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Wednesday morning tasted of stale coffee and metal. Nothing about the day suggested anything unusual – except Adrian’s irritability. The ventilation fan in his secluded house had lurched to life and rattled him awake; he lay for a moment, ears ringing with the steady whine, then fumbled out of bed to slap the switch off. His summer dreams dissolved like smoke as he swung his legs over the mattress and padded across the cold floorboards.

Better to start work early: scan the overnight reports, schedule the boring follow-ups, then erase it all with a pint — Wednesday beer, he told himself, as he opened his work email. The viewer interface glowed a clinical, washed-out gray; the interface’s sterile light made the apartment feel smaller, the weekday monotony heavier.

A single gull cried. Then the secure line bled into the room with a hard, insistent ring – the one reserved for transport engineers and accident experts. Adrian’s jaw tightened. He had the habit of thinking the call would be about another stupid scrap of broken precision kit; it gave him something solid to grumble about.

*"Good afternoon. Adrian speaking,"* he answered, voice automatic but alert now.

*"Adrian, this is – this is the case of the century. You need to get here ASAP. Request a copter energy credit and fly out – urgently,"* Mikko’s voice came clipped and thin over the scramble of network compression.

Adrian’s stomach flipped. *"What the hell happened?"*

After a breath, Mikko said, *"There’s been a death. A bloody accident on an almost empty road."*

The words hit the apartment like a gust of cold air. He felt the room tilt for a second, the big ceramic mug rattling in his kitchen sink.

*"Okay – send coordinates. I’m on my way,"* Adrian barked, forcing his tone back to business.

He was still groggy, eyelids thick, but the caffeine thin coffee waiting in the mug downstairs suddenly mattered less than getting moving. He snatched a pack of cigarettes and a thin toolkit from the hall shelf — set of lens , a multi-bit driver, a compact scanner — the small rituals that steadied him. He pulled on boots, shrugged into a jacket that smelled faintly of tobacco smoke, and locked the door behind him.

The drive from Landenpohja to Lahti was long enough for his thoughts to clear but not for the unease to dissipate. Morning snow clung to hedgerows and the glass of peripheral monitors; the landscape slid by in hilly, domesticated fields and the occasional pinetree forests. Traffic was light — the regional planning and population distribution policies had kept the main arteries unclogged — so he kept a steady pace. Through the windshield the road looked deceptively calm, an empty ribbon of tarmac promising nothing and possibly everything.

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Lizzie had become obsessively preoccupied with her appearance and with staying young. After three hundred years of life, her mind was fraying at the edges. Assets, capital, and energy credits surrounded her like guardians — and, most intoxicating of all, the absence of familial responsibility. No children to answer to; no messy obligations. Thirty years earlier a reform had allowed citizens to retain voting privileges if their assets met a threshold, and Lizzie had been among the first to take advantage of the rule.

Beneath the surface, though, she nursed a single fanatic desire: to roll her body back to the beginning of life — to look twenty five or even younger again — but without the strain of painful procedures, or

years of rehabilitation. She wanted youth as a consumer product: instantaneous, effortless, and socially acceptable.

At dawn she stood naked before an antique mirror, the glass rimmed faintly with condensation from the bathroom. She lingered there, studying the barely noticeable hollows at her temples, the faint lattice of veins at her wrists, the patchy paleness of skin where age and indulgence had left marks. Today's question was practical and performative: what to wear, how to present herself, what animal she intended to embody. Her public persona was brash and go-getting — theatrical in its hunger — but behind the bravado she regularly pushed illegal, near-lethal doses of gene therapy to sculpt that persona into reality.

Finally — the thing she'd been rehearsing for days - today would be a public show. She needed to arrive in Lahti early, before the event, to visit an old friend and gene therapist who was working on advanced life extension technology. The appointment was important: the summit featured many technology presentations, and one of the items being showcased was credited to both Lizzie and this therapist.

Her journey of a few hundred kilometres should be mechanically uneventful. The car's limited driving AI and automatics removed the variable of human error; a copter would have constrained her movement in the city, so she'd left that option off the table. Glass and chrome reflected the pale morning as the vehicle ate up the kilometres: few service stops, coffee mugs, science and commercial reports, the steady hum of tires over watery tarmac. Nothing to worry about.

Yesterday had been consumed by fights with the Medical Circle — a phalanx of exasperated experts who had tried to curb her self-experimentation. The arguments had rattled her, but prescribed neurotransmitter modulators kept her moods from unravelling completely. Now her thoughts orbited the coming public appearance: the introductions, the cameras, the ritual applause. She had one trump card left in the debate over her gene therapy - an argument she believed would silence dissent — and she planned to use the event to press her advantage.

