have to find some food and drink," Ake noted. *"I don't know about you, but we have been here for many hours. It is time to replenish our energy reserves, so... shall we?"* Ake was tired, though his physical exhaustion was entirely eclipsed by a sharp, persistent hunger.

"Let's go," Adrian replied, standing up while keeping his eyes fixed on the display table. *"But since we are highly intelligent hunters mimicking victims – or to be more precise, prey – we should move toward the crowded, popular places."*

"Indeed, I asked a few trusted guys to follow us secretly, just in case. I hope you are fine with that," Ake replied, ready to conclude their work and take a rest.

"No, I assumed that was mandatory enough to skip mentioning it altogether," Adrian countered. *"Even Michael, with your assistance, wasn't able to prevent Liz's... transition into the third state. I am a very curious person, but safety is hardly my last concern. No worries, though. And yep – I am direct, and a little bit rude when I'm hungry. Get used to it. Let's move."* Adrian softened the statement, finishing the conversation with a distinctly friendly tone.

The room's door slid open, and they stepped out into the corridor toward the elevator. The communication centre was still crowded; several wall panels had been pried open, revealing a complicated matrix of internal wiring.

"Ah, one more question, Ake – have you ever actually been on a hunt?" Adrian asked.

"Only foxes. Once," Ake replied.

At the very exit of the communication centre, Adrian raised a hand, signalling for Ake to wait. He stopped next to one of the technicians who was busy inspecting the exposed wiring.

"Hmm, hey! Sorry to bother you," Adrian said to the worker. "Could you recommend a place – a biergarten or whatever – to find good food and drinks? Ideally the most popular spot around here. We're newcomers to this habitat, so we're just asking around..."

The technician paused his work, spending a few seconds sizing up Adrian and Ake. *"I see,"* he muttered. *"Try Welde Brauhaus. Very popular place."*

"Thank you. We should head there then," Adrian replied, his tone once again open and friendly.

In deep space, a massive vessel roughly one kilometre in length – defined by a prominent bow debris shield – glided silently toward the Helix sector. The ship remained completely dark across almost all electromagnetic frequencies, absorbing light and radio waves with absolute efficiency. The only visible output was a faint, crimson luminescence emanating from its active heat dissipation system, where an immense cloud of microscopic magnetic droplets was manipulated by invisible magnetic fields, cycling continuously from one structural beam to another. It was a spectacular, unearthly display: the liquid droplets began their transit glowing a stark red and ended nearly pitch-black, leaving only a trace of residual warmth at the terminal boundary. From a distance, the active radiator resembled a massive gradient plate floating in the void. Yet, out here, there was no one to witness the precise, carefully engineered parade of the thermal architecture.

As it approached its destination, the ship began its transformation to decelerate – another unseen, highly coordinated process. The bow shield shifted dynamically, transitioning from an absolute, light-absorbing black into a flawless mirror. It was not an instantaneous mutation; instead, the conversion took several standard minutes to complete. Now, the shield was fully reflective across both vital spectra: visible light and radio frequencies. In the empty void, this sudden reflectivity acted as a blinding signal, a raw demonstration declaring the vessel's presence: **"I am here"**. Then, the central core of the shield folded inward, retracting into itself to expose the front engine nozzles. A moment later, the thrusters flared to life, gaining massive thrust as the deceleration sequence began.

Despite the anomalous heat signatures and the blazing reflectivity of its shield, the spaceship remained entirely mute. There was no inbound or outbound radio traffic, nor any trace of targeted laser communication. There was simply nothing – a complete, chilling silence across every detectable frequency range.

Hours later, the structural spine of the ship came to life as an increasing array of flashing signals blinked into activity. The vessel's configuration was entirely distinct from typical Inner System architecture: it was purely functional, minimalist, and resembled an automated bulk freighter designed for short-range container transit. This was made immediately evident by the complete absence of a centrifugal gravity ring – there was no spinning chassis, nor even a stationary, locked habitat wheel. Gravity architecture was entirely non-existent.

