
Immediately following the incident on one of the space infrastructure's most advanced Phoebe-class habitats, the sterile, cold routine of the investigation began. There was a biting irony in the station's name: Heidelberg. It was named after the ancient terrestrial city famous for preserving its oldest building, yet here, in the vacuum of space, names preserves the history.

First and foremost, a shuttle was deployed for the dirty work – scouring the void to collect every remnant of the shattered structure and the cloud of debris that followed. In the vicinity of a rotating habitat, space debris is more than a nuisance; it is a lethal kinetic threat. Even a small fragment could puncture the hull of the massive rotating drum, leading to repairs that were both complex and staggering in cost. But beyond these practical concerns, an even more critical task was on the table: the search for evidence of what had actually happened.

The boxy shuttle was operated remotely – a choice that was safe, cost-effective, and eminently practical. Unlike its ancient predecessors, which boasted sleek aerodynamic lines, elegant foils, and the distinct, powerful sterns of atmospheric craft, this distant descendant was a brutalist block with rounded corners. Every face of the craft was cluttered with a utilitarian array of thruster ports, cameras, docking sockets, and sensor clusters. Only the underbelly – if such a term even applied in the space without distinct up and down – remained mostly clear, dominated by a massive, reinforced latch that served as the gateway to the shuttle's cavernous cargo and instrument bay.

The shuttle was far more versatile and pragmatic than its distant ancestors. Tucked within its cargo bay was a sophisticated suite of instruments ready for any contingency: precision repairs, electron beam welding, complex rescue operations, or the grim task of debris collection. Depending on the mission, the necessary tools were deployed with surgical efficiency. Minimizing cost, optimizing time, and mitigating risk were the core priorities of these dull-looking vehicles – but for those in peril, the sight of that matte-gray, rounded box was the ultimate beacon of hope. In the aftermath of a space accident, its arrival meant the difference between a tragedy and a survival story.

The shuttle operator possessed a total, spherical view of the vessel's surroundings, stitched together from an array of cameras positioned every few meters across the hull. This visual feed was augmented by a flood of sensor data: infra-red overlays and, when necessary, visualizations of the radio-frequency spectrum were projected directly onto the operator's glasses. In the void of space, where human eyes are easily deceived, this multi-spectral vision allowed the pilot to see the invisible threats – heat signatures from leaking gasses or the silent ghost-radio of distorted electronics.

The operators assigned to these massive space habitats were the elite. Hundreds of simulation hours and an equal number of real-world missions were the baseline requirements for such an assignment; they were the best the infrastructure had to offer. Yet, despite their expertise, the debris collection was troubling. While they moved quickly to secure the remnants of the shattered structure, the material itself seemed to defy them. Much of the mysterious hull had almost vanished, disintegrating into fine dust and leaving only a few small fragments behind. Even the most seasoned operator and a vehicle equipped for every conceivable contingency weren't enough to capture the full thing.

The shuttle worked in silence, moving with almost mathematical precision as it gathered the sparse remnants of the explosion. There was no wasted motion; every thruster burn was calculated. With that same mechanical grace, the vessel navigated back to its berth and docked with the base, ready to hand over its meagre findings. Somewhere in the sterile labs of the Heidelberg, an investigation crew was waiting, eager to see what – if anything – was left of the strange structure that had dared to latch onto the habitat static part.

Humanity's collective psyche was an erratic tide – flawed, aggressive, and relentlessly territorial. It was a recipe for eternal friction. Even within the fine-tuned machinery of their global orbital society, governed by rigid protocols and agreements almost carved in stone, corporate espionage found the shadows it needed to thrive.

The great engineering marvels – the space habitats – were not merely the domain of engineers, traders, and social specialists; they housed a silent, almost invisible, and minuscule population. The spies. Deeply integrated, these folks never slept. They were the static in the radio feed, the microscopic drift in the telemetry – a permanent, predatory presence woven into the very fabric of the infrastructure.

Matthias Klein was one of them. On the surface, his life was a sequence of formal checklists: technical assistance during damage assessments, accident forensics, and gruelling safety reviews. But these responsibilities were merely the host for his true obligation. His real work was a shadow hunt – to identify proprietary processes, new emerging technologies, and weak points, then siphon information about that back to the North American Cluster he was working for.

