

The distant and quite ancient dream of humankind were finally achieved as the old order crumbled. For centuries, humanity had waged wars and engaged in petty politics centred on land share and resources. But the final global conflict and the catastrophic economic downturn that followed nearly ruined civilization, threatening to bury every scrap of progress made from the earliest empires to the modern age.

The last fading strongholds of national government rule were the long-term projects – those that spanned beyond a single human lifespan. Even with the staggering advances in medicine, tasks like deep-space travel and investments in mega structure construction remained unachievable for individuals. This was the final justification for the state's existence, but it was also a boiling point; inevitably, through accident or arrogance, authoritarian stupidity would rise, leading to yet another cycle of wars.

The old order was simply too unstable and too slow to adapt to a reality sculpted by emerging technologies. In many cases, state authorities had even tried to stifle the pace of innovation, attempting to halt the spread of technology just to hide the growing obsolescence of a rudimentary government. Furthermore, in times of peace, taxes were squandered on impractical research, useless projects, and foolish social experiments – a systemic waste of human potential and valuable resources.

Then came the rise of gene therapy.

As lifespans extended, the horizon of commercial activity shifted. A long life allowed corporations to outpace national governments in both economic stability and long-term influence. It took nearly a century to dismantle the old nations and establish the Clusters, replacing borders with a global web of policies and protocols. Finally, commercial operations grew large enough to afford the projects of a truly astronomical scale. An investor could now place their capital and wait a hundred years for a profit, only to reinvest it even further.

This evolution came with a price. To seize control, military contractors across the globe – organised into powerful unions in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania – had to consolidate and sacrifice immense amounts of capital and investment to weaponise their agenda. They began providing highly automated drones, advanced intelligence infrastructure, and orbital bombardment satellite networks to the standing governments at a fraction of their actual cost. It was a calculated maneuver; they armed the states only to seize the control to those weapons at a precisely engineered moment.

Where democratic governments had been too timid to end the plague of authoritarianism and dictatorship, the commercial unions made the decision for them. This brave decision led to a century of cold, soft confrontation with the remnants of the old rule, but the past could never hope to defeat the future. All the old fashioned regimes and their bloated bureaucracies were destined to fall.

Mutual commercial interests and the rigid bureaucracy of global regulations pushed ancient wars to the dustiest shelf of history. Society did not become social-oriented; instead, it forged a new deal – a mixture of technocratic cold steel, the absolute freedom of trade, and a culture that prized privacy and the optimisation of human potential above all else.

The key to this transition was the extension of the human lifespan. However, this enormous longevity came with a price and was not fit for everyone. The first century of this new era did not see exponential population growth, as even the longlivings were not immortal: accidents and unfixable diseases remained a threat. To address this, strict biological regulations were introduced. Gene therapy was never intended as a universal cure for the young or the frail; instead, it became a duty – a mandate to push humankind beyond its ancient biological limits and to pave a way beyond the terrestrial life. This therapy required a constant intake of specialised medications at predetermined intervals, with the dosage and frequency strictly regulated by the inter-Cluster policies and protocols.

The mechanism of the therapy was straightforward but demanding: it effectively halted the ageing process by manipulating specific gene pairs, essentially switching off the expiration date of the human cell. However, the effect was not permanent; it degraded over time, requiring constant refreshing through the globally controlled meds. It was not a miracle cure for existing illness, nor could it reverse

the damage of age once it had occurred; it simply held the human body in a biological stasis.

Unregulated usage of the therapy was considered a severe crime, largely because of how precisely the math of profit and interest was calculated across such long horizons. In this new society, it was not uncommon to have a sibling who was a hundred years older than oneself, provided the family's assets and management duties justified the cost of their extension.

Twenty years before the fatal accident, Lizzie had been contacted by a medical doctor who introduced himself as a lead gene therapist from a Research and Development department of the very Cluster's division she partially owned. The approach had been executed in a strictly formal, entirely unsuspecting manner. The electronic message originated from a legitimate source; every signature was verified, and the cryptographic seals were all in their proper places.

At first glance, it appeared to be the kind of common, tedious official research report sent from Research and Development to major stakeholders. But this time, the tone was unexpectedly personal.

"I am sending this report to you personally because it may be of your specific interest," the introduction began.

"At the moment, it has already been rejected as non-significant by the Shareholders committee. Please read it carefully; I hope you will find more within these pages than they did."