The summit itself was a new trade and engineering pact between the German and Finnish commercial clusters. Lizzie was a mandatory attendee by virtue of her holdings in German enterprises and her technology presentation. The official sessions bored her — by-laws, signatures, bland speeches — but the social hours afterwards promised exactly the kind of staged spectacle she lived for: flattering lights, hungry faces, an audience to impress.

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Nick Etalainen - a massive broad-shouldered dispatcher for the high-speed highways — sank into the control-room chair like any other morning, trusting the automation to hold the lanes steady. He let the silence wash over him, punctuated only by the soft susurrus of the ventilation and the distant hum of servers.

His twelve hour shift suited him tonight; the cooling quiet was a welcome refuge after another fight with his wife.

The Lahti County dispatch office monitored every highway artery and entrance in the region. Though the center was largely automated — like the thousands of control hubs scattered across the planet — human operators still sat shifts to handle the two to three percent of incidents that the algorithms couldn't resolve. Human labour was expensive, but the cost of a mismanaged traffic disaster — stranded vehicles, cascading delays, financial losses for transport firms and builders — could be far higher.

Nick's quiet enjoyment ended in an electronic klaxon: a rare incident demanding immediate human attention.

*"Damn — what the ..."* he muttered, jolted upright.

For a heartbeat he froze, still half in that meditative drift. Then the automation took over: incident

data exploded onto the main screen, crisp and uncompromising — coordinates, vehicle details, sensor feeds, timestamps. Police and ambulance had already been dispatched; a tireless emergency drone was cutting through thick, falling snow toward the scene.

Within seconds Nick was buried in readouts, manuals, and step-by-step protocols as updated telemetry streamed in.

*"Survival rate: zero... fatality confirmed,"* he read aloud, voice hollow.

His palms slick, he initiated privacy protection protocols — reflexes honed by years of handling sensitive incidents.

*"Not on my watch"* his tired brain insisted.

Questions crowded him: Do I have to go? Who else can or even should? How did this happen? He toggled through checklists, sent urgent reports to transport services, summoned specialist teams. The system logged and redistributed the data; dispatched squads acknowledged.

Nick had hoped to remain invisible, to let the automation blur him into the background. But some incidents were too big to hide from. The facts were now out of the machine; what had happened was irreversible, and staying in the shadows felt suddenly impossible.

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Adrian trusted the car's automation and thumbed through the urgent update that had arrived mid-journey. The snowfall was thick, powdering the windshield and softening the landscape, but the regional crews had kept the main arteries passable; the trip was shorter than the weather promised. Warm airflow fogged briefly on the glass as the car glided over slushy tarmac.

He liked incident responses — not for the drama, but for the rhythm of work. Most incidents were painfully routine: a crushed bumper, a skittish driver, an afternoon of tow trucks and polite insurance statements. Those scenes made tidy television: engineers explaining a clever root cause, commentators blaming a human lapse. Fatalities were rare. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been to a scene with confirmed deaths for years; the most recent fatality on his list had been a silent heart attack at the wheel, the ambulance few minutes too slow.

The automated console had painted the new incident in clinical detail: coordinates, vehicle telemetry, impact vectors, survival probability flagged at zero. The map tile pulsed a single cold pin where the empty road bent beneath low pines.

His car stood on the emergency shoulder beside a police vehicle, hazard lights stuttering like warning eyes. Snow clung to the wheel arches; frost traced the chrome. He stepped out into the clean, crispy air. Each breath burned slightly; the wind peeled across his face and tugged at his collar. The muted thump of distant traffic was a thin comfort.

He pulled his favourite battered fur hat down against the blast, feeling the familiar stiffness of the hat's leather material. His boots sank with a soft crunch into the packed verge. Around him, the automated drones droned faintly overhead, their navigation lights ghosting through the snowfall. He adjusted the toolkit at his belt, checked the compact scanner's battery with a practised flick, and headed for the bend where the map had marked everything that had gone wrong.

*"Well, well, well — let's take part in this creepy show ..."* Adrian muttered under his breath.

*"There isn't much information, and what there is isn't designated for our service. Specifically: today's unlucky person is from Germany,"* his thoughts continued.

He was interrupted when Mikko appeared out of nowhere and began reporting in his slightly booming northern accent.

