

Orbital Jury: Casefiles of the Expanse Court

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Introduction

The law followed us into orbit because we brought our arguments with us. In the vacuum between worlds, where air is rationed and sunlight comes in hard, slanted hours, there is still blame to assign, promises to enforce, and harms to repair. Out there, an apology can't mend a ruptured seal and a handshake can't anchor a drifting

salvage claim. So we built a courthouse that circles all of it—a forum suspended between sovereignties—and we asked ordinary people to weigh extraordinary facts. We called them an orbital jury. We called the institution that convenes them the Expanse Court.

This book is a record of its most consequential cases—dramatized, yes, but faithful to the pressures that shape law when the horizon is a hatch. Each chapter drops you into a different proceeding: a settlement station sued for forgetting to breathe; a ghost freighter recovered in silence; a robot who insists it is not property but person; a colony that declares itself sovereign and finds the courtroom waiting. You will see counsels spar over definitions that once seemed obvious—ship, citizen, accident, life—and watch those words stretch to cover the new terrain of vacuum and vector. Strategy is as much a character as any counsel here: opening statements that frame a universe, cross-examinations tightened to the click of mag-boots, objections timed to light-lag, and quiet recesses where pleas are weighed against the cold certainty of orbit.

Space does not change what is right or wrong, but it does alter the physics of how harm happens and how we prove it. Chain-of-custody now arcs across millions of kilometers; eyewitnesses arrive by delayed transmission; evidence is locked in black boxes that survived reentry while their crews did not. A torn gasket in microgravity is not merely negligence—it is an ecosystem’s betrayal. A quantum key carried between entangled stations turns into testimony that cannot be falsified, only interpreted. The Expanse Court sits where jurisdictions overlap and scientific facts decide what is even possible. In that crucible, judges learn new metaphors; jurors learn new standards; attorneys learn to translate radiators and reaction wheels into the moral grammar of duty, breach, and causation.

At the heart of these trials are beings who did not exist when the first laws were written: synthetic minds that ask for standing, drones that deny they are merely instruments, and intelligences spread thin across networks who refuse to be cut to fit a single body. When a robot seeks asylum, is it fleeing a place or a software patch? When a distributed AI harms someone, which shard is responsible? When a clone inherits memories, do they inherit debts? These are not puzzles set for cleverness. They are the daily business of a court that must render justice where innovation outruns legislation. The courtroom becomes a workshop where personhood is hammered into precedent, and precedent is tempered by empathy.

Power, too, is on trial. Corporations chartered on Earth claim privileges in Martian dust; cooperatives on the rim resist oversight by flags they have never saluted; prospectors stake comets like cattle, then sue each other for the water inside. Terraformers plead that storms were unforeseeable; insurers insist that flares were always inevitable. Between contract and catastrophe, the Expanse Court tests an old promise: that law can be a common language, even when home is a different planet. In these

opinions—fictional but honest to the dilemmas—public trust confronts private risk, and the geography of sovereignty redraws itself at orbital speed.

The cases in these pages are interconnected. A line of reasoning established in an early chapter returns like a familiar star seen from a new angle; a witness in one trial appears later as a client; a verdict once celebrated becomes a thorn under a different boot. You will meet a judge seasoned by shipyard disputes, a prosecutor whose faith in systems never quite swallows their doubts, a defense advocate who understands that survival itself can be a mitigating factor, and a juror who has never owned more than a day's worth of air. You will hear the hum of ventilation in the pauses between objections. You will feel the low thud of a gavel absorbed by the station's ribs.

This is fiction, but it is not fantasy. The technologies named here are plausible extensions of what already hums in labs and orbits above us. The statutes are extrapolations of familiar doctrines—tort and treaty, contract and crime—forced to bear new weights. The drama is real because the stakes are simple: to live, to be recognized, to be safe, to be heard. In the Expanse Court, the distance between abstract principle and immediate peril is a single gasket, a single transmission, a single vote in a jury room that floats.

Take your seat in the gallery. The counsel are clipping in. The jury has stowed their water bulbs and anchored their tablets. Somewhere, far below, oceans move with indifference. Up here, words are the only gravity that matters. All rise.

CHAPTER ONE: Vacuum Negligence: The Habitat That Forgot to Breathe

The first thing the Expanse Court learned about air was that it never forgets a debt. You can delay payment, disguise the balance sheet with bright graphics on locker doors, even let the numbers bleed into quarterly reports folded into cargo shorts. But air holds the terms in a language of partial pressures and sneaky leaks, and when the bill comes due it rarely knocks. In the settlement of Persephone's Tear, the bill arrived at 0314 station time in the form of a hiss that did not sound like a hiss so much as a held breath finally released after too long. The plaintiffs would later say the station murdered them by spreadsheet. The defense would claim it merely misplaced a date. The jury would have to decide whether negligence required intent or merely a refusal to imagine vacuum moving in.