This time, fortune had favoured the predatory. He had secured a position in the first group of experts assigned to investigate the catastrophe that occurred during Mair's final inspection of the static space habitat's area. To the mega structure, he was an ordinary expert helped to sustain work flow; to the real employer, he was a first class industrial spy in the front row.

The North American Cluster – known more commonly by its formidable moniker: the American Technate – was a sprawling industrial titan, dominating with seventy percent of the total output of the orbital industrial complex. It was a behemoth on the global market, yet its success wasn't born from the spark of original technology inventions. Despite its massive output, the Technate was notoriously starved for true innovations; its singular, driving obsession was the expansion of market share and the cold constant prosperity within its borders.

The Directorate – specifically those from the power-bloc holding the majority of votes – operated under a cynical, ironclad rule: a professional corporate spy is a far better investment than a dozen brilliant scientists. Their methodology was as ruthless as it was effective: identify an emerging technology in a rival's Cluster lab, steal it or buy the leads, reverse-engineer the core components, and pivot immediately to mass production.

While the process was fraught with technical hurdles, the returns were undeniable – a relentless growth in market dominance and profit. The Technate maintained a vast network of high-security research facilities where these hidden operations took place. These sites were so elusive and deeply shrouded in layers of unclear black-budgeting, encryption, and enormous bureaucracy that no rival power had ever successfully traced a stolen technology or idea back to its source.

A few hours before the catastrophe struck the Heidelberg space habitat, a drop of data arrived for Matthias via an encrypted high-tier channel. It was a special message, appearing on his private terminal for only a limited time before its self-scrubbing protocols engaged.

"Be advised: based on intelligence from leaked sources, an incident is imminent, probability of event is sixty seven percent. Secure a position within the first group of current investigation team. Next communication window opens in four standard hours. Wipe all remnants of this transmission immediately. No confirmation required."

The message was brief, stripped of human warmth or signature – a typical by-product of the Technate's operational security.

Matthias had served the Technate for over ninety years – a tenure he wore with a cold, quiet pride. He had even begun to envision his centenary; a hundred-year anniversary of service to the most powerful industrial titan. But this latest transmission was an anomaly. It was cryptic, bordering on the mysterious. Until this day, every directive had been distinct and comprehensive, providing clear objectives, detailed

subject profiles, and the necessary context to ensure success. Most importantly, the protocol had always been rigid: every order required an immediate, encrypted confirmation of receipt.

This message was different. No explanation. No confirmation. It felt just like a command whispered from the shadows of some unknown leaked source. It left Matthias with a hollow sensation that no amount of energy credits or accumulated wealth could soothe.

The message forced Matthias to immediately scrub his itinerary. He reached out to the habitat's technical board, offering a strategic trade: he would make himself available for any emergency duty over the next three standard days in exchange for a shift-swap later in the next eight standard days. It was a mundane request, framed as a tired expert looking to balance his schedule, but it ensured he was exactly where he needed to be.

Despite his preparation, a gnawing uncertainty remained. He had no clues regarding the true origin of information in the message or the nature of the event to come. He chose the only logical path: he would submerge himself in his routine, avoid any suspicious deviations, and wait for the black swan to appear.

Michael returned to the warmth of his office with a rare sense of satisfaction. It was a pivotal moment – the long-awaited clarity of knowing exactly what to do next, what results to expect, and how to orchestrate the reports for the involved parties. The biting Frankfurt am Main winter still lingered in the tips of his fingers, a numb reminder of the freezing morning air, but he didn't wait for his circulation to return.

He unlocked his terminal, his fingers finding the familiar rhythm of the keyboard. He felt a quiet pride in the flow of human evolution; some inventions were so perfect they defied time. Keyboards, much like wheels, were primal, simple artefacts born centuries ago, yet their efficiency had allowed them to survive every era of exploration and progress. Just as the wheel was still required to rotate, the keyboard remained the essential bridge between thought and action. Like the spoon or the blade, these simple things had secured their place in the machinery of civilisation for millennia to come.

The instrument of his gambit today was an old good known thing: the Tyflos cargo agreement. It was a long-standing treaty that permitted the unscanned passage of freight between the Inner and Outer Solar System, a relic of frontier diplomacy. However, the only challenge lay in the ascent.

