
Ake sat in the rhythmic hum of the ascent car climbing toward the edge of Earth's orbital ring, attempting to weave the disparate threads of Michael's plan into a cohesive web. He had plenty of time to focus; the journey to the electromagnetic slings perched at the ring's apex was a tedious eight standard hours transit.

The orbital rings were yet another marvels of engineering – gargantuan mega structures designed to efficiently defeat the planet's gravity well through sheer scale – but for Torenbergh, the novelty had long since eroded. As a frequent traveller between Earth, the space habitats, and the frozen silence of cargo stations, the spectacular views from the cabin were merely background noise. The endless blur of passing freight containers and passenger pods hurtling in the opposite direction, and even the staggering curvature of the Earth itself, were too routine to attract his attention.

He spent the first hour dissecting the profile of Sojohan Wolters. His objective was surgical: identify a psychological fracture, a specific weakness, and calculate the precise leverage required to align the grieving man to Michael's agenda. It was a high-stakes play; for the next several weeks, the stability of the entire Michael's corporate scheme operations rested on Sojohan's compliance.

Next, his mind drifted back to the recap of their office discussion. He could still catch the faint, peat-heavy ghosts of the whiskey Michael kept in his desk. The state of Lizzie Wolters – a top-tier figure in the German Cluster – was neither life nor death. **"Temporarily dead"**. The phrase was frightening, and the implications stirred a rare, cold friction in his gut.

His logic struggled to process the concept before finally settling on a new classification. He slotted this third state of being directly between life and death. The sheer longevity of this newly introduced state – and the fact that it involved someone of Lizzie's stature – was frightening too. Yet, once his brain aligned with the new flow of existence, the weirdness began irradiate outside. It became a simple logical manipulation: create a new category, define the parameters, adjust the flow, and proceed with the mission.

Ake sat in the darkest, furthest corner of the cabin, fully dived into his thoughts. He wasn't looking for small talk with the other passengers; instead, he sought a rare, solitary peace during the long ascending hours. But this time, his isolation was rudely interrupted. A tall man stepped into the windowless, secluded area, cutting through the shadows.

"Hey! Are you travelling often?" the man asked.

The tall stranger didn't seem interested in Ake's appearance; instead his eyes darted around the cabin, searching for a static, solid object or a surface to anchor his gaze against the motion of the ascent.

"Yup. Often." Ake replied, his voice a flat signal that he had no interest in continuing the discussion.

"See, I am going up for the second time only," the man continued, despite the Ake's coldness.

"It feels... funny in the gut. But the talking, it helps me to cope."

"A newborn, huh?" Ake said, keeping the replies short.

"Almost. But the ten years ago, I decided to move from the Earth and enlist for the gene therapy. That is the requirement, you know..." The tall man sighed and sat nearby, his body moved awkward in the shifting gravity and acceleration.

"The requirement? Man, that is the investment," Ake replied, his tone shifting into the lecture of a seasoned expert.

"The Cluster expects you to work for the many decades to come. The education, the practice, the insurances... nobody wants to waste the credits to educate you just to get one or two decades of the job before you retire. The pace in the space is the different thing. The project developments are long. You must keep up the KPIs, man!"

"See, I am the communication engineer, assigned to the space habitat – the name is Munster... of the habitat," the man continued.

"I was there when the drum's frame was finished. Massive structure, made from about 450,000 big universal frames. Six years ago..."

"Ah, I have heard this habitat is already spinning, but still in the filling phase, right? Huh?" Torenbergh asked.

Despite his cold, logical mind, he felt a flicker of pride for those who built and maintained the mega structures. He knew these people performed a wonderful job to keep all such things alive and bring the new ones to existence. In some degree, he felt the responsibility to keep these people out of the dangers. In some degree, he thought he served them – only a little bit, but he served.

"Yeah, the hull is ready, the static structures are almost in place, the fusion works, and part of the drum is already habitable," the excited man continued, his eyes filled with the pride and the joy for the upcoming work.

"But there is about one decade left to commission it as the fully ready habitat. That is a Phoebe-class... could support the living for five millions."

"Yup. I am going to the another places. You better talk with the group..." Ake gestured toward a section of the cabin occupied by a cluster of travellers.

"Those guys look excited too; probably you will find them the more talkative. I am busy, man," Ake finalized.

"See, definitely will try them. Thanks," the tall man replied.

He left quickly, appearing a little dizzy as he navigated the shifting inertia of the ascent.