It was a second passage in the introduction, however, that truly captured her attention:

"I know you are quite concerned about the current stagnation in further gene therapy development. Please review this report. More is coming."

The report was dense, saturated with data from a vast array of simulations and raw physical experiments. While meticulously prepared, it was clearly not yet ready for formal peer review – it was too raw, perhaps too dangerous for public scrutiny. As Lizzie scanned the findings, the outcome left her stunned. The objective of the research wasn't the mere optimisation of existing therapy; it wasn't about holding the line against time. It was about reversing the process entirely.

At this point in her life, Lizzie had already begun her slow retreat into agoraphobia. She spent more and more of her days sequestered within the artificial safety of her habitat, rarely venturing into the public events. She was terrified of death, haunted by the realisation that current medicine technology could only pause the clock, never turn it back. In her isolation, the research report had found its most desperate and attentive reader.

The race between competing corporations to find more effective ways to sustain genetic integrity was nothing new. However, every competitor remained focused solely on halting the ageing process entirely. The existing therapies were already capable of slowing biological decay to a crawl, with the most optimistic estimates projecting a lifespan of several thousand years.

From a pragmatic standpoint, there was no commercial interest in reversing the process. Even for those whose ambitions reached far beyond the boundaries of the Solar System, rejuvenation was seen as a luxury without a purpose. Interstellar travel remained, at its core, a brutal engineering problem. No vessel yet designed was capable of self-maintenance for the millennia required to reach a neighbouring star. Even if a hull could hold, navigation across such vast distances was a nightmare of signal delays and autonomous drift. In a world where you could already live for thousands of years, the whole global community saw no reason to turn the clock back – they only cared about keeping it running.

Mikko returned to his home to find it empty. His mindset was far less driven by curiosity than Adrian's; perhaps because he was still able to find contentment in the simple, quiet things of his prolonged life. He had joined the longevity program centuries after Adrian, and for him, the transition had been smooth. One year bled into the next in a rhythm that felt almost perfect.

His way of thinking and his approach to challenges had long since adapted to the long-life scheme. No one knew for certain what caused these mental and behavioural shifts: was it a natural adaptation of the human brain, a forced evolution, or merely a side effect of the gene therapy? Science had become a practical tool for engineering and commerce, and since there was no immediate profit in studying the root cause of these psychological changes, the question remained unanswered.

Regardless of the cause, the benefits were undeniable: more detailed, hyper-logical planning and a significant reduction in primal fears. Yet, the old human ghost still lingered. Occasionally, during the depth of winter, Mikko would experience heart-beating emotions – visceral, unbidden surges of feeling. Decades ago, his second son had died in an space construction accident, an event far removed in both space and time, yet this piece of memory still had a way of salting his blood. It was exactly this cold, sharp emotion that welcomed him into the silence of his home.

The first thing he did was check his messages; only one of them held his interest – the upcoming anniversary event. His wife, Virta, had decided to host a gathering at their home, a rare occasion in their social circle. Such events, filled with discussions and clashing opinions on everything from new regulatory policies to cutting edge engineering solutions, were a welcome distraction from wandering thoughts and useless emotions. However, that was scheduled for a later point on time line.

For now, his mind remained anchored to his late son. Memories of the kid's graduation and his first assignment to the space structure engineering department remained as vivid as if they had occurred only days ago. Mikko had been profoundly proud of him, despite their sharp disagreement over his son's assignment to the Mars Orbital Ring construction.

Mikko had never been fond of Mars; to him, it was a dull, small, toxic and cold piece of rock. Every logical thought he had on the subject suggested that such a useless sphere was better suited for dismantling – broken down for raw materials and ancient museum collectibles from the era of early robotic exploration.

He scrolled through his saved archives, text chats with his son popping up on his terminal. The communication lags were preserved in the timestamps: sometimes ten minutes for a reply, sometimes an hour or more, all depending on the orbital alignment and relays involved. The logs were a depiction of a colossal scale endeavour – tricky engineering puzzles, logistics nightmares, and simple, human talk.

But on one particular winter day, when the light-speed lag was only five minutes, every connection abruptly closed. During a shift on the construction site, a cargo tug had slammed into an incomplete section of the orbital ring. At the tug's velocity, the kinetic energy was enough to shatter the unfinished mega-structure entirely, taking the engineering personnel with it. That was the end of the story. The wreckage of the orbital construction was swallowed by the martian gravity well, dragging everyone down into the dust. That was how Mars became a grave – and in Mikko's mind, it gave the planet one more reason to be dismantled for materials.