The era of expensive chemical rockets – laboriously lifting payloads bit by bit was a story of the past, ancient times. In its place stood the network of orbital rings, massive active support structures that served as the primary arteries for escaping Earth's gravity well. Spanning entire continents, these rings were governed by strict inter-Cluster treaties. This was by design; the global community ensured that no single Cluster or any other organization could ever seize a monopoly on the planet's only viable throat. Yet, this shared oversight created an obstacle: before reaching the ring, every cargo was subjected to exhaustive scanning. In the sterile, high-security zones of the ascent-elevators, the Tyflos style of diplomatic immunity simply did not exist.

However, within the crushing weight of global bureaucracy, there is always a gap. Michael Berndt was a master of the procedural loophole, an architect of the fine print. His plan was elegant in its morbidity: mark the cargo as a bio-hazard.

By attaching research papers from a high-security medical lab and documenting the contents as contaminated, frozen corpses, he created a zone of institutional fear. No customs agent at the orbital ring was eager to perform a tactile inspection of a viral tomb, especially when protocol allowed to avoid such a thing. This designation bypassed the standard deep-tissue scans and granted him the high priority he desperately required. The logic was unassailable: in the interest of planetary safety, any

hazardous material or high-risk research was mandated to be processed in the isolation of space located laboratories. Michael wasn't smuggling; he was merely safeguarding the world from a threat he had invented on paper.

Lizzie Wolters research was scattered across a handful of specialized space labs, but one particular facility anchored in the Outer Solar System caught Michael's eye. Its remote location was a tactical gift. It provided the perfect justification to requisition a standard-issue space container for a long-haul delivery under the Tyflos cargo agreement. By routing the bio-hazard to this specific deep-space station, Michael ensured the cargo would drift beyond the reach of inner-system jurisdiction, disappearing into the vast, unregulated silence of the outer reaches.

He completed the necessary digital paperwork within the hour. As the final encrypted message has been sent, and final formal approve took place, he felt the crushing weight of the mountain lift from his shoulders. The office, once a warm sanctuary, now felt stifling. The fresh, freezing air of the city called to him, pulling him back out to the stone wall where he had waited earlier. He was driven by a singular, obsessive need to witness the departure – to see the vehicle leave the facility with the same clinical detachment with which he had watched its arrival.

Hours before the accident with Lizzie Wolter's car Matthias sat anchored in the deep foam of his lounge chair. Despite his projection of veteran composure, his mind was submerged in the enigma of the previous message. He was a creature of the space habitats, long accustomed to the rhythmic pull of simulated gravity, yet today the centrifugal force felt off, leaving him with a faint, persistent dizziness.

Precisely four standard hours later, the silence was broke. The secure terminal chimed, heralding a second message through the same high secured channel. The parameters remained identical: a fleeting time window of access before the data purged itself.

"FYI: Incident confirmed on Finnish Cluster terrestrial territory. Key stakeholder Lizzie Wolters presumed deceased. Event probability has decayed to forty-six percent. Remain vigilant. Maintain communication silence. Next communication window opens in seven standard hours. Wipe all remnants of this transmission immediately. No confirmation required."

"Forty-six percent, still far too high to relax about that." a thought sparked in the cold periphery of his mind.

The message provided a tangible anchor – a thread he could finally grasp and pull. The pieces were shifting into a recognizable pattern: sabotage. Someone was moving to decapitate a specific project.

Needless to say, Matthias immediately initiated a discreet deep dive into the Lizzie Wolters profile. Her influence was significant: a fifteen percent voting block and a lead role in classified research related to the gene therapy. The objective was now more clear. He needed to identify the architects of the sabotage, secure any lingering evidence before the cleaning team arrived, and ensure he was the primary forensic authority on-site when the hammer dropped.

"Forty-six percent... within a seven-hour window," he murmured, the dizziness fading as his veteran instincts took over. His internal state hardened, shifting into the cold, clinical logic of a man who had survived a century of corporate warfare.

"Which means ..." he continued, his mind running the silent math of a professional gambler.

"There is roughly a sixteen percent chance of the event occurring within the next two hours." he calculated.

"I'm only scheduled with the primary investigation group for the next two hours," he noted, a grim realization settling in.

"I can't push for an extension without flagging the technical board. Any deviation now would look like anticipation – and in this business, anticipation looks like guilt." he finalised a flow of thoughts.