Torenbergh switched back to his thoughts. He remembered the few weird things – the variables that did not align. Michael did not know how or who had murdered, or more precisely, who had transitioned Hugo and Lizzie from the alive state to the temporary dead. He also did not know who had triggered the HEI transmitter to explode during the Mair inspection.

Someone – or more frightening, something like another organization or Cluster – knew about the HEI transmitters. Or perhaps the owners from the Outer System had done it? However, the last thing was not fitting to the logic. The hidden installation of the transmitters was beneficial for Michael and for the certain interests of German Cluster; it was even more beneficial for the owners.

One last thing sparked in his mind: the message about the Privacy Protocol violation. Michael's reaction had been strange – way too calm. Michael already had the name of the violator, Adrian Porinen, and the name of the victim, Lizzie Wolters. Everything was on the table to sink the man and shut him down for quite a while. But instead, Michael had ordered to make himself the victim's representatives in the court and sent a request to provide more data to the case.

Mikko's eyes found Adrian's car parked at the roadside on arrival to his secluded house. It was morning; clear blue skies and white snow made view cold, fresh, and calming, but Mikko's mind was in hurry. He went to door, following already made path through snow.

When he approached door itself, it clicked, welcoming guest.

"Come in, Mikko," Adrian's voice echoed in almost empty corridor.

Mikko removed his shoes and continued to working room. Adrian sat at working table; few emptied bottles of ale were spread everywhere. He was awake, his eyes filled with mix of joy and worry.

"I was expecting you to come. Sorry for being off for while, but first things first. Please sit and explain what you found," Adrian said, leaning back in his big chair.

Mikko knew this mood; it always spoke of Adrian's findings, or conclusions made. Something mind bending, or opposite – trivial, but concluding and well calculated.

"I found Lizzie was driving to conference; forum about research partnership or some agreement between our and German clusters. She was planning to present new research in gene therapy. And know what? Her fellow head of research suddenly died day before she intended to arrive. Hugo Moreau is name," slightly shocked Mikko began.

"It is definitive connection between her appearance and her research... and this death," Mikko said.

"I know that fact too. Moreover – I could even share her last movements and probable last contacts too," Adrian replied with bit of smile.

"However, I guess you have other question. Right?" he continued.

"I have a lot of questions, not only one. How do you know about her? Found someone?" surprised Mikko asked.

"Hmm, you make me tell bad news first, but I was planning to keep it for story end. Well, probably it makes sense to begin with bad side of story," Adrian started.

"What news?" Mikko asked, his eyes were wide open.

"You are speaking with criminal person now, Mikko. I have got notify to stand as violator in court. Privacy Protocol violation. Just few hours ago. But do not worry – I was expecting that," Porinen explained.

"So... there is probability I will miss your and Virta's party, lose job assignment, and who knows, probably something else... Needless to say I will continue to investigate; only problem is one person: Michael Berndt. Do you know who I am talking about?" Adrian asked.

"Yes, technarch of corporate operations of German cluster. He is same old as you, very cunning person, heavy lifted in corporate hierarchy. How long is he in this position? Two centuries... or something like that. How this tier is involved?" Mikko continued, being surprised.

"You could not believe, but he represents Lizzie in court," Adrian replied calmly.

"Heh, you stole data about Lizzie, just to get same information as I. That is silly, Adrian."

"Oh nope, that is where I am asking you again: other question?"

"Have a lot, let me choose first one: why German cluster directorate still silent about Lizzie death?" guessed Mikko.

"That is not question I expected, but will reply: she is alive on paper. And yes, that is good question to ask in court. Lizzie is dead, but yet officially is alive. Next one?" slightly satisfied Adrian replied with bit of smile.

"I found one weird fact: why she did not react to death of this Hugo, and why she was heading to forum? Her and Hugo's presentation was cancelled," Mikko replied.

"Indeed, that is point! That is bloody right question! She was intentionally walled off for few days. I mean she did not receive any real information, updates, news. Someone very powerful did that. I found that in logs; there is gap – few days, some faked data. Hah! My dirty job was not waste." Adrian said with signs of satisfaction.

"But now, Mikko, I need your help. You will find telemetry, logs, and more digital evidence... I want you to make a report out of it – an iron proof for my words," Adrian continued.

"And that is not the only task waiting for you. I have another message. At first, I decided to postpone it, to ignore it for a while. It came from a man you do not know yet – John Berg. He is not so high-ranked, but high enough to control and investigate these non-standard cases for his insurance company. His focus is space transportation," Adrian continued, his voice became calm again.