Mars had always been plagued by bad luck – a small, dry, and frozen wasteland choked with toxic perchlorates and iron oxide rust. Yet, for some reason, this godforsaken spot had always attracted humanity's attention. In the old ancient times, it was even considered a candidate for terraforming – a naive, stupid dream of transforming a lifeless rock into a green, living world.

Nowadays, that dream has been long buried. Mars is nothing more than a cold, dusty mineral extraction hub sitting on the jagged border of the Inner System. Despite the catastrophic construction accident that claimed Mikko's son, the Orbital Ring was eventually finished, decades behind schedule.

Ironically, the primary purpose of the ring remained purely industrial: it provided a practical way to hoist raw goods from the claws of the planet's gravity well. Now, however, the structure is more heavily armed than an orbital deep-space crawler, bristling with defensive measures designed to ensure that no collision of such kind ever threatens its integrity again.

His immersion in the past was suddenly broken by a call from Virta. Her voice crackled in his ear, clear despite whatever distance lay between them.

"My medical forum just wrapped up," she said. "I'm heading home now."

"I'll be here," Mikko replied, leaning back in his chair. "See you soon. An hour? Two?"

"About two hours, maybe a little more. Wait for me there – I have some interesting stuff I want to discuss."

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised. "See you then."

The call ended. Mikko and Virta had lived together for a long time, yet their lives were often defined by absence. As a medical researcher, her work frequently required long journeys to specialised labs located in deep space; weeks or even months of transit for a one way trip was a standard part of her career.

Earth itself was no longer used for the messy business of experimentation. Under the Preservation Regulations, the planet had been transformed into a luxurious cradle for humankind – a pristine sanctuary designed to host endless conferences, high-level forums, Clusters think centres, and diplomatic summits. It was a deliberate evolution: the birthplace of the species had become its most exclusive resort, supported by a massive, highly regulated tourism industry that ensured the cradle remained as perfect as the day of dawn of the first civilizations.

Mikko decided to turn his attention back to the anomalous vehicle logs. He found the task a welcome distraction, a way to channel his restless energy into something productive. The painstaking nature of the work finally began to yield results; out of the chaotic pile of files, a series of templates and connections emerged, and eventually, a coherent timeline began to take shape.

The timeline had been a difficult nut to crack. Some logs adhered to the ancient, Earth based time systems, while others utilised the modern Universal Solar Time Measurement System (USTS). Most alarming, however, were the entries that seemed to be a total mess – sporadically switching between timing systems without logic and pattern, while other data points were simply corrupted beyond recognition.

Despite the digital chaos, Mikko's persistence allowed him to restore order and bridge the gaps between the conflicting records. To gain a bird's eye view of the entire accident's time line, he highlighted several major events and established them as pivot points, anchoring the scattered data into a single, terrifying picture.

"Solar Pulse. A funny new name for what was once just a 'second' back in the old ages," Mikko muttered to himself.

Since the transition to USTS, the price of Caesium – essential for the precision of atomic clocks – had remained high and remarkably stable. Rumours suggested the German Cluster was exporting the element to the Outer System in massive quantities.

"What if ..." His flow of thought was abruptly severed.

Virta had arrived later than expected; it seemed the day had been more eventful than she had anticipated. Although the heavy oak door to their home was unlocked, she made no effort to enter quietly. The old wood swung shut with a distinctive, heavy thud that echoed through the house.

"Hi there! I'm back! Late and sorry ..." Virta called out, her voice was intentionally loud as if she expected her husband might already be asleep.

Mikko had been waiting for her, but having dug so deep into the technical wreckage of the logs, the passage of time had slipped away from him. He stood up slowly from his massive chair, leaving

his unfinished thoughts scattered across the digital workspace on his table. They finally met near the kitchen – a month of distance and silence finally closing between them.

"Hmm... hello there, stranger," he replied with a slight, ironic smile.

"It was only one Earth month this time," he continued, holding her gaze. *"How are you feeling?"*

"Oh, I was expecting all the homesick souls to be asleep by now," she replied, returning a friendly, tired smile.

They hugged tightly for a moment, standing in the silence of the house before sharing a long, familiar kiss.