*"At the moment, all we know is that privacy protection protocols were triggered. The victim is Lizzie Wolters. I couldn't get many details about her, but she looks very young — possibly a newborn,"*

Mikko said.

Adrian objected, *"Hm ... so why a newborn?"*

Mikko snapped in reply, *"You know gene therapy is prohibited until age 35, and she looks too young to be 35 or older."*

*"Guess this doesn't concern us, Mikko. Let's focus on what we do best. Hell — we need to request permission to access the telemetry of this dawn car. Mikko, contact the manufacturer. Meanwhile I'll work with a screwdriver and other tools, just to be part of this creepy show,"* Adrian said, voice low against the wind.

Snow squealed against the car's body as Mikko moved to follow instructions.

Adrian pried a telemetry module from the car's driving AI unit and slipped it into his bag. No sooner had he done so than a small copter cut through the white out and representatives of the German Cluster landed nearby, rotors kicking up a flurry of powdered snow.

A lanky agent approached, his coat dusted with snow, voice clipped with a German accent and an orderly tone.

*"Please hand over the telemetry media."* He seemed coldly composed, though his gloved hand trembled just enough to show the strain.

*"We're not in Germany, you know,"* Adrian began, forcing a wry tone, but the agent cut him off without smiling.

*"We have the necessary permissions,"* the agent said, holding out a mobile terminal. Steam rose from his breath in the cutting air.

Adrian and Mikko took the device, fingertips numb as they checked signatures, certificates, and the terminal's contents.

*"Fine. Drone footage, highway sensors, and other records are yours,"* Adrian said. *"But car telemetry belongs to us. I don't think the automakers union will accept a blanket ban on investigations involving their telemetry. You won't get a copy without the proper warrant — we know our rights."*

*"Okay, but you'll receive orders about the data. Engineer — introduce yourself,"* the German insisted, teeth briefly clenched against the cold.

*"Porinen. You should have my ID; if you were issued broad permissions,"* Adrian replied.

He grabbed Mikko's arm and they hurried to his car, snow hissing under their boots.

*"We need that data. Even if this clown's right, nothing's simple here. This is a chance to learn — call Virta and tell her there's work in Landenpohja today,"* Adrian said as they shoved into the vehicle and shut out the wind.

*"Nice — haven't seen anything this intriguing in forty years,"* Mikko said, voice thin with cold but bright at the same time.

*"Then go on, my friend,"* Adrian said, and they drove back to the city of Landenpohja through a highways blurred by falling snow flakes.

Adrian's mind already sketched accident models, hunting engineering flaws and human-factor errors. There wasn't much room for error: the driving AI was a mature, well tested system. Still, the agent's timing — arriving precisely while the module left the car - and the way they'd staged their approach in the storm suggested they'd been waiting on that corner for a reason, or at least it felt that way. The cold bit at his neck and the world narrowed to his curious mind and the data on the telemetry module in his bag. Those small, tense details made his pulse climb.

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Habitat general maintenance hardly qualified as anyone's dream job – not exciting, not glamorous, and dangerous enough that nobody pictured themselves doing it forever. Because of the high risk, the

compensation was quite good: not only money, but long vacations and additional paid leaves, passes to the luxury areas, or even free tickets to other habitats, and other cushy perks. Needless to say the work was highly ranked in society; those who kept the megastructures alive and running rubbed shoulders with the creators and lead engineers.

However, most of the habitat's upkeep was automatic – fleets of drones and bots, swarms of varied sensors, and thousands of kilometres of wiring and hydraulic pipes hummed through the guts of the whole habitat. The maintenance crew usually spent most of its time waiting on alerts that rarely came. Despite this high level of automation – the set of safety maintenance protocols demanded periodic human inspections: wiring checkups, space debris damage assessment, and visual inspections of external structures such as communications array.

Habitat itself looked like a colossal, gigantic drum rotates like a wheel around the spindle inserted into the centre. The spindle was longer than the habitat's drum and basically consisted of two parts: an internal one located inside the cylindrical drum's inner space, and two mostly identical external parts on each side of the rotating drum. The spindle was a static structure. The internal part hosted many supporting struts and elements that connected the spindle's static core to the outer shell of the rotating drum. The two external parts of the spindle hosted a variety of equipment: engines for position corrections, ship docking stations, communication arrays, sentry weapons to deal with debris, and massive heat dissipation arrays.

It was a Phoebe-class habitat – the most latest, modular, and advanced megastructure. Using the latest advances in material science technology the rotating part was truly immense: forty kilometres long and ten kilometres in diameter. Rotating at a rate of one revolution about every 2.3 minutes, Phoebe provided about 0.989 g for her inhabitants. The outer surface moved at roughly 98.7 metres per second due to this rotation, allowing the rim to launch small satellites or drones.