"No, okay, but what about that? We are on Earth now, and our coverage is Northern Europe mostly... at least for the next decade," Mikko objected.

"No, there are two points to argue with you. First, the very core of transportation is the same, and one of the important things is time synchronization, right? Second – did you get this calculated

feeling of some connection between Lizzie's death and the explosion on that German habitat? Two rare, extraordinary events happening on the same day... coincidence, right? It is unclear, but our friend Berg has brought something frightening to our table," Adrian continued, a small, knowing smile playing on his face.

"He brought telemetry, full logs, and sensor data from space... about the space tug. You know, those ones used for delivery from crawlers to the logistics hubs. Unmanned, highly automated ships doing their monotonous job. In most cases, space tugs work autonomously mostly, without any remote interruptions. Only the location or other small data packages come from them, right? So, no fancy electromagnetic traffic in the gigahertz range."

"However, it is core functionality to take remote control – for emergency, or to reassign the destination. In that case, whoever needs to make changes also informs the insurance company, and the space tug itself verifies two sources. That is how to make a proper goodbye for smuggling and piracy, right Mikko?"

"I know that. Why are you explaining the basic things again?" Mikko asked, his patience thinning.

"No, my point is to answer all your questions when my explanation is finished. So, please, do not try to hurry with the answers. I received a report from the insurance company with some weird data from this tug – the very same weird logs you have seen before from Lizzie's car... And you know what? It happened almost the same day as Lizzie's death and the habitat accident."

"The space tug was property of our beloved German Cluster, but the changed destination and the amount of cargo – it was not aligned with the insurance company's data. So, here is the second favour I must ask you: could you analyse this data too? Compare the patterns, whatever you find in there," Adrian said, and fell silent for a while.

"No, this information gives me more questions than answers. And looking at you, the same could be said of you, Adrian. When are you going to be in court? And where?" Mikko disrupted the silence.

"That is another interesting point. I am not surprised with the timing – I have about four days before the event. I guess the Court can clean up the schedule for such a serious violation. But the place is a strict location; I cannot be remote. The victim's representative requests the Inter-Cluster court in Rotterdam. Since it is about a Privacy Protocol violation... I can only guess, but it feels like this Michael is hiding things. A lot of things in this mess do not align. It will be a play – a play with a sharp mind. This is the reason for my worries; I must reveal the evidence at the exactly right moment," Adrian replied.

"Yep, yep... it will not be easy. However, Lizzie is still alive on paper, and according to global policies, she should represent herself in case of a Privacy violation. But they are forcing it now, not postponing until she is officially dead. That is weird," Mikko continued.

"No, you are following the line. That is definitely something. And this is the reason why I need your help with the evidence and the data I have."

"Let's move on with it then. A few days is a tough deadline," Mikko agreed.

Michael Berndt was a man of absolute arithmetic and cold logic. He possessed a rare, cold ability to calculate almost any variable or event to ensure the outcome benefited both his own vision and the Cluster's mandate. For over a century, he had reigned as the Technarch of Special Operations within the German Cluster – a title that served as a sterile shroud for a darker reality.

Under his hand, special operations were the hidden gears, pipes and wires of the machine: the brutal maintenance of Cluster security, industrial counter-espionage, and the protection of Directorate members that often felt more like a mix of imprisonment and child care. He held enormous responsibility and

wielded staggering corporate power, yet Michael lived with the sharp, humbling realization that he was, ultimately, an employee. He was a high-functioning component in a system that spanned the planet, habitats, outposts, but a component nonetheless.

Over the decades, he had mastered the art of balancing his personal agenda with that of the Cluster. He had no taste for the hollow noise of corporate politics, nor for the accumulation of credits and stocks. To Michael, the System was the only thing that mattered, and energy was the only true currency – a resource far more valuable in the long term than the digital representation of manufacturing and trading volume – money. He served the structure because, without it, there was only the cold and the dark of echoes of the past.

However, in recent decades, the friction between his own long-term plans and the Cluster's immediate interests had begun to generate a dangerous heat, warping the surface of his work. This growing misalignment forced him to become a very cunning predator in his own house. He moved with a new level of caution: planning surveillance for the top tiers of the elite, inventing virtual realities on paper to hide the truth, and quietly looking for the right minds to join his shadow agenda.

Michael had learnt Adrian's dossier long ago, almost a decade before the Lizzie's incident had ever predicted in any records. In an age of rapid extension and gene therapy spreading, true relics like them were a vanishing breed; barely a few thousands remained who could claim such a long life. They were living witnesses of a long forgotten revolution.

