



MP SPY ACADEMY

Condition Orange: Assess the room. Protect the vulnerable.



THE WATCH

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Terry Oroszi.

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*For the women who stand watch,
who assess the room before they enter it,
who know the difference between a threat and a performance,
and who protect the people who need protecting.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Amy Duvall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

The Briefing

Bex Holloway's office was the kind of place where nothing happened by accident, including the amount of light that came through the windows at any given hour. She had chosen the space partly for the sightlines: ground floor of a converted warehouse in Portland, two exits, nothing tall enough outside to give anyone a vantage point above her desk. The window itself was treated with a non-reflective coating that let her see out while making it harder for someone to see in. Every detail served a purpose. She positioned her desk so she could see the door without having it dominate her attention. The chairs for clients faced the desk but also had clear lines to both exits. Nothing was random. Nothing was casual.

The woman sitting across from her now did not seem to notice any of this, which was professionally done. Ingrid Lund had the kind of face that suggested a long line of people who had figured out how to survive in cold places. Norwegian by birth, mid-thirties maybe, gray eyes that took in information the way efficient machinery took in input. She was dressed well but not carefully, as though the clothes had been selected for their function rather than their appearance. Her hands lay still on her lap while she waited for Bex to finish

reading the briefing package.

"You are being threatened," Bex said, not looking up from the papers.

"Apparently," Ingrid said.

Three threatening communications over six weeks. Printed threats left at her apartment building in Lisbon. A second set left at her foundation office. Generic language, nothing specific enough to suggest real knowledge of her schedule or vulnerabilities. Bex had seen this type before: designed to trigger a response, not to convey intent. The syntax was wrong for real threats. The language was wrong. The escalation pattern was nonexistent.

"The Portuguese police are not taking it seriously," Bex continued. She looked up now, making eye contact the way she had been trained to do. "Which suggests either they have seen a lot of this and it is noise, or someone is leaning on them to not take it seriously. Neither option is reassuring."

Ingrid did not react to that. She just waited, the way people who understood that information cost time always waited.

"Your foundation does work on AI regulation and compliance. The threatening language talks about your foundation's research being a threat to industry, to innovation, blah blah. Except your foundation does not actually have that much visibility outside specialized circles. You would have to know what you are looking at to care." Bex set the papers down and leaned back in her chair. "So either someone who knows what you do is scared of it, or someone hired a threat writer who was given a general brief and a word list and was told to make it sound sufficiently menacing without being specific enough to be actionable."

"Which do you think it is?" Ingrid asked.

"I think you know more about what you are scared of than you have told me. I think you brought me in because someone recommended me, and I think you need to tell me who that was and why they suggested me specifically." Bex kept her tone level. She had no patience for the way clients sometimes worked around the truth, but she understood that people had their reasons. "And I think if you do not tell me that, I am going to have a very hard time doing the job you hired me to do, which is assess the actual threat and advise you on how to

mitigate it."

Ingrid was quiet for a moment. She looked at her hands, which had not moved. Then she nodded slightly, like she had been expecting to have to do this but had been hoping not to.

"A woman named Dr. Patricia Moore recommended you," she said. "She is connected to Mission Possible Spy Academy -- MPSA -- which is directed by Dr. Terry Oroszi. Patricia said you completed the Guardian ribbon, which is their primary protection training, and the Ghost ribbon, for low-visibility operations. She said if I needed someone who could tell the difference between a real threat and a performance, someone who understands both operational security and the way people actually behave under pressure, you were the best option available."

Bex knew Patricia Moore. They had trained together years ago, had worked separately on a dozen different operations. Moore was solid and did not throw recommendations around casually. That meant either Moore thought this job was worth Bex's time, or Moore thought Bex was worth protecting in some way that had led to this recommendation. Those were not the same thing, and Bex would need to consider which one this was.

"Tell me about the foundation's work," Bex said. "The actual work, not the public version. Tell me what your researchers are doing and why someone would be scared of it becoming public."

Ingrid explained for forty minutes. The foundation's research focused on the gap between what AI systems said they were doing and what they were actually doing, the space between marketing and reality, between designed capability and actual behavior. They had found systematic compliance gaps in multiple major systems, particularly around data handling, algorithmic bias in automated decision-making, and the way companies were documenting or failing to document their systems' limitations. The research was solid, which meant it was dangerous. It was also elegant in the way that good research was elegant. It did not make claims it could not support. It showed gaps that companies were actively trying to hide.

"So the threat is real," Bex said. "Just not the one they are announcing."

"I believe so," Ingrid said. "I believe someone wants the research data. I believe the threatening letters are cover for something else. I believe someone is trying to create a specific narrative about why an external consultant has been brought in, and I believe that narrative is false."

"You want me to come to Lisbon."

"Cascais, actually. I have a house there, outside the city proper. I would like you to come for two weeks. Assess the actual threat. Work out what is happening. Tell me if the foundation research is genuinely in danger or if I am being paranoid."

Bex thought about her schedule, about the niece waiting for her at home with probably five pages of notes about things that needed fixing, about the way she had been planning to spend the next month doing quarterly audits on existing clients' security systems. She also thought about Patricia Moore and why that particular person would have made that particular recommendation. Patricia did not do things randomly. Patricia did things for reasons, and those reasons were usually good ones.

"Thirty thousand for two weeks, plus expenses," Bex said. "Hotel, food, local transport. I will need access to your foundation staff, your office, your systems. I will need to talk to Portuguese law enforcement. I will need to document everything."

"I understand," Ingrid said.

"I will also need to do things that might upset people. I will need to ask questions that suggest I am not accepting what I am being told. I will need to look like I am an external security person doing a security assessment, which means I might burn some bridges with your staff."

"I understand that too," Ingrid said. She said it like someone who had already made the calculation about cost and benefit and had decided that the cost was worth the benefit.

"Then yes, I will take the job. When do you want me to start?"

"February 3rd. There is a commercial flight from Portland to Lisbon on February 2nd, arriving the morning of the 3rd. I will arrange a car to meet you at the airport."

Bex nodded and made a note. February in Portugal was cold, which was useful. Cold climates made people careless about things like leaving windows open or taking shortcuts through security procedures. People in warm places sometimes got complacent. People in places where it was consistently unpleasant tended to stay sharp.

After Ingrid left, Bex sat at her desk and looked at the light coming through the treated window. It was the kind of light that Portland got in winter, diffuse and gray, not suggesting violence so much as suggesting that the world was a place where you needed to pay attention to everything because nothing was obvious. She thought about Cascais, which she had been to once years ago on a training rotation. She remembered the specific way the city smelled, the coffee and the salt and the old buildings. She remembered the light there, which was Atlantic light, which was different from Portland light.

She should call Maya before she left. Tell her about the trip, make sure she was squared away with her friend Sarah's family for the two weeks. Maya would roll her eyes about the travel, would make some comment about Bex never staying home, and then would accept it like she always did, because they both understood that this was part of how things worked. Bex stood watch. That was what she had been trained to do at MPSA, first through the Guardian ribbon and then through the Ghost ribbon. Protection work. Low-visibility operations. Understanding threat. Maintaining awareness. She did not do it casually or incompletely.

But first, she needed to call Patricia Moore and ask her exactly what she thought was happening in Portugal, and whether Patricia knew more