Matthias decided to move. His plan was survivalist in its simplicity: embed himself in the safety and investigation office, find a colleague to engage in a discussion about nothing and everything, and stretch his presence past the two hour window. It was a gamble to widen his window of opportunity without appearing on a formal schedule.

He boarded a standard rail pod for the transit from his residential structure to the office. The route spanned only a few kilometres, clinging to the inner curve of the Heidelberg's massive rotating drum. It was a journey devoid of scenic wonder; the monorail tunnels were buried just beneath the habitat's inner upper surface, with utilitarian access nodes positioned at every major structure.

The cabin was a clean, sterile, six seater box – as unimpressive as it was efficient. In a space habitat governed by automated logistics, the journey was a lonely one. There were a little chance of unscheduled stops, and quite rare encounters with extra passengers, just the faint, rhythmic hum of the rail and the slight, nauseating tug of the habitat's centrifugal force as the pod accelerated through the dark, subterranean veins of the station.

This time, the cabin wasn't entirely empty. A single passenger occupied the corner seat – a woman who appeared to have halted her ageing in her mid-thirties. She was striking, with light yellow hair, pale skin, and sharp, slate-gray eyes. Her silhouette was elegant and proportional, possessing a soft, curved grace that stood out against the sterile, boxy geometry of the transport pod. Matthias found himself staring a moment too long.

"Something on your mind?" she asked, her voice cutting through the hum of the rail pod.

"Oh – no, nothing. Forgive me," Matthias replied, recovering his mask.

"I thought I recognized you. Are you from the bio tech division?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied calmly, her gaze steady.

"You've likely mistaken me for someone else. I only arrived twenty hours ago, and I have absolutely nothing to do with bio tech development at all."

"My apologies. Welcome to the Heidelberg," Matthias said.

He felt a slight internal thaw; she was a newcomer. If she was fresh to the station, she was unlikely to be a monitor or someone who would remember his face later.

"Where are you visiting from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It's no secret. I'm in from the Munster habitat."

"Munster? Not a long journey, but a taxing one nonetheless," Matthias noted.

"True, but my speciality is cooling system engineering," she said with a quick, practised smile.

"I decided I wanted to spend a few days on a habitat that was actually finished for once."

"A well-deserved break, then," Matthias replied, checking his internal clock.

He didn't push further. The math was still running in the back of his mind, and the sixteen percent probability was more interesting than small talk.

"Enjoy your stay. I have to exit here – duty calls." he finalised the dialogue.

The office was half-deserted when he entered; the air was thick with the stagnant quiet of a shift where nothing ever happens. Matthias knew he had to act quickly. His primary goal was to find the shift lead, engage him in a trivial conversation.

He spotted the lead hunched over a terminal.

"Hey. How's the spinning drummy treating you? Anything new on the boards?" Matthias asked, leaning against a console with practised ease.

"Oh, thanks for checking in, but it's dead silence," the shift lead replied, rubbing his eyes.

"Everything is running within specs. It's a ghost shift boring to the death."

Matthias's internal clock ticked. He realized this man would be clocking out in two hours, ending his own group's window of access. He needed a technical anchor to keep him in the room. This lead

was a good man for a drink at a local pub, but right now, he was a bureaucrat standing in the way of an mysterious event with forty six percent probability.

Matthias looked the diagnostic monitors, his eyes was searching for something unusual in the routine. There, on a procedure display, a red flag blinked: a communication array ADS483, was nearing the end of its visual inspection cycle. The certification would expire in five hours.

"It's boring. Deathly boring, know the feeling," Matthias said, injecting a note of restless energy into his voice.

"Let's make it interesting. I see the visual inspection on ADS483 is about to expire. Tell you what – let's play. If during the inspection something will be found, I'll cover your drinks at the pub after the shift. If it's clean, you owe me a round of the good amber. Do we have a deal?"

The lead's eyebrows shot up.

"A wager? Why not. It was scheduled for the next shift, but protocols allow us to trigger the inspection up to eight hours early."

"The game is on, then," Matthias said with a sharp smile.

"I'm going to grab a drink. You want anything while I'm up?"

"No, I'm good. Take your time. I will call Mair to do the visual inspection of this communication array, no worries," the lead replied, already pulling up the local comm interface.