Like Michael, Adrian was a child of the Old Epoch. He had been born into the long sunset of nation-states, witnessing the era when the last standing governments clawed desperately at the shadows of their fading sovereignty, trying – and failing – to stave off the rise of the new corporate entities. They were both witnesses to the before and the after, and neither had been born as a beneficiary of the transition.

Adrian's origins were rooted in the so-called middle class – a precarious caste that survived on the brittle crutches of job security and paper savings funds. When the Shift stepped in, the transition was seamless for the high-stakeholders; they simply traded one form of supremacy for another. But for men like Adrian and Michael, the Shift was a pivot point. They weren't invited into the new world; they had to infiltrate it. They were forced to adapt, to integrate, and to retool their very identities just to survive the cold machinery of the new order. And pushed to learn things again to thrive in the new society.

Michael possessed a psychological talent for getting under a man's skin, a skill he preferred to practice offline. He favoured the raw intimacy of a face-to-face confrontation; digital interfaces were far too forgiving, offering an opponent the luxury of a delayed response – precious seconds to polish a lie or steady a racing heart.

He wanted no such buffers for Adrian. Michael stripped away the sanctuary of the screen and the physical comfort of a chosen environment. He dictated the terms, ensuring the psychological terrain was as uneven as the logistics.

Rotterdam was the designated inter-Cluster ground, though the inter-Cluster nature was a calculation in itself. For Michael, it was a crisp, standard hour flight by copter. For Adrian, it would be a gruelling five standard hours of the transit. Before the first word was even exchanged, Michael had already ensured Adrian would arrive tired, displaced, and operating on a deficit.

Berndt recognized the Adrian's kin. Men like him were never truly loyal, nor could they be rendered dependent; they were too singular for such pedestrian bonds. Instead, like Michael himself, they were driven by long-horizon agendas and private obsessions – psychological fissures that could be wedged open, manipulated, or, at the very least, harnessed for a time.

The problem lay in the limitations of the data. A profile, no matter how deep, was merely a hosted echo of a man. It lacked the marrow. Michael knew that the most vital variables – the ones that truly governed a man's breaking point – were never found in a digital profile.

The final strategy calibration would have to be done in the flesh. He would have to read the micro-

flickers in Adrian's eyes and the tension in his posture, performing a cold, improvised dissection of his character in the moments between breaths. To succeed, he wouldn't just need to talk to Adrian; he would need to solve him.

Michael stepped into the copter, closed the heavy door with a sealing that severed him from the outside world. He leaned back into the shadows of the cabin and closed his eyes. He wasn't seeking rest; he was convening the court – the internal space where he would weigh every variable and simulate every possible deviation. In the rhythmic noise of the flight, the arithmetic of the coming encounter began to pulse in the dark behind his eyelids.

The building housing the Inter-Cluster Court was located in the very heart of Rotterdam. Because of the rising sea levels, several of the city's districts had been elevated, and what was once the world's busiest sea port had been transformed into a quiet recreation area. Even history was subject to the Cluster's logistics; a few ancient, historical buildings had been moved to these heights piece-by-piece, relocated simply to preserve them from the water below.

Despite a lifespan spanning centuries, this was Adrian's first time in the city. He could sense that something was being prepared for him inside that building, so he bypassed the sights, choosing instead to face the consequences as quickly as possible. His experience was vast; he understood that there was no point in drawing a deep breath before a failure – it simply wouldn't help.

He made his way to the designated room, HGA-012. The space itself was smaller than he had expected. In fact, the entire procedure – the audience, the environment – was nothing like what he had imagined during his long journey.

Outside, there was no snow; only a windy, damp warmth, with the temperature hovering precisely five degrees above the melting point of ice. The clinical simplicity of the process made him uneasy on one hand, yet strangely more relaxed on the other. It didn't feel like a grand trial; it felt like a routine process of the system.

After a lengthy explanation of the case – detailing the violations and the cold list of possible consequences – the judge finally gave the floor to Adrian. This was the crucial moment. It was his chance to scan the room and locate Michael and his company. He needed to establish eye contact, to scrutinize their faces and monitor every flicker of a reaction.

"Honourable Judge, members of the technical committee," Adrian began, his voice steady as he scanned the room.

"I do not contest the fact of the violation. However, I wish to submit supplementary data to the record – evidence that re frames this incident not as a breach of protocol, but as a localised technical issue..."

He didn't get to finish.