Despite a heavily insisted suggestion from Adrian to take a walk to the Welde Brauhaus, they took a transport instead. Ake had dug his heels in, and Adrian gave up the fight; it simply wasn't worth arguing over such a trivial detail, even if it completely disrupted his long-standing habit of walking before refuelling. They arrived at the venue quickly. There were no natural nights or days within the space habitats; life here was an endless loop of activity where one shift seamlessly replaced another. This constant rotation optimised overall performance, which was vital since these engineering marvels

were perpetually hungry for maintenance. The only planetary artefact that remained was the lighting schedule – different sections of the habitat were programmed to dim their illumination sequentially. It provided a bizarre sensation, possessing the ability to walk straight from an artificial day into a simulated night.

The Brauhaus was nearly at capacity, yet Ake and Adrian managed to secure an open table – a rare thing at this hour. The table was positioned almost directly in the centre of one of the main dining halls. Adrian felt instantly exposed; it was a tactical vulnerability he despised. Ake, conversely, was simply relieved to finally rest, eat, and drink. He was still preoccupied with impressions of the Greek man he had met back on the Astraeus habitat, and he was hoping to steer his conversation with Adrian toward something distant, buried safely in the past.

"It's your territory, Ake. Could you order the best thing from the menu? Just... not too fatty or heavy. Something balanced in the middle," Adrian requested in a friendly tone, seeking some psychological compensation for the exposed vulnerability of sitting in the centre of the hall. *"Yeah, and could you also arrange two beers for me, please? But rest assured – the next round is on me."*

"Sure, let me arrange that," Ake replied. He didn't find the request unnatural at all; instead, it dissolved any lingering formality between them. *"Mmm, it will take about ten standard minutes for the food, and roughly seven for the beers..."* he continued, looking at the menu display. He looked up, his gaze catching the hop-shaped light fixtures hanging from the ceiling. *"I can actually acquire the beers much quicker myself. I will be right back."*

Ake stood up and navigated toward the bar, leaving Adrian entirely alone in the middle of the crowded room.

A moment later, Anni stepped into the same hall, scanning the crowd for Ake or Adrian. Their target profiles contained not just images to recognise them, but exhaustive behavioural summaries of their personal habits – intelligence that weaponized her with actionable details. Anni naturally checked the corners first, identifying the high-privacy zones, as she had never seen either man in person. To rapidly observe the room, she moved toward the centre of the room and inadvertently collided with the table occupied by Adrian. She failed to notice his presence for a split second, but then a sudden, icy chill gripped her spine. *"That is him – the dangerous mind in a meat pack..."* the thought flashed instantly through her mind.

"Oi, sorry. I was looking for a friend," she said, quickly spinning a simple legend. *"He reserved a table here, but... it seems he hasn't come yet."*

Adrian didn't expect to run into his hunting prey quite so fast. His first impression of her didn't match his expectations at all. She looked a little bit weird, but attractive.

"No worries. Mmm, you could sit with me while waiting for your friend – there are no free tables, as you can see," Adrian said, turning into the play immediately.

"Thank you. Your accent... sounds interesting. Rare for this place. Are you new here?" she asked, mimicking a lively interest so well that it wasn't distinguishable from a real feeling.

"Nothing of interest – just a contractor for the German Cluster, recently arrived. That is right," Adrian continued the game. *"May I ask you in return, where are you from originally?"*

"Yes, but... could you guess?" she replied with a tint of a smile.

"Mmm, let me guess... pale skin, hair colour... it all leads to..." Adrian was gently interrupted by her hand sign.

"Enough, you're leading in the wrong direction. I came from the Munster habitat, and the German Cluster is my origin," she replied, giggling.

While returning with the beers, Ake stopped dead in his tracks for a brief second. He saw Anni sitting with Adrian, chatting. He moved toward them quickly.