Before making the call, he decided to check the visuals for communication array ADS483. The feed wasn't as clear as usual. Debris, perhaps a broken reflector, lay near the antennae. It looked like a structure, but the low resolution, the camera angle, and the harsh lighting refused to explain exactly what it was. The most obvious conclusion formed in the lead's mind: just some broken debris.

"Mair, please proceed to a visual inspection of ADS483 immediately. There's some kind of debris out there," the shift lead ordered calmly.

Matthias didn't seem interested in the finding; he turned away, his heart rate steady. He had just bought himself an extra twenty minutes in a worst-case scenario, and in the best case, more than an hour of justified presence in the office. If the coin flipped his way, his success became guaranteed.

Within an hour, the forecasted event began to unfold. The shift lead's eyes went wide as the quiet flow of his final hour was suddenly interrupted; it had finally become something. He was wearing small headphones equipped with a hidden microphone, and what he heard was completely unexpected:

"I need assistance here – an investigation crew, and... undock a shuttle to place near the communications module,"

"Sending an emergency crew immediately. ETA is fifteen standard minutes," the lead replied to the request.

He tapped his terminal quickly to muster the emergency team, then moved to the shuttle call.

"Shuttle undocked. The operator is on their way to the control room," he continued.

Then he looked up, a grin spreading across his face.

"Hey Matthias! Prepare your credits – I win the game!" he shouted with a touch of satisfaction.

Matthias hadn't expected the game to end at such a fast pace. He walked over to the lead's station immediately.

"Oh? And what did the winner find?" Matthias asked with a friendly, joking tone.

"Long story short – I spotted some garbage on the site, and Mair just confirmed it by requesting an investigation team. They're on the way," the lead answered, clearly intrigued by his own luck.

Now, both of them were focused on several video streams: one from Mair's suit camera, a second from the array's observation point, and a third – a real-time feed from the approaching shuttle. At first, they saw something that looked like junk – formless, just a mess of random light reflections.

But as Mair drew closer to the object, all their attention shifted to his suit camera. Now it was clear: it was a structure. It had a low-signature design, where a highly reflective surface was mixed with a perfectly black, light-siphoning material. Mair wasn't concerned with the show he was broadcasting;

the next thing he noticed was exactly what the viewers saw – a standard data cable connected directly to the structure.

"I... haven't seen any debris quite like that..." Matthias whispered, sounding genuinely nervous.

"That's a double prize... I guess..." the shift lead replied, his voice thick with shock.

"Moving to the maintenance panel to inspect the connection point," Mair said.

His breathing was heavy, but he continued to narrate his actions as he moved toward the panel.

"Emergency crew ETA is two standard minutes, shuttle ETA is four minutes," the shift lead added, trying his best to keep Mair calm.

"Opening the maintenance panel for ADS483 now..." Mair continued, his breath hitching in the suit's microphone.

Then, suddenly, the video stream cut out. The viewers weren't able to see exactly which socket the cable led to before the screen went dark. Just a few seconds later, the feed resumed, but it was a chaotic mess – Mair was spinning helplessly in the vacuum of space.

Both spectators in the safety office quickly switched to the shuttle's video stream. The pace of events was incredibly fast, but there was just enough time for Matthias to recognize his next move: Mair was safe, but more importantly, the shuttle had collected several pieces of the unearthly structure. One of those fragments was exactly what he intended to deliver to the Technat.

While Matthias was settling in the safety and investigation office, the attractive woman he had seen during his short trip in the rail pod was making her way toward the central communication structure. It was an array of different buildings linked together like a sophisticated forest of antennae and dishes – a fascinating design that spoke clearly to the architecture's singular purpose.

She was in a hurry, desperate to get into the office as quickly as possible. She fumbled for her key card, searching every pocket before finally finding it. But there was a cost; in her haste, she lost the visual badge she had used at the conferences – a simple piece of semi-transparent polymer that displayed her name and position: **"Anni Wyde, Lead Cooling System Engineer."**

She slipped quickly into one of the communication rooms, opened her personal terminal, and typed:

"I have identified the Technat spy. Monitoring communication activity now. Expect a report within two standard hours, or sooner if anything happen."

The shift lead and Matthias were both deeply shocked by the event, but their years of training and expertise left no room for hesitation. There was no time for reflection; the situation demanded immediate action.

"I'm heading over to the investigation facility to wait for the evidence. Everything needs to be listed and accounted for," Matthias said, his voice lowering.

"And I truly hope Mair didn't sustain any serious injuries."