"Should we eat first?" Mikko asked, stepping back.

"And drink," she confirmed. *"I hope there's plenty of frozen stock in the pantry, and that your crazy friend has equipped you with his usual collection of ales."*

They moved further into the deep of kitchen to prepare the meal. In this age, it was a simple task; the modern microwave units and high-speed cookware could have a full meal ready in under twenty minutes.

"Not this time," Mikko replied, programming the interface on the microwave. *"Adrian is quite busy with that latest incident. I think the thing has fully consumed his hungry mind."*

Virta checked the fridge for a drink, bypassing the soft drinks for a bottle of wine. She turned back toward Mikko, the bottle in her hand.

"I just hope his mind didn't consume yours as well," she whispered into his ear.

Adrian couldn't find sleep until the early hours of the morning. His head was operating like a giant supercomputer, compulsively processing facts, events, and images pulled from different times and corners of space. All these scattered memories were struggling to settle into a logical structure, seeking an order that remained just out of reach. He had worked his way through the last of his ales, but the intoxicating feeling of something vast, mysterious, and unknown was far more potent than the finest ale.

Eventually, the sheer weight of fatigue and the ale did their job, forcing his overheated brain into a restless slumber. He slept through the entire morning. Yet, the long rest did nothing to quiet the stream of calculations running in the back of his mind; the sleep had been a mere pause, not a stop.

When he finally woke, all his mental processes resumed exactly where they had left off, as if he were simply in a stand-by mode. A dull headache began to throb behind his eyes – a minor, but annoying issue – but it wasn't enough to halt his momentum. The curiosity was already pulling him back in.

Adrian was well known for his particular talent – or as many others called it, simple and very his own 'magic'. It was the ability to weave disparate events and scattered facts into a coherent structure built entirely on logic. This talent was useful in many domains, but it was indispensable in investigations. Whenever something broke, Adrian could restore the chain of events, link the facts, identify the root cause, and provide the full story as if he had been standing there to witness it.

However, this time, something felt fundamentally wrong. The pieces refused to fit together. There was no clear plane of events, no clean alignment of causes, places, or timings. For the first time in his career, the logic was failing him, leaving him staring at a ghost that refused to take a solid shape.

The victim was a person of immense importance, well known to the Board for years. Even if the Board itself were the assassin in this case, the logic simply didn't hold up; there were too many unknown consequences. A fifteen percent stake is a massive share of power – too large to destabilize on a whim. Yet, the Board remained silent, and more than that, they seemed to have viewed the event as predictable.

Without understanding the internal work-flow of the Cluster's Board, one might stick to the simple theory of a corporate hit, but every other detail pointed elsewhere. The German agents had been nervous,

hurried, and almost desperate to grab the body. That haste usually suggested direct involvement, but again, it didn't align with the Board's typical, calculated behaviour.

Then, another link forced its way into the chain of events: the 'incident' on the habitat had occurred on the exact same day. It looked like a specific, coordinated attack on the German Cluster – one the Board was already aware of, or perhaps one that someone on the Board was actively fighting. This mysterious entity would have to be incredibly powerful. And finally, the question that refused to be answered: even if this were a corporate war or a sophisticated sabotage ... what was it actually about?

The first thing he did was check his messages. It was a habit that always yielded something – be it boring, exciting, or just... something. One of the new notifications was from John Berg. At first glance, it seemed entirely unrelated to the case.

Adrian's mind quickly pulled up the 'frames' and content of his last conversation with the man. To Adrian, John was a rare find: a man who truly understood the nuances of fine ales and, not less importantly, a man who would listen until the very end of a sentence before starting to argue – or, on some occasions, agree.

His initial instinct was to ignore the message for a while to stay focused on the current case, but being loyal to a friendship, Adrian decided to read the first passage, just in case.

The message began quite simply:

"Hi Adrian, I've been assigned to a case that might be of interest to you. I hope this finds you well. Regards, John."

Despite being deeply immersed in his own thoughts, Adrian decided to perform a quick review of the incoming message's attached data. The case highlighted in the John's message was utterly fresh – less than forty hours old. The more intriguing part, however, was the core of the incident: the erratic, near-predatory behaviour of a space vessel during the cargo unloading process.