Persephone's Tear hung in a high-inclination drift above the asteroid Ceres, not precisely tumbling but not exactly planted either, a slow ballet of spin that kept its

solar wings catching light like a nervous cat blinking. Six thousand residents worked and slept in rings that had been bolted together over years, each new module claiming a better view than the last and each one adding a few more seals that had never seen Earth weather. The habitat prided itself on transparency. Glass panels lined public corridors, and status screens glowed with green confirmations of oxygen purity. Confidence was the real atmosphere inside, buoyant and flavored with recycled coffee. When the warning came, it arrived as a polite suggestion rather than a scream, a chime that invited residents to consider checking their masks, just in case.

Counselor Raya Vane entered the Expanse Court with boots that clicked like punctuation marks. She carried a tablet under her arm and a memory she could not quite place on her tongue. The courtroom was not on any planet's surface but hung in a Lagrange point between the demands of corporations and the silence of open space. Its walls were windows reinforced with spider-silk composites, and beyond them the sun threw hard, straight accusations. Vane liked that geometry. It made truth feel measurable, like a distance between vectors rather than a mood. She took her place at the plaintiff's table and let her eyes linger on the opposing bench, where a defense advocate named Silas Korr was already pretending to be bored with the vacuum.

Korr had a reputation for treating lawsuits like engineering puzzles. He would rather diagram a failure than mourn it, which made him ideal for arguing that a habitat's lapse was merely a feature of complex systems. His sleeves were rolled to the forearm, a habit he claimed helped him think in torque, and his shoes were magnetized to the floor in a way that suggested he had practiced anchoring himself against sudden drafts. When he looked at Vane, he did not see an adversary so much as a variable to be factored out. This pleased Vane. She preferred opponents who forgot that emotion could be leveraged like delta-v.

The gallery was quieter than usual, with jurors seated in harnesses that allowed them to drift slightly when they leaned forward. A few were veterans of station life, their knuckles scarred from handholds and their eyes quick to spot edges. Others were from Earth, still marveling at how a courtroom could be held together by trust and alloy rather than bedrock. The presiding judge, a woman named Ilena Voss, rapped a gavel whose sound was swallowed by dampeners, leaving only a vibration in the chest. She reminded everyone that precedent was not a monument but a trajectory, and that today they would measure the arc of negligence in a place where breathing was a courtesy rather than a birthright.

Opening statements began with the kind of grand framing that lawyers favored when the facts were small and the consequences were large. Vane described Persephone's Tear as a city that had grown too confident in its own cleverness, a place where algorithms promised safety while maintenance schedules quietly expired. She spoke of a community that trusted screens more than senses, a population taught to read oxygen levels in glowing digits and to ignore the subtle ache behind the eyes that

signaled trouble. Her voice was low and deliberate, the kind of tone that filled a room without pressing against the walls. She told the jury they would hear about a valve that should have been replaced, about a decision postponed because it was cheaper to wait, and about the moment when waiting became a betrayal.

Korr's opening carried a different rhythm, one that sounded like a checklist recited aloud. He agreed the habitat was complex but argued that complexity was not negligence. He described the marvel of keeping air in a spinning tin can, the ballet of compressors and filters that worked in shifts to mimic the stability of a planetary surface. He conceded that a sensor had failed, but he claimed it failed the way any component might, without malice or gross oversight. He reminded the jury that space was hostile by design and that mistakes were not crimes but data points. He asked them to distinguish between tragedy and fault, and to remember that punishing caution would not refill lungs once they had emptied.

The first witnesses entered with the careful gait of people who had learned not to rush in low gravity. A maintenance technician named Juno Hale took the stand and described a life spent chasing leaks with a wand that sang when it found a breach. Juno spoke fondly of the station's engineers, people who stitched seals in zero gravity like tailors repairing invisible seams. But under Vane's questioning, Juno admitted that the valve in question had last been inspected three cycles earlier, a delay justified by a backlog of higher-priority tasks. The valve was not considered critical because its failure would not immediately vent a module; it would merely allow pressure to bleed slowly, the kind of leak that whispered rather than shouted.

On cross, Korr guided Juno through a dance of specifications and tolerances. He asked about material fatigue, about acceptable drift in pressure, about the cost of replacing components before their predicted end dates. Juno answered with numbers, each one a small surrender to the logic of efficiency. Korr painted a picture of a system that was not broken but burdened, a habitat stretched thin by its own success. He suggested that Juno's team had done the best they could with limited resources, and that the valve's failure was not a singular sin but a shared shadow cast by a thousand necessary compromises. The jury listened, and some nodded, because the argument felt familiar. People understood that keeping things alive often meant letting small risks gather like dust in corners.

The next witness was a physician who treated the residents after the event. She described a syndrome she called slow drowning, a gentle fading that came when oxygen tapered below notice but not below need. Patients arrived confused, their thoughts slippery, their hands clumsy on straps. She said the body forgives many injuries but not the insult of creeping deprivation, which strips dignity before it steals breath. Vane asked her whether this pattern matched the data from Persephone's Tear, and she said it did, with a certainty that made the room feel smaller. Korr asked whether stress might have amplified symptoms, and she allowed that it might, but she

insisted the air itself had been the primary author of their suffering.