He paused, then added, *"Is there anything else you need me to do here?"*

"Ah, nope, you're exactly right. But my best guess is that Mair is out for a while; after an event like that, he's going to need some time. Also, one more thing – our shift has to complete the initial report, and yes, that list you mentioned. Sorry, but you'll be getting off-shift later than expected. And... yes, please come back here afterwards. The amber liquid is definitely required today, hope you are in," the lead replied.

"Agreed," Matthias answered. *"We'll take a few to Mair's health later."*

It was exactly what the Technat spy needed. He was going to steal one piece of the strange exploded structure, and this fragment would never make it into the official report – after all, he was the one writing it. He glanced out the window; everything looked calm, but he knew the remnants of the structure were already being transported somewhere within the habitat. All he needed now was patience.

The walk to the investigation section wasn't long. As he moved, he sent a message via a secured channel:

"Position in the primary investigation group secured. Object will be in my possession soon."

"Object... it's not just an object," he thought, the realization sparking.

"It's a piece of a structure. The material... it's strange. I'd guess it's a composite of some kind."

Upon arriving at the investigation section, his first task was to allocate an evidence room for the accident; the second was to wait for the delivery. He easily secured a room, opened it, and sat down to wait. But his solitude was quickly interrupted by a message:

"Agents assigned to the case. Collect the sample as soon as possible. Do not get involved in the investigation. Stay low. Report upon receipt."

Michael sat in his office, his mind churning through the next phase of his calculations. He felt a cold sense of pride in how the pieces had settled. The recent directorate meeting had been a success, largely thanks to a last-minute realization: the secrecy surrounding the cargo Lizzie Wolters had rerouted had created a contractual quagmire. It was the perfect smokescreen.

However, the fifteen percent of the votes Lizzie controlled remained a problem. He hadn't had time to prepare for that variable, leaving him with only one weapon: a lie. It was a gamble – promising action on a matter that wasn't due for days or even hours – but the probability of success was high enough to justify the risk.

He knew the legal loophole: according to corporate policy, as long as a death investigation is ongoing and the passing has not been officially certified, the missing party's votes are held by their designated proxies. Michael had pulled the dossiers on Lizzie's assigned representatives. He only cared about two: her father, Sojohan Wolters, and her spouse, Alden Leroux.

Alden was a problem. A technarch managing a heavy machinery and mining nexus in the Mars sector – right on the edge of the Inner Solar System – he was too far away to control and too seasoned to be intimidated. Furthermore, Michael's intel suggested their marriage had been crumbling; Alden wouldn't be susceptible to sentimental manipulation.

Sojohan, however, was a different story. Still drowning in a decades-old grief over his wife's death, the man was defeated and inert. He was an easy target. The puzzle was almost complete.

The most dangerous variable remained Lizzie herself. It was a high-stakes play, but Michael had managed to keep her alive on paper – at least for now. He had promised the board a resolution, but for the moment, the ambiguity served him. As for the incident at the habitat itself; Michael had already delegated that mess to his personal agents and his most trusted technarch of the Heidelberg space habitat.

By early morning, Michael had executed the first phase of his plan. He had secured the cargo and finalized the manifest: safely frozen bodies of Lizzie Wolters and Hugo Moreau were now officially categorized as bio-hazard cargo.

On paper, everything was perfectly aligned. He had mapped the logistics with surgical precision – from the orbital ring's ascent schedule to the automated space tug's docking window and the final orbital crawler transfer. It was a masterpiece of coordination. However, one volatile variable remained

on the table: orbital customs. If there was even a minor delay – a random inspection or a suspicious clerk – his ideally constructed schedule would shatter.

A few hours before, Michael had summoned one of his most trusted personal agents to his office. Now, he sat in the silence of the room, waiting for two events to come. The first was the confirmation that his 'bio-hazard' cargo had been successfully loaded into a space cargo container. It was a container from Outer Solar System, so it was protected by Tyflos agreement. The second was the arrival of Ake Torenbergh. The cargo was moving, the lie was holding, and now, he needed his hands on the ground to ensure everything followed as designated.

Michael felt a rare, sharp need for counsel. He was prepared to discuss the situation with someone as expert and cold-minded as himself, and Ake was that man.