The implications hit him with enough force to knock anyone else back. He immediately tagged the message with the highest priority. His consciousness had already forged a thin, flickering link between this space vessel anomaly and the on-going investigation came from the road. Yet, to properly digest all incoming information and events, Adrian knew he needed more than a hunch. He needed the granular details of the car accident – and because of the draconian privacy protocols, the window of time was rapidly closing.

Furthermore, Adrian understood that technical logs alone were insufficient; he needed a complete profile of the deceased, her intended route, and her precise timing. By law, every autonomous vehicle was required to broadcast its trajectory, destination, and several specific identification keys to the insurance database registries. A vast, global network of control and monitoring nodes blanketed the Earth to ensure that autonomous driving remained safe, regulated, and – most importantly – underwritten.

The only barrier was the privacy protocols.

Only a fragment of the data remained accessible to the investigation process. Crucial details – the route's final destination, the victim's full biography, and even the identity of the primary insurance carrier – were strictly shielded. Once these protocols were activated, bypassing them was not merely a violation of law; it was often a technical impossibility, a cryptographic dead end.

Adrian had already extrapolated every potential destination based on the legally available data, but to reach a definitive conclusion, he needed to know the woman's schedule beside the other data. The map and timeline pointed toward several research centres and at least two technology conferences, but under these mounting time constraints, he couldn't afford to investigate them one by one.

To make the violation of privacy protocols technically impossible, the system was designed to wipe all original local storage. However, under the global safety regulations, a narrow grace period existed: the data had to remain on the original hardware for a short window of time before the final purge.

Adrian rapidly calculated the possible outcomes and realized he was trapped in a losing race. He would never reach the physical locations in time to secure the data through legal channels. The only

way to win was to intercept the data directly from the control node's storage before the wipe-cycle completed.

"Damn bloody privacy protocols... I'll have to pull the data illegally," the thought sparked in his mind, *"but I'll have to move freaking fast."*

His fingers flew across the keyboard, navigating the common command-line interface to pull a summary of the accident. He needed two things: the specific address of the sector's control node and the identity of the dispatcher who had been on shift during the impact. He was in luck. The same man was scheduled for the next eight hours. His name was Nick Etalainen.

Adrian locked his array of dull, gray terminals, the screens fading to black like dying embers. He threw on his heavy outdoor gear, calculated journey time one more, and moved toward the exit with practised speed.

"Only three damn hours between me and that information," his mind whispered as he pulled the door shut. *"Let's see what you're hiding."*

Mikko and Virta lay naked in their bed, their breathing finally falling into a flat, rhythmic calm in the aftermath of their intimacy. On the bedside table, two full glasses of wine caught the glow of the room's only lamp – a low, amber light that cast long shadows into the corners and turned the far walls into a dark void. The air was heavy and warm, thick with the primal scent of human skin and the sharp, slightly sour tang of the wine.

The house hummed faintly around them, the nearly silent vibration of the air conditioning system a reminder of the controlled environment that allowed them to ignore the freezing world outside. Despite the absolute stillness and the exhaustion of the day, sleep remained elusive. Both were wide awake, their minds still tethered to the complexities of their separate worlds.

"Who goes first? Who has the most to share?" Virta asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

Mikko shifted into a reclining position and reached for his wine glass. After a long, thoughtful sip, he said, *"I suppose I should start with the incident that has Adrian's mind in a vice. It's a fatality – literally deadly."*

"Those are vanishingly rare these days," Virta noted, her voice dropping an octave.

"Ha! I'd bet your obsessed colleague has already closed the case in his head," she added with a faint smile. *"Or, knowing him, he's already found an answer that the rest of us aren't ready to hear."* Virta concluded.

Mikko took another sip of wine, then handed the second glass to her.

"No, you're wrong this time. The case is a mess. From a technical standpoint, the logs are full of anomalies – I spent hours digging through them without making any real progress. It's a terrifying thing in the machine."

He leaned back, his voice dropping into a calm, steady rhythm.

"The other strange part is the German Cluster's involvement. Their agents appeared at the crash site almost instantly. I'm not ready to accuse them yet, but the timing was ... suspiciously precise. And the victim herself was one of theirs – a woman, looking remarkably young."

"The road was almost empty," Mikko continued, his voice tight with professional disbelief.

"Every damn sensor on that highway is in perfect condition. The surface is decent – no slopes, no sharp turns. There was no reason for a failure. But somehow, the automated pilot just ... collapsed. It smashed that vehicle into a concrete fence pillar at full speed."

