The Last Node

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v1.0.0

Published by konsensus.net

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About this Piece

Satillionaire · Mar 22, 2025

An article published by konsensus.net.

CHAPTER ONE

The Last Node

1.1 I

'I'll do it,' Ada said, stretching out her palm with steely resolve.

'That's not a good idea,' I shot back, but she was already snatching the short cable from my hand and making her way to the ladder.

Her small hands gripped the rungs as her skinny ten-year-old frame ascended. I watched, my throat tightening, but something in me stayed silent.

She climbed higher, struggling with the hatch door until muted gray light spilled in, only to be swallowed again by darkness. I remembered all the times I had disappeared through that hatch, leaving Ada alone. Connecting the battery bank to the solar panels usually took two to three minutes, but each time, she must have been scared that I might never return.

I tapped the pendant on my shirt, and a soft blue light shimmered, forming the hologram of Lenora, my late wife and Ada's mother. She appeared in front of me, life-sized, and ghostly, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. As my mind flashed to Ada



up on the roof, Lenora's expression shifted slightly, a trace of concern in her eyes. She didn't need to say anything. I turned and quickly scaled the ladder.

Opening the hatch door, I peeked out onto the expansive roof. The skeletal remains of what was once a boomtown on the banks of the Mississippi stretched out around me — glassless windows like dead eyes, overgrown flora reclaiming the streets. The silence was eerie, broken only by an unnatural buzz.

I spotted Ada on the scaffolding just as she powered the inverter. The green light flickered, and she glanced at me, offering a brief smile of satisfaction. She climbed down and confidently crossed the ledge to join me.

We descended to our lair — a once-grand executive suite, now dilapidated with windows smeared in black paint, walls cracked, and cherrywood floors littered with debris.

At the center of the conference table, our node was ready, cobbled together from a repurposed server rack, electric bike batteries, and an old solid-state drive. Each piece had its own story. I pressed the power button and we leaned in, eyes locked on the old display. The wires hummed faintly as the seconds stretched. My mind raced through every possible failure point. For a tense moment, nothing happened. Then, the rhythmic glow of the node pulsed to life. The screen showed a scant handful of comrades: other nodes blinking like distant stars in the vast digital night.

Ada leaned into the old repurposed radio microphone and initiated the recording sequence to embed her message into the node's signature. Her voice echoed through the vast suite. 'Block height…

1,704,238. We're cold and hungry, and longing fills our hearts. But just like bitcoin, we endure.'

Relief spread across my chest. My stomach growled, and as Ada and I headed toward the sink, something caught my eye: a flicker on the screen. The nodes were going offline.

Ada and I raced back to the table as the small fluorescent dots blinked out, one by one, until only our own remained. My heart pounded in my ears. The lobby doors suddenly burst open, dust and debris swirling from the updraft of the patrol drone blades. I snatched Ada by her coat and lunged for the elevator shaft, shoving her through the slightly wedged-open doors and onto the top of the elevator parked a floor below. The drones neared, sirens blaring, laser fire scorching the air.

We dropped into the elevator hatch door and fell onto a pile of cushions. Above us, the drones banged and pried the elevator doors to no avail. We rolled off the mattresses and sprinted down the hall to a set of stairs.

Tearing down the stairwell, we heard each step echoing through the hollowed-out building. At the bottom, I yanked open a rusted door that led to the underground parking garage. We moved quickly toward an old service tunnel at the back. We ducked inside, the narrow passageway barely wide enough for us. Cold, damp air pressed against our skin. We crawled through the tunnel, emerging in an overgrown alley. Without a word, we slipped into the woods, leaving the city ruins behind.

1.2 II

The woods I once knew have changed. I remembered how my friends and I raced through them on bicycles, fields stretching out forever. Back then, we were masters of our domain. Now, Ada and I are trespassers. Nature has taken back the land, no longer fearing man.