Torenbergh arrived silently; he was never one for politeness or the formalities of etiquette. Yet, he possessed a rare ability to work with precision – silent, accurate, and direct. Ake was no simple machine. He always questioned his orders, but his only interests were the logic and the calculations behind them. He was bitterly cold in his profession, a man who worked for money but lived for the idea. He was Michael's first personal agent, having served him for sixty standard years. Above all, he was quite loyal.

"Hey! How is your dirty business going?" Ake asked, walking toward the table.

"Is it cold enough to use as space heat dissipation yet?"

"The cover is holding," Michael replied.

"The shit is already frozen and ready to be dusted by a soft touch. Did you secure all the evidence left from the explosion on Heidelberg?"

"Heh, yep. My best folks secured all your frozen shit over there. No spies, no curious noses can sneak in," the agent replied.

"Nice to hear. Well, take the bottle of whiskey from the drawer on your right, and bring two glasses... no, make it three glasses," Michael continued.

"Three? Are we waiting for somebody else?" Ake asked, surprised.

"No, no. The third one is for Lizzie."

"She's dead. Why waste good whiskey on a dead person?"

"Bring it. I'll explain," Michael replied, as calm as ever.

"She's dead, but probably only temporarily."

Ake did as he was asked, but his eyes were wide, fixed on Michael in a rare display of shock. "Dead temporary" was a phrase for medical bays and emergency revivals – minutes, maybe an hour at most. But this? They were talking about days. Not just hours, but many days. In all his sixty years of service, Ake had never seen the math of life and death stretched so thin. The logic he prided himself on was failing.

"Guess you still remember why I requested that special emergency unit back in the Finnish Cluster territory, that vehicle is capable of freezing a body fast enough to prevent any tissue damage – especially the brain. Yes, if it works, Lizzie will need a long list of procedures to restore that precious, beautiful body she cared so much about. But... it is doable," he continued.

"Ahh, that day when she smashed her car on the way to Lahti... Hmm will work. What will work?" Ake asked, his voice filled with amazement.

"We're not capable of resurrecting her brain yet, but somebody in the Outer System is," Michael said calmly.

"Lizzie probably worked with those folks. She has an operational research outpost in the Outer System – it's part of the German Cluster, so..." Michael's voice trailed off. He shifted his attention to the table, the bottle of whiskey, and the three empty glasses.

"Ake! Has cosmic ray damaged your brain tissue? Please pour whiskey, let's drink first." Michael ordered, his tone was friendly.

Torenbergh became mute for a while. He poured the whiskey into the glasses, took a long sip, and replenished his emptied glass. Michael did the same; the whiskey was a good catalyst for storytelling.

"That's why you were in a hurry to order a space container from the Outer System. That's why those frozen bodies are on their way to this research outpost. That's why Sojohan will manage her votes for a while. She's dead, but she isn't dead. I'm not sure about her friend Hugo, but let's hope to fix him too," Michael continued, avoiding any questions from his trusted agent.

"Sojohan...?" Ake finally found his voice again.

"Yes, exactly. Sojohan Wolters, her father. Your task is to make him cooperative and ensure he follows our agenda. Please, do it gently. You'll need to discuss the matters with him directly, so prepare yourself for a journey – it's a space habitat. I was kind enough to send you his profile; you'll find everything you need in there," Michael answered quickly.

"Sure. So tell me then – who murdered Hugo? Who murdered Lizzie? And in both cases, I cannot understand how. Or why?" Ake continued to push.

"That's the end of my shiny story. I don't know. I can only guess. And as for the how? I have no idea what Cluster, Circle, or other organization is capable of such methods. As for your why... that's simple." Michael poured more whiskey into his glass.

"Lizzie and Hugo were the leading heads in the latest gene therapy research..." He took another sip.

"Somebody doesn't like the advancements in their research. Lizzie was on her way to that summit in Lahti. She and her friend Hugo were going to present a breakthrough, and the proof was Lizzie herself! That's why. But I have no idea who. I have spies in every advanced Cluster, and there are no signs of such capabilities..." He sipped the whiskey again.

"Mystery in the dark... But how did you know something would happen to Lizzie?" Torenbergh asked, sipping his whiskey again and refilling his glass afterwards.

"I was spying on her, and one fact triggered my suspicion: Hugo died the day before her journey, but she didn't react to it. I thought perhaps she knew, that she was involved in his death. However, it didn't fit the logic. I decided to call her..." Michael replenished his own glass.