He stopped, taking another long sip of wine as if trying to wash away the illogic of the event.

Virta took a sip from her own glass, her head tilting slightly as she processed his words.

"Well, I have something for you," she said, her voice quickening, wrapping around the quiet space of the room like a tether.

"I've been stuck with the Germans almost all the time during last summit. And they're behaving erratically because of yet another incident – another one that was literally deadly, too." she continued.

Mikko was not a man of outward expression; usually, his face remained a mask of professional stoicism regardless of the circumstances. But this time, his composure cracked. His jaw tightened, and a look of genuine shock flickered in his eyes.

"Oh, it wasn't quite as dramatic as your case," Virta said softly, leaning in to give him a light, reassuring kiss.

"It was a heart attack. One of the lead M.D.s working on the advanced life-extension program. He'd likely been feeling unwell for days leading up to it... but the timing is what haunts me now. He only managed to deliver one presentation from his research. The second one – the main one as I understood – he suddenly cancelled the very day before he died." she said, taking a short, deep breath.

Mikko's expression was a rare knot of confusion and intense interest. He tilted his glass to take a sip, only to find it was already empty.

"Damn, it's completely empty. I'd better bring the bottle," he said, moving quickly as he slid out from under the covers.

He walked to the kitchen, his bare feet silent on the temperature-regulated floor. As he searched for the wine, the subtle hum of the house felt louder in the absence of their conversation.

"Let me guess," his voice echoed back from the kitchen, sharp and resonant.

"He was a German Cluster man too, wasn't he?" Mikko asked.

"Actually, that's where you're wrong," Virta called out, projecting her voice to ensure every word reached the kitchen.

"He was French Cluster man – his name was Hugo Moreau. But in a sense, you're still right; he was working on behalf of a German Cluster laboratory under a specialized research contract."

Mikko returned from the kitchen, the dark green bottle in hand. He refilled his own glass and then topped off Virta's, the sound of the liquid pouring being the only noise in the quiet room.

"Hmm. So at least there isn't a mystery there," Mikko said, his shoulders dropping as he tried to relax back into the pillows. *"A standard inter-Cluster talent partnership."*

Virta took a slow sip of the fresh wine, then set her glass back on the bedside table with a soft clack.

"No, Mikko. You're wrong again... and again," she said, a small, knowing giggle escaping her lips.

"Because of that specific contract, the German Cluster agents are officially responsible for investigating the root cause of his death. At least, that's the public line," Virta continued.

She leaned back against the headboard. *"And there's one more thing – they announced a high-level figure from the German directorate who had been personally overseeing his research. It was a strange, almost antique and rare name... Lizzie..."* she said, her voice carrying the quiet weight of a detail she guess was very important.

"Lizzie fucking Wolters!" Mikko shouted, his voice cracking the silence of the room like a gunshot as he cut her off.

Virta jumped slightly, her eyes wide with genuine shock. *"How do you know that name?"*

"Oh my... that's her. That's our victim. The one who smashed into the concrete fence pillar at full speed," Mikko stammered, his calm façade finally shattering. *"Shite, I have to inform Adrian immediately!"*

He barked the words as he scrambled out of bed, the sudden movement nearly knocking his wine glass over. The intimate warmth of the room vanished, replaced by the electric, panicked energy of a man who realized he was standing in the middle of an events chain that spanned from the Earth's highways to the depths of a German Cluster research projects.

Adrian's car surged forward, the advanced diesel motor whining as he pushed the vehicle roughly into manual mode. He needed to clear the city limits faster than the local traffic algorithms would allow. The car skidded through the sharp turns of the old town district, tires chirping against the cold and snowy pavement, while the road-assist stabilizers fought to keep the chassis level.

Once he hit the open highway, he slammed the system back into full automation and set the coordinates for the Lahti's regional control node.

Released from the wheel, Adrian began patting down his pockets, searching for his communicator. He checked the center console, the floor mats, and the glove box. Nothing. It wasn't in his gear, and it wasn't in the car.

"Damn it. Fucking bloody communicator..." he growled into the empty cabin. "I just hope to hell nobody needs me for the next eight hours."

The winter light faded rapidly, the horizon bruising into a deep purple before giving way to total darkness halfway through his journey. At first, the highway was a ghost and almost empty road, but as Adrian approached the regional control node, the traffic thickened into a heavy, glowing river of lights.