The core of the moving section was an enormous drum skeleton; its structure created a cellular pattern across the drum's surface. It was made intentionally: each cell was designed to fit a standard habitat building block.

However, this elegant solution wasn't visible: the space between building blocks and the outer light-gray plates was filled with minerals, soil, and water to shield against radiation. Inside the habitat's gravity zone, layers of equipment, soil, and minerals covered the cell blocks, though the design allowed a block to be removed and replaced.

Most Phoebe-class habitats were located at the Earth - Moon Lagrange point (L2); the latest were installed at the Sun - Earth Lagrange point (L1) to better serve the inner Solar System. But Mair was luckier: his maintenance duty was on an L2-placed habitat. Besides the dangers of servicing the static hub, the denser population there made life easier for him. Each Phoebe-class hosts at least 600,000 inhabitants, which meant there was always plenty to do.

It was just a regular shift for Mair – except something had been found near the communications section of the external static structure. Orbital junk was nothing new, but from his experience debris didn't just sit there; it damaged things. That made this different.

Going from the rotating habitat into the static hub always left him a little dizzy, so he downed two beer cans to dull the inner-ear transition before the exit. It was forbidden, but he'd done it for years. Reluctantly leaving his housing block, he rode the elevator from the lower tier up to the docking-station level on the static spine. With a cranky magnetic boots he moved towards the transparent air lock.

The view through the transparent airlock stopped him cold. A device of impossible geometry clung to the hull of the communications module: a mirror-smooth material folded and curved in ways that resisted easy measurement. It wasn't the shape that stunned him so much as the economy of it – every curve and void seemed designed to use as little raw materials as possible and to vanish from casual sight easily. The sight was mind blowing: object's highly reflective surface and weird shape, heat dissipator's reddish barely noticeable glow, the habitat's gray hull, and blinking navigation lights all mixed together,

making it feel utterly otherworldly.

Those low-mass, low-signature designs had begun to show up only in the outer system, where non-gaseous raw materials were scarce. But the material itself – its surface, its sheen – was unlike anything he'd seen.

*"I need assistance here – an investigation crew, and... undock a shuttle to place near the communications module,"* Mair requested via the secure link embedded in his space suit.

Torn by curiosity but apprehensively, he silently moved out of air lock, and continued toward the unknown structure in the silence of space. What stopped him next made his gut tighten: at the base of the strange object was a standard data socket — one end plugged into the object's hull, the other end plugged into the communications array's maintenance panel. Red and white wires ran from the plug straight into the module and disappeared inside. Neither the weird device nor a civilian data cable should have been there. Instinct took over; Mair reached out maintenance panel and opened to investigate further.

Right after that the investigation team spilled out of the airlock, and events accelerated. The strange object detached from the hull, drifted away from the static spine, then detonated into a spray of shards. The largest fragments slammed into the antenna arrays; shards of outer shell nicked Mair's suit and sent him tumbling, weightless, for a breathless moment. The impact shock was enough to knock him out: the comms chatter dissolved into static, and Mair slipped into unconsciousness.

The shuttle arrived too late. All that remained for the arriving crew was to collect debris and assess damage to the hull and antenna arrays.

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Snow continued to fall, laying miracle-like layers of white over everything below the ice melting temperature, just as winters did years and centuries ago. Adrian's car had long since left the high-speed road and now relied entirely on his driving skill. The local road wasn't cleared like the highway; its surface was packed hard with compressed snow, and the rear window and trunk were layered with thick snow.

*"I have never been here, so far from the highway."* Mikko interrupted a buzzing silence in the car.

*"Huh. That's the point of being in places like this — fewer people and almost no light pollution,"* Adrian replied, his eyes locked on the edge of the road where the white snow met the brownish granite of the exposed roadside cliffs.

After a few seconds he added, *"It's already dark. Let's grab a couple of good beers and steaks at my favourite spot nearby. After that I'll set up my home office and we will try to figure out what the hell happened to the dawn car."*

The road curved and dropped toward the suburbs of Landenpohja. Adrian parked quickly by one of the older buildings. It was a typical two storey place with large windows: the ground floor housed a pub and kitchen, the second floor a small hotel. Nothing special about the building itself – old fashioned LEDs and dimmed lights in the pub gave it a cosy winter mood. The place was about half full that evening, so there was plenty of room to sit.