"Committee, I insist that we analyse my data first. I applied for this matter days ago," Michael interrupted, his voice cutting through the room with the weight of his office.

The members of the committee, and the judge as well, showed no reaction. They weren't surprised – or at least, they were disciplined enough to hide it. To them, Michael's intervention was simply another gear turning in the mechanism under the shiny bonnet.

"The Committee requires a technical break of two standard hours to process the new data," the judge concluded, his voice final.

"The violator's data will be reviewed later. Dismissed!"

The initial proceedings left Adrian with a hollow, unsettled feeling. He had expected more. In his mind, the violation of a core Protocol should have carried a certain weight – a gravity that matched the centuries of history moved to these Rotterdam heights. Instead, the proceedings felt like a routine system process. Despite the two hours spent submerged in the dry, rhythmic flow of the official procedure, he didn't feel drained. If the goal was to wear him down with the friction of bureaucracy, the system had failed; his mind remained sharp, fuelled by the quiet, stubborn persistence of a man who had seen the world dramatically changed in the past.

He headed into the corridor to find the nearest exit. His plan was simple: smoke and reflect on what had just happened. But his path was blocked by a tall, solidly built man wearing a dark brown coat.

"Finally, we meet, Adrian. As you have surely concluded, I am Michael Berndt," the tall man began.

Adrian wasn't quite surprised by the encounter, yet he hadn't planned to meet Michael in person so soon.

"Oh, hello Michael. Yep, and thank you for the opportunity to visit ancient Grote Kerk or Sint-Laurenskerk ..." replied Adrian with a bit of smile. He was leaning into the dry sarcasm, using the joke to steady himself and hide the flicker of confusion Michael's presence had triggered.

"You are welcome. However, as I have observed, the sightseeing and the good manners are not the primary objectives at the current moment. I wish to engage in the discussion with you regarding the case and the subsequent implications. Considering the nature of the kin to which you belong, I am certain that the satisfaction will be achieved and the hunger of the curiosity will be satiated," Michael continued in his typically calm, measured voice.

"I have reserved the privacy-hardened room for the negotiations. Given the limited hour, I have the hope... well, please, follow me. We do not possess the luxury of the time before the second hearing of the case begins," insisted Michael.

"Sure. No sense breathing deep before the death, you know," Adrian replied.

"Death? The breathing? You are disappointing me, Adrian. It is the opportunity for the second breath instead," Michael reacted, his voice devoid of any amusement as he corrected the logic of the joke.

They proceeded to the negotiation room in the silence. It was the window of a few minutes – a final chance for the both of them to calculate their actions before the next move.

The negotiation room was far from small. The walls were covered by sound insulation panels of varying geometric shapes. Due to the complex mixture of these geometries, the panel compositions had an unearthly appearance; their forms and arrangements had been calculated by algorithms with a singular goal: to provide the most efficient way to trap air vibrations within the space.

In the center of the room sat a massive table. This table was the central piece of the environment; the surrounding chairs were the room's only other inhabitants. The table itself was a composite of materials: aged oak, polished granite at the center, and metallic forms embedded directly into the surface. It was certainly a work of art and high design – striking to look at, yet strictly functional.

Adrian and Michael sat at opposite sides of the massive table. For the first ten seconds, there was only a silence so absolute it felt like physical pressure – the true weight of the privacy-hardened space. Each man scrutinized the other, attempting to guess the logic of the person sitting across from him. Had an observer been present, they would have felt the atmospheric tension, an invisible storm cooking between two giants.

On one side sat Michael: the embodiment of corporate authority, weighted by a century of strategic manoeuvring and the cold instinct for survival. On the other was Adrian: the expert of engineering, anchored by a lifetime of technical expertise and the same stubborn. They were two relics of the same era, each having adapted to the new world in entirely different ways.

They were two powerful units of society; their power was different in nature, yet comparable in scale.

"As I stated previously, we do not possess the luxury of the time. I know you, and I am quite certain you know who I am," Michael began.

"I am fond of the people of our era – the first generation that faced the great changes. In the year of my birth – 42BS – the world was still dominated by the failing governments. Your birth year – 40BS – was not different, especially in that regard. I have the ability to read the people, to understand their motivations, the desires... And you know what – most of them can be bought, and many can be loyal, but... not those born BS. There is so much of the mess in our brains left by the centuries, by the knowledge..." Michael continued in his low, steady voice.

"That might be true. But maybe you should start a book. Should we save the time and talk about the case instead?" Adrian interrupted.