Frustrated by the conservative pace of the highway's flow-control, Adrian seized the manual overrides. It wasn't a fully manual mode – global safety regulations had long ago outlawed unassisted driving – but it allowed him to push the boundaries of the vehicle's spatial sensors. The car became a part of a high-speed hive; thousands of proximity sensors fired every millisecond, maintaining micro-distances between the concrete barriers and neighbouring vehicles. The traffic moved like a swarm of insects, shifting and undulating at lethal speeds with perfect, mathematical precision.

Navigating the chaos with aggressive intent, Adrian reached the facility in record time. He had made the trip in exactly three hours.

Control nodes were typically isolated, tucked away a few hundred meters from the highway's main arteries. They often doubled as rest stops, serving as hubs for refuelling, automated car washes, and small groceries. This facility followed that exact blueprint – a sprawling complex of parking zones and refill stations perched directly above the highway.

At the far end of the commercial strip stood the heart of the sector: a windowless, gray concrete monolith. Towering above the control node was a massive CO2 harvesting spire, its fans humming as it scrubbed the atmosphere of the highway's exhaust.

Adrian brought his car to a sharp halt near the building's secure entrance. He was in a feverish hurry. As he approached the door, the facility's proximity sensors swept over him, instantly recognizing the embedded ID chip beneath his skin. With a single, impatient chime from the terminal, the heavy doors cycled open, granting him access.

Nick Etalainen wasn't expecting a soul. The facility was a tomb at this hour, and that was exactly how he liked it. He sat in the cramped kitchen nook, the fluorescent lights humming overhead as he poured himself a massive cup of black coffee and a glass of ice-cold water. His plan was simple: disappear into the break room for an hour or two while the systems ran themselves. After the chaos of the recent fatality, he was certain lightning wouldn't strike twice; the odds of another incident tonight were astronomical. Only the looming mountain of paperwork remained to haunt his routine.

In the main hub, Adrian stepped through the sliding doors to find the operator's console abandoned. It was a stroke of luck – the glowing monitors flickered in the dark, unattended and vulnerable. He moved silently through the dim space, his eyes darting between the rows of blinking hardware. Nick was completely unaware that he had an intruder, let alone one who was about to tear a hole in his quiet night.

"Hey, Nick! Wherever you are, stay calm and keep doing whatever you're doing!" Adrian's voice boomed through the sterile halls, cutting through the silence of the break room.

Nick nearly dropped his coffee. Despite the clear instructions to stay put, his instincts took over; he stumbled back into the main hub, his face a mask of confusion as he prepared to demand an ID. Adrian didn't give him the chance to get suspicious. He was already there, flashing his credentials with a practised, authoritative flick of the wrist to settle the man down.

"How's it going, Nick? Struggling with that final report, huh?" Adrian asked, his voice a blur of forced casualness and intense hurry.

"Umm... yeah. No worries, I'm... I'm going to finish it," Nick stammered, his mind struggling to catch up with the sudden intrusion. "Just... just need to finalize the last few things ..."

"May I ask what a Principal Engineer from the Investigation Department is doing all the way out here?" Nick asked, his voice gaining a sliver of professional courage.

"Nothing that concerns you," Adrian barked back, his patience thinning as the clock ticked down.

"Just stay calm and go back to whatever you were doing. I won't have anything to report regarding your... extended break, if you just let me work." Adrian continued.

The threat was subtle, but effective. Nick held up his hands in a defensive gesture.

"Good, good, my friend. I'm going back. Just... let me know when you're leaving the room, alright?" Nick said.

With that, Nick retreated, eager to put a wall between himself and the Principal Engineer's intense, shadowed energy.

Adrian stood motionless until he heard the faint scrape of a chair in the kitchen, signalling Nick had settled back into his hiding spot. He knew this breach would eventually trigger a flag in the central audit, but in a system this vast, a quiet illegality could take days to surface. If he kept the circle of witnesses small, he bought himself the only currency that mattered now: time.

He slid into the operator's chair. The common interface hummed beneath his fingers as he pulled up the node's local storage logs from the day of the crash. There it was – a massive, bloated block of encrypted telemetry. It sat there like a lead weight in the system's memory, waiting for the final purge.

"I'm lucky today; there is still time to grab the data." sparked quickly in Adrian head.