*"This place is mostly occupied by newborns, isn't it?"* Mikko asked, his voice dropping as they approached the entrance.

*"Yep, mostly. You afraid of them?"* Adrian let out a short, dry laugh. *"I'm telling you, they're just like us. They just live without the gene therapy. Aside from their ageing at the 'natural' rate, there's no real difference. You'll see."*

They stepped into the pub, leaving the biting cold behind. The interior was a sanctuary of a bygone era: heavy oak tables scarred by decades of use, and walls clad in dark wood panels that met a ceiling painted a deep, hunter green. The ceramic floor tiles were worn into smooth paths by generations of

boots, speaking to an age that modern world of mega scale engineering had long forgotten. Dimmed, amber lights softened the edges of the room, casting a warm glow that made the low hum of conversation feel like a protective cocoon of privacy.

They settled into the farthest, dimmest corner.

*"Keep an eye on the news,"* Adrian said, his voice low. *"I'll bet our accident is already saturating the streams. Did you ever reach Virta? Never mind – I'm going to go order. It might take a bit; they don't do automated service here."*

Mikko looked around, feeling like an astronaut on a foreign planet. He was used to the clean, sterile lines of modern glass and composites; these heavy, dark proportions felt oppressive. Even the air was different – thick and heavy with a scent of human sweat, rich malt, and the sharp, peppery kick of seasoned meat. It was a smell so dense he felt he could taste it on his tongue. To his surprise, nobody was interested in their presence.

Signs on the wall sparked with old-fashioned LEDs: *"Buy Five, Get the Sixth Free," "Never Miss a Fresh Pour," "Ice Cold."* The atmosphere was so thick it made him forget about a call for a moment. Remembering, he pulled his sleek terminal from his pocket. He tried a voice link three times, but the connection refused to handshake. With a frustrated sigh, he dropped a text message to Virta instead.

Adrian returned, thumping two heavy glass mugs onto the wood. *"Here we go – best brew you'll find in this hemisphere. Forget the data for a second; we've got time. So, tell me – how are you finding the 'natural' life?"*

*"It's... quiet,"* Mikko admitted, glancing at the amber liquid. *"Immersive, I guess. But definitely not my usual scene."*

Adrian slid into the opposite bench and took a long, appreciative sip. *"Thank God for the evening. Did you get through to her?"*

*"No,"* Mikko said, a shadow of disappointment crossing his face. *"Just a message. Strange, I couldn't get a voice link. Maybe she's just out with friends."*

*"Whatever she's doing, you can relax. Trust me,"* Adrian said, his eyes twinkling over the rim of his glass.

Mikko paused, his brow furrowing. *"Wait... do you know something I don't?"*

*"Nothing serious,"* Adrian replied, his face a mask of practised calm. *"She called me yesterday about your celebration next week. Long story short, she's off with her presentations for the ongoing summit. Top secret stuff."*

The tension drained out of Mikko's shoulders, replaced by a visible wave of relief. *"Ah. And here I thought you didn't care for social events. You live out here in the middle of nowhere, avoiding crowds like the plague."*

*"I don't,"* Adrian chuckled. *"But even a hermit knows when a gathering is mandatory."*

He leaned back, his eyes wandering to the dark wood of the table. *"Besides, my choice of home has nothing to do with avoiding people. I guess you've already noticed the lack of light pollution here, and the... well, the 'ancient' feel of things. I love it because it allows me to do a deep dive into memories that are centuries old. This place feels like those memories."*

He paused, a nostalgic smile playing on his lips. *"And that's not all. When the skies are clear, you get a view that's impossible in the cities. Imagine looking up and seeing ancient forests and orbital habitats in a single frame. On a good night, you can see the habitats with the naked eye – tiny, blinking points of light. They look like diamonds, Mikko. Little diamonds used as a home for many hundreds thousand people."*

Adrian finished the thought with another long sip of his beer, the amber light of the pub reflecting in his eyes.

*"It goes without saying that I own a few of the local businesses,"* Adrian added. *"I made this place to my own taste and kept it that way for a long time. But in recent years, I've stepped back – letting*

*the locals run things their own way. So that's why I shifted my focus toward orbital industries and deep-space trade thing."*

Mikko set his glass down. *"I've always been fascinated by your work. Why do you still do it? With your resources, you could have retired decades ago."*

*"A few reasons,"* Adrian said, leaning in. *"You know the legal requirements since you follow the same protocols. But really? It's too boring to do nothing. I'm still quite curious. There are too many questions lying right on the surface, lurking around, and waiting for answers."*

*"Indeed, so the today's mystery is part of the equation?"* Mikko took a long, thoughtful sip of his beer.