"Huh, you know what? I wasn't able to reach her. You were in a different place with a different assignment, but one of your people did the communication checks on her. Her communications, news feeds, calls – everything was faked. But it was too late. As you remember, I aborted your task and summoned you and your best men to the Finnish Cluster." Michael paused.

"Yes, we were late, unfortunately," Torenbergh replied.

"It wasn't your fault. But at the end, at this very moment, we are managing the situation. We are fixing things. I hope we will fix Lizzie soon..." Michael was interrupted by the chime of an incoming message.

He made a 'wait' gesture with his hand and checked the notification:

"LOGISTICS UPDATE: Delivery content BWH083234H is loaded to space container JUOO14523FFH."

"Lizzie is in space now, on her way to the research outpost. Let's drink," Michael said, satisfied.

A car, weary from the long highway distances, ghosted into the sleeping streets of Lahdenpohja. The town had already retreated into its nightly silence, leaving the streets desolate. The deep blue of the car's body caught the rhythmic pulse of the street lights, reflecting them in distorted smears across its damp surface as it glided through the roads.

Behind the wheel, Adrian felt the weight of the journey in his bones. Only a stubborn, burning curiosity kept the fatigue from pulling him under. A faint sign of satisfaction touched his face – the kind of look that remained invisible to anyone who hadn't known him for a decades.

The silhouettes of the old town buildings faded into the rear view mirror. Adrian headed toward his secluded house on the far side of the city, away from the highway's reach. This was a low-density district nestled against the lake shore, where the city's pulse finally flattened.

Street lights grew sparse, replaced by the white glow of the snow-packed road. Here, the winter forest stood sentinel, every branch heavy under a thick, crystalline shroud. The silence and the clear, biting air were meant for deep concentration, or for the quiet reset of the mind. Adrian felt a momentary pull to stop the car and walk into that stillness, but the weight of the forgotten communication device pressed on him.

He had been out of reach for hours. He needed to call Mikko, not just to share the intel, but because the stolen data was a labyrinth he couldn't navigate alone. The snow had stopped falling hours ago, and the temperature was dropping fast; the sky was a cold, obsidian mirror calling for observation, but the clock was against him. He needed answers before the events of the last few days could hide the consequences in a vast world of technocratic procedures.

Adrian pulled over at the roadside. The short approach to the covered parking bay was buried under a drift so massive the car wouldn't have stood a chance. The snow sat there, heavy and undisturbed – a silent reminder of hours he'd been away.

"Where is this automated idiot?" he barked at the empty air.

The exterior lights of the garage flickered to life, casting a harsh, warm yellow glow over the parking entry. Beneath the roof, the automatic snow cleaner sat in a state of a dead sleep. The only way to wake the thing from his position was through a sub-menu on the communication device he'd left behind before his long journey.

Gritting his teeth, Adrian decided to push through the drifts. He reached into the car and retrieved the data media stolen from the Control node, tucking it deep into his inner jacket pocket. He needed to be absolutely certain the media storage hadn't been corrupted or physically compromised by the sudden thermal shift during his trek through the snow.

His home was empty, the silence absolute for only a few moments before the noisy ventilation fan began its dirty job. It kicked in with a groan, churning the air to establish an optimal flow while grating against its master's ears. Everything was exactly as he had left it.

"Ahh, my noisy friend greets me again, should I order a new one? Something quieter? But who truly loves a mute fans?" Adrian whispered, scanning the fridge for an ale.

He emptied the bottle into a glass and moved through the rooms in search of his communication device. It took a few minutes to turn it up. The notification area was a cluttered mess, but the stand outs were the missed calls from Mikko and a single, urgent message:

"Hope you are doing well... sleeping... whatever. I found the place and the event Lizzie was heading to. That place couldn't avoid death either. Hugo Moreau... well, you are definitely joking, not answering these calls... reach me ASAP!"

"Oh, my friend, you wouldn't believe what I've brought. I'm still a step ahead of you." , sparked in Adrian's head.

He typed a short, jagged reply:

"I've been doing some bloody dirty work. The information I have is amazing. Expecting you at my place... ASAP as well."

He sank into one of the heavy chairs, took a long, deep sip of the ale, and set the glass on a side table. Within a minute, the exhaustion won. He found himself sliding into sleep.