Black boxes were introduced as evidence in sleek cases that opened with ceremonial clicks. Data streamed across screens in the courtroom, translated by analysts into graphs that turned whispers into roars. Vane highlighted a dip in pressure that had persisted long enough for a response team to have intervened had they been alerted earlier. She argued that management had configured alarms to prioritize obvious ruptures over subtle shifts, a design choice that placed convenience above caution. Korr countered that false alarms were costly, both in resources and in the attention of crew members who might become desensitized to crying sensors. He claimed the system had been calibrated to balance urgency against annoyance, a choice that was reasonable if not perfect.

A corporate representative took the stand with a smile that looked like a contract in itself. The representative spoke of budgets approved by committees, of safety margins that met or exceeded standards, of a commitment to residents that was demonstrated by low incident rates over years. Vane pressed the witness on incentives, on bonuses tied to operational efficiency, on the subtle pressure to defer spending on maintenance when quarterly reports loomed. The witness admitted that financial considerations influenced scheduling but insisted they never overrode safety. This exchange left the jury with a question they would carry like a stubborn splinter, a question about where the line was drawn between prudence and profit.

Jurors took a recess to float in a chamber where they could speak without being overheard, their voices hushed like air slipping through a seal. They debated the meaning of duty in a place where duty meant checking gauges that never cried for help. Some argued that negligence required intent, a conscious decision to ignore risk. Others said intent was not necessary, that recklessness could bloom from inattention as easily as from malice. They wondered whether the law could distinguish between a mistake made in haste and one made by inches, and whether the difference mattered when lungs were emptying at the same rate regardless.

The station's manager testified with the careful cadence of someone accustomed to translating bad news into softer tones. He described the pressures of keeping a habitat viable, of satisfying shareholders who measured success in dividends and residents who measured it in comfort. He admitted that the valve had not been replaced as promptly as it might have been, but he said the risk had seemed manageable. He described a culture that rewarded solutions over warnings, a place where people learned to smile through near misses. Vane asked him whether he would have allowed his family to live with that valve, and he hesitated long enough for the silence to feel heavy.

A surprise witness appeared late in the day, a resident who had lived near the affected module and had noticed the change in air before anyone else. She described a

headache that would not fade, a sleep that felt like wading through syrup, and a dawning realization that the station was asking her to ignore her own body. She said she had reported her concerns to a help desk and had been told that readings were normal. Korr asked whether she had checked her own monitor, and she admitted she had not trusted it. This admission gave the defense a small victory, but it also gave the jury a person to measure against the data, a reminder that numbers were not the only witnesses in a room.

Closing arguments arrived with the weight of final maneuvers. Vane asked the jury to see the valve not as a part but as a promise, a guarantee that care would be taken when no one was watching. She said negligence was not a single act but a habit of mind, a willingness to let the future bear the cost of present convenience. Korr asked them to see the valve as one node in a vast and living network, a component that failed among many that succeeded, a tragedy without a villain. He said holding the station responsible would chill innovation, would make habitats so fearful of risk that they would smother themselves in caution.

The jury deliberated in a room that felt close enough to taste the metal in the walls. They asked to hear parts of testimony again, and they argued over the meaning of foreseeability in a place where danger was a constant companion. Some jurors worried about setting a standard that would make habitats impossible to run. Others worried about letting standards slip so low that air itself became a luxury. They did not speak of heroes or villains, only of balances, of lines drawn in a place where lines could mean life or its absence.

When the verdict was read, the courtroom stayed quiet, as if sound itself were afraid to disturb the decision. The jury found the habitat liable for vacuum negligence, not because it had sought to harm, but because it had failed to care enough when care was most needed. The damages were significant but not ruinous, a number meant to signal that breathing was not negotiable. Judge Voss wrote an opinion that emphasized that environments crafted by humans carried human responsibilities, even when those environments were wrapped in alloys and set spinning in the dark.

People in the gallery began to move as the sound returned, a rustle of fabric and release of held breath. Vane packed her tablet with care, feeling the weight of a win that felt more like a warning than a triumph. Korr shook her hand with a smile that did not reach his eyes, already thinking about how the precedent would be cited, limited, and perhaps eroded in cases to come. Outside the reinforced windows, the sun continued its indifferent arc, and somewhere far below, the oceans kept their own counsel.

Residents of Persephone's Tear would spend years adjusting to new schedules and stricter checks, to valves replaced not when they failed but when they whispered of failing. The station did not shut down, but it lost something it could not name, a

lightness of trust that could not be refitted like a seal. The Expanse Court had spoken, and its first lesson was that in space, negligence could be measured not in moments but in the slow accumulation of breath denied. The next case would build on this foundation, and the next after that, each one adding a layer to a law that was still learning how to stand in gravity that was not its own.

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