We emerged from the woods onto a cracked road, our old house coming into view. Its smooth, curved walls, once vibrant, now stood lifeless, the large frameless windows shattered and dark, void of the life they once held. I led Ada to the back, where the door hung off rusted hinges. I pushed it open, the creak echoing through the dead structure. I glanced back at Ada, searching her face for some sign of what she was thinking. But, her expression remained as guarded as ever.

'We need to be quick,' I whispered. Ada nodded and slipped down the hall. I forced open a jammed desk drawer in my old office, rifling through dust-covered cables, a power inverter, a soldering kit. I shoved them into my bag, searching for anything else that might be useful.

I found Ada in the master bedroom wearing one of Lenora's old hats, the wide-brimmed straw sagging on her small frame. I paused in the doorway. 'Your mother loved that hat,' I said quietly. I tapped the pendant on my shirt, and Lenora's hologram shimmered to life, standing across from Ada in the same hat. For an instant, mother and daughter were together again, the past temporarily intertwining with the present.

Then the moment shattered as a low, ominous hum approached from outside. My heart sank. The drones were near.

I pulled Ada into the guest room, shoving the bookcase aside to reveal a hidden door. We slipped inside, and I slid the bookcase back, plunging us into darkness. Lenora's hologram flickered to life, her ghostly form smiling softly at us.

The hum of the drones grew louder. The house around us shook — furniture crashing, beds overturned, doors ripped from their hinges. The noise was relentless, but Ada didn't flinch. She sat still, eyes focused, calm in a way that both reassured and unnerved me.

I watched her, remembering the little girl who used to bury her face in my chest at the slightest sound. A loud boom struck the wall beside us, and I jumped. Ada lowered her head, and for a moment, I thought I saw a tear. I placed my hand on her shoulder, but, she barely reacted. The noise above shifted, moving away from us as the hum of the drones began to dissipate. Ada brushed my arm away, her face a mask of quiet resignation.

'We need to find somewhere else to sleep tonight,' I said. Ada nodded.

1.3 III

The old barn behind Nana's house, built in the '90s, had somehow withstood The Rewind better than any of the newly printed houses in the neighborhood. It was eerie, this old pine and corrugated steel barn outlasted everything around it, mocking the modernity we once slaved to attain.

We moved cautiously through the overgrown grass to the barn. Inside, it was cold and dank, the beams groaning with age. We cleared a space on the floor of the loft and laid down makeshift beds. I expected Ada to settle next to me, but instead, she dragged her palette to the far side of the platform and lay down alone.

I stared at her across the distance, the dim light, casting long shadows between us. Was this the beginning of the difficult teen years everyone warned about? Or was it something deeper? I couldn't shake the feeling that she was slipping away from me. 'Ada,' I whispered. Silence. 'I love you times infinity.'

The next morning, I woke with a start. Pale light filtered through the cracks in the barn's walls. It had been 24 hours since we'd gone offline. The danger was mounting but anyone still monitoring our node wouldn't know where to find us. Or worse, there might be no one left to care. I pushed the thought aside and stood up, unpacking my bag.

Ada stirred and joined me at the makeshift table, her face offering none of the warmth or acknowledgment I had hoped for. We moved silently. I laid out the components: an old power inverter, a half-burned-out circuit board, a tangle of Ethernet cables, a salvaged solid-state drive, and an old gaming system processor.

Our communication was wordless — glances, nods, the occasional brush of hands as we passed tools. Ada worked with steady precision, soldering connections between the processor and the drive. I focused on calibrating the power interface, ensuring it could handle whatever source we managed to find.

Finally, the node was assembled, a fragile patchwork of salvaged technology that, just like us, was held together by sheer will and the hope that keeping this network alive still mattered.

1.4 IV

Ada walked a few paces ahead, her steps purposeful but distant. Dust swirled beneath her feet as we neared what was once her elementary school. The auburn-brick building, now weathered and worn, its walls marred by time, kudzu swallowing its frame. The sign, once canary yellow and welcoming, now hung crooked, its letters barely legible.