*"Oh no, today is just a local task – intriguing, but small, at least that's my first impression. I'm talking more about the global picture."* Adrian's voice dropped to a conspiratorial hum. *"Have you noticed that our technology hasn't truly advanced in a century? We just scale things up. Bigger habitats, faster engines, advanced sensors, faster communications, better fusion, but no fundamental breakthroughs. Just refining the same old laws of physics. And our population is stagnating. A long lifespan is only one part of the equation; we can still die in an accident without a hope for a replacement. By keeping a low profile here, I can work on those kinds of questions in peace."*

They sat in silence for a moment as the weight of that reality settled between them, until Mikko's terminal chirped with a sharp notification.

*"Seems like a reply from Virta. Let me check."* Mikko reached for his pocket.

But it wasn't a private message. An urgent news bulletin overrode the standby screen, the message header flashing with high-priority metadata.

*"Hey, Adrian – that's not a message. News ...,"* Mikko exclaimed, his eyes fixed on the glowing text. *"You'd better grab another round. The news is breaking, and I think it's about the death case we were investigating on the highway!"*

Adrian stood up silently. As he wove through the heavy oak tables toward the bar, his mind raced through the possible telemetry failures that could have caused the crash. He dreaded the inevitable mountain of formal reports, but a small, darker part of him felt a spark of interest.

*"Maybe a few days of fun, after all,"* he thought.

*"Hey, Tom – two more, please,"* Adrian said, leaning against the worn bar top. He'd known every bartender in this place for a lifetime. *"And could you flip the screen to the news feed? We need to see the report on that fatality from the highway."*

Adrian took the glasses and turned back toward the table. His dark-green eyes immediately caught the change in Mikko's expression; the man looked utterly blind sided, his face a mask of deep, pale shock. Adrian felt a spark of adrenaline hit his gut. What? What the hell happened?

He closed the distance to the table quickly. *"Hey, what is it? What happened?"*

Mikko looked up, his voice tight. *"It's not our case. Or... not just our case. An hour ago, there was a major incident on a Phoebe-class habitat. And get this for a coincidence: it's the German cluster's habitat..."*

Adrian set the beers down, his mind already calculating. *"The German cluster? That's the same jurisdiction as the today's victim came."*

*"Exactly,"* Mikko replied, swiping his screen to share the feed. *"The reports say it was some kind of unknown surveillance device – a spy-bot or something like that – clinging to the hull. It detonated during a maintenance sweep. No fatalities, fortunately. The engineer was caught in the blast, but he's in the hospital now. They say he'll make a full recovery, which means the primary witness survived."*

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Freezing rain pattered against the reinforced glass, driven by wind gusts that created a relentless, monotonous rhythm. It was a typical office monolith in the heart of Frankfurt's business district – all concrete and steel – but despite its outward dullness, this building served as the nerve center for the entire German Cluster.

Michael, one of the committee's highest-ranking managers, stared out at the grey city. At this moment, he felt as though his role was a punishment for some disastrous sin in his past. Two catastrophic events in a single day. He knew the weight of his responsibility and the fallout that would follow if this situation goes wild. He tapped his fingers nervously on the polished table, awaiting the rest of the executive personnel. They had been summoned on short notice; for some of them living in the orbital habitats, the gravity transit down to Earth had been a gruelling, hurried trip.

*"The first problem is Lizzie's death,"* Michael thought, his mind racing. *"That might be manageable. But the second... that will require a far greater effort to bury."*

The committee's primary directive was clear: **keep all dark secrets under the shiny cover, at any costs.**

The heavy doors hissed open, and the top managers stepped in. Their faces were masks of professional indifference, perhaps tinged with a slight dissatisfaction at being summoned so abruptly. Michael, the man responsible for securing their interests, felt a bead of sweat form on his forehead. He knew the risks; if this situation spiralled out of control, it would be devastating for everyone in the room.

*"We've already secured the internal investigation, Michael. That's the part you seem to have missed,"* one of the members said as he took a seat, his voice cold. *"We have a few days to figure things out on the habitat."*

*"And what about the habitat engineer?"* Michael countered, his voice tight. *"He was right there when it happened."*

*"Do nothing,"* another member replied flatly. *"We'll keep him medically sedated and unconscious for a few days. In the meantime, you will prepare a plausible cover story. The risk of this incident exposing what lies beneath is already too high."*