To crack it, he needed the 'Triple-Lock' handshake. He already had the first two: the Department of Transportation's master investigative key and his own high-level Principal clearance. But the third was the operator's witness key – a physical token or biometric signature currently sitting in the pocket of the lazy man drinking coffee about twenty meters away.

Even if he got the key, he still faced the privacy protocol's limitation, which slowed down external transfers to prevent bulk leaks. He didn't just need the data; he needed to kill the system's conscience.

The privacy protocol was a hard nut to crack; bypassing it through software would require a chain of command approvals he simply didn't have. So, Adrian decided to exploit a physical loophole. While any data leaving the node was flagged and throttled, operations performed within the internal storage array were considered routine maintenance.

He checked the storage volume diagnostics. Physical drive wasn't full with the data, but it was enough to worry about data copying time. He located a spare hot-swap drive in the rack and began a low-level ID tampering. He masked the spare volume ID to perfectly mimic the primary incident storage.

The plan was set, but the order of operations was critical: he had to secure the unencrypted data before performing the physical swap, or the mismatch would trigger a system-wide lock.

"Nick! Sorry to bother you again," Adrian called out, his voice now quieted and stripped of its earlier bite.

He sounded like a tired professional just trying to get through a long night. "It's about the timeline for that last incident. I need your witness key to extract the raw timestamps. Standard procedure for the final report."

Nick was a man of least resistance. He lived by predefined templates and strictly followed the path of the basic procedure. To him, thinking about a request from a superior was more work than just

granting it. If a Principal Engineer told him a key was needed for a timeline, he wouldn't dream of questioning the logic. He just wanted the request – and the intruder – to go away so he could return to his routine.

He stood up, the chair scraping against the floor, and began the short walk back to the console, reaching for the physical key – token clipped to his belt.

The handshake was over in seconds. Nick tapped his physical token against the reader, the terminal chirped a dull green of approval, and the triple key encryption fell away.

"Thanks, Nick. I'll take it from here," Adrian said.

Nick gave a tired nod and retreated toward the kitchen, his mind already back on his coffee. Adrian's eyes were fixed on the terminal. His brain was already projecting the next steps visualising how the data should look on the screen.

As soon as Nick was out of sight, Adrian's fingers flew across the interface. He didn't use the facility's network to connect to the interface; instead, he deployed his mobile terminal – a specialized, multi-functional device he'd brought in his jacket. He bridged the connection directly to the internal storage bus, bypassing the facility's outgoing data-monitoring.

The data stream began to flow. High frequency signals were silently moving across the unconventional, but functional wiring scheme.

Once the copied signal flickered, he moved with practised precision.

He popped the physical latch on the server rack, slid the original incident drive out, and clicked the tampered fake drive into its place.

He performed a quick clean sweep script to wipe his temporary access logs, ensuring the console looked exactly as it had when Nick left it. The original drive, now heavy with the secrets of Lizzie Wolters death, was safely tucked into his pocket.

Dry, freezing weather was typical for a Frankfurt winter. It wasn't a devastating cold, just a few degrees below the water freezing point, but it bit at any exposed skin. The remnants of a rain from days ago had turned into thin layers of ice, glazing the naked bushes and the dark yellow fallen leaves. The morning sun was just beginning to play with the reflections off the glass of the massive office buildings.

Michael found the bitter weather a nice fit for his new ideas; the cold kept his mind sharp. He'd chosen to spend the morning near the Cluster's Earth HQ, leaning against a cold stone wall. He was waiting. It wasn't technically necessary, but he wouldn't be satisfied until his own eyes witnessed the mundane event.

Yesterday, he had issued the order: every shipment and delivery tied to the Hugo Moreau's death investigation had to be approved by him personally. No exceptions. Now, standing in the shadow of the Cluster HQ, he waited for the first notification to buzz against his palm.

He positioned himself between the glass-heavy HQ entrance and the concrete maw of the underground parking gates. Because the lobby sat nearly two meters above the facility level, he had a clear line of sight over both. It was the perfect vantage point – discreet, elevated, and biting cold.

He didn't have to wait long before a vehicle marked with a bio-hazard sign arrived. Almost instantly, his device buzzed with a message: "Michael Berndt — your delivery has arrived. Please review and approve the next steps."

He watched the vehicle for a moment, his gaze lingering on the hazard symbol, before finally turning toward the entrance to head to his warm office.