It was impossible to know what Ada remembered, or what thoughts crossed her mind as she neared the place where her childhood had been left behind. I could still picture the crossing guard, the clusters of children laughing as they bounced across the crosswalk memories from a world that seems like just a fleeting moment now.

Ada stopped abruptly at the front door, her hand hovering over the rusted handle.

'What is it?' I whispered, watching her closely.

She shook her head, a flicker of something unreadable passing across her face, before turning sharply and walking away, her resolve seemingly shaken.

'Sweetheart, did you see something?' I asked, keeping close behind her.

She paused, her gaze fixed on a shadowy corner of the decaying building. 'We should enter through the gym,' she stated firmly, then veered decisively around the back of the structure.

I reached for my pendant and gave it a subtle tap. Lenora appeared beside me, walking with purpose. I shot her a stern, silent look, and waved my arms as if to say, 'What's with this new psychic trick Ada's pulling?' Lenora placed a hand over her mouth and let out a giggle.

I tapped the pendant again, she flickered and vanished. 'Not helpful,' I muttered under my breath, picking up my pace.

Inside the gym, the bleachers were warped and splintered. We moved cautiously, the air thick with the tang of rot. We found our way up the stairs in the back and headed to the third floor.

The utility room was a graveyard of wires, most stripped bare or corroded beyond use. Ada dug into my bag and pulled out the extension cable, turning to leave.

'Where are you going?' I asked, suspicion lacing my tone.

'To run this up to the roof,' she replied, her voice steady.

'We're not splitting up. Get that thought out of your head,' I ordered, the finality in my voice unmistakable.

Ada turned away, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, defiance etched in every line of her small frame.

I was done with this attitude. 'Go,' I snapped, and she scurried off without another word. I pulled out the node and began reassembling it on a rusted file cabinet, the only stable surface left in the room. My hands moved with practiced precision, but my mind was elsewhere: on Ada, on the danger that seemed to be closing in around us.

I heard a bang and rushed into the hall, adrenaline surging, just as Ada appeared from the roof. She was pulling the extension cord and offered me the female end.

I found the power cable to the node and plugged it in. We held our breaths.

1.5 V

It took a moment, then the node pulsed with a faint glow, and the monitor flickered to life. A few scattered blips appeared on the map: other nodes, other survivors. Ada and I breathed a sigh of relief. I opened my arms, and to my surprise, Ada let me hold her. I could feel the tension in her neck and back begin to soften. Then a harsh, grating beep cut through the air. On the screen, the dots were blinking out, once again leaving only our own.

Ada and I exchanged a panicked glance. In the distance, a low rumble began building. The drones had found us, and this time, there was nowhere left to hide.

My mind flashed to Lenora and the world we once knew. The sacrifices we made for Ada's future. The Rewind had taken everything. But we never surrendered. We had volunteered for this mission, knowing the risks. And we did it all because we had no other choice. We refused to sit by and watch humanity's spark be snuffed out. Sadly now, it was all for nothing.

I turned to Ada, my heart heavy with the knowledge that this might be our end. 'Ada,' I began, my voice cracking, 'I know—'

Boom! The cinderblock wall beside us exploded inward, showering us with debris. This was it. I shoved Ada behind me, protecting her with my body. A figure in all black, a dark-visored helmet, shot through the breach. He lunged for us.

I swung at him, but he ducked, locking his arms around my midriff. I tightened my grip on Ada, sheltering her as I struggled against the intruder. A sharp tug at my waist, and we were yanked back through the hole, up and out.

We ascended rapidly, the wind whipping past us as I fought with everything I had. Then, through the haze, I saw it: the obsidian chopper above, and the bright orange symbol of freedom emblazoned on its underside.

I looked down at Ada, her eyes wide, and caught a glimpse of something in her face I had never seen before. Hope.

Source

Originally published at konsensus.net/article/21f-the-last-node