"Yes, we should. You are correct. Let us set the philosophy aside for the later time. What I wish to convey before the formal discussion commences – or perhaps this is the commencement of our discussion – is this: you have to make the decision before we depart from this room. There is the other matter worth the mentioning. You possess the choice regarding the outcome of this case. Either you proceed to the full trial due to the gross violation of the Privacy Protocol, or this case is reclassified as the routine disciplinary matter – a very minor violation," Michael continued.

Adrian had not anticipated such a turn of events. He still held the information – the projectiles he had prepared to launch – but the terrain of the situation had shifted.

"Mmm. And the second option... it comes at a cost, right?" asked Adrian.

"Correct. You are aware of the fundamental fact – the everything possesses the cost. Our civilization exists upon the basis of the constant trading. By selecting the second option, you will need to work with me..." Michael answered.

"I am quite sure you have your own facts for the court, and you are free to file them. It would be an unnecessary waste of time and – as you have undoubtedly calculated – a significant pain in my ass. But please, understand one thing: my offer for the second option is not merely because of that. We are both capable of surviving a trial. But I believe a collaboration – a true cooperation – will be a win-win situation in these circumstances."

Michael continued, monitoring his opponent's reaction, attempting to read his mind. It wasn't working well; Adrian's face remained unchangeable.

"Work with you, huh? Interesting. But your offer should come with something – with more information. Otherwise, as you mentioned right now, we are both able to survive." Adrian replied.

"Well, that is the part of our deal. Let us be brief: Lizzie Wolters is not dead – at least on the paper. Later, she will return to the life. Literally. But now, it is your turn to reveal your information, Adrian. Not because I wish to leave you unarmed, but because I require the starting point to know what I should share next," Michael replied.

Adrian was shocked by that sentence. This single variable changed the entire equation in his head.

"I knew that someone walled her off a few days before the... mmm... death. Literal death. I have the proof right here. I know her last movements and the connection to the other dead man – Hugo Moreau. Sorry if the pronunciation is wrong. All points to you. But... Michael, what do you really know?" Adrian said.

It was Adrian's curiosity asking now, pushing past his caution.

"More than you, but still not the full picture. As you can see, someone is attempting to disrupt the matters intended to be under my control. The explosion on the Heidelberg is a part of that hidden

entity's operations," Michael continued.

"Mmm. I have another question. In my possession, I have a report from an insurance company. It states a wrong cargo declaration. And, a more interesting thing is the activity of the space tug – one of yours. The way the communication was tampered with... it is very the same as during the Lizzie's car incident," continued Adrian.

"It would be simple to think you are behind it – just to get control of Lizzie's voice, or whatever else you are planning. But... there are many illogical things with that. Is someone trying to frame you? What is it you really want, Michael?" concluded Adrian.

"Ahh, the space tug. I did not think you were so deeply involved in that specific matter. There was indeed an attempt to redirect the vessel, but the cargo was of a highly confidential nature – that is the reason there are no official reports concerning the event. And no, it is far more concerning than a simple attempt at the framing... That is what I require from you: the knowledge. I do not wish to proceed with the internal resources of the Cluster. This delicate matter must be managed by someone external. Someone with the technical expertise and the your so-called 'magic' to find connections that my subordinates lack," Michael replied.

"It's time, you have to smoke right?," asked Michael.

"Mmm, would like to," Adrian replied.

"So, the choice. You must reach the decision while we are departing from the room, mmm?" Michael asked again.

"How are you going to convert the case to a minor disciplinary violation?" Adrian insisted on knowing.

"I want to understand the procedure."

"It is a personal assignment from the Lizzie Wolters, issued directly to you. The objective: to retrieve the data which you have – from the official perspective – merely secured on her behalf. Since she remains alive on the papers, the directive is legally valid. It is simple, is it not?" Michael replied, a small, knowing smile touching his lips.

"Oh, yes, give me something else ..." Adrian requested, his voice steady despite the weight of the previous reveal.

"Very well. The HEI transmitter – that is the object which exploded upon the Heidelberg. It is the specific variable which has been hidden from the your equations," Michael replied, watching the realization dawn on the engineer.

Adrian was not a man who liked making rapid decisions, especially when based on a lack of information. He was naturally wary of becoming further entangled in this hidden operation, or of working with a man who was still an unknown variable to him. But this time, the choice was not simple – it was a conflict between what was right and what was deeply, irresistibly interesting.

"Yep, the second option ...", Adrian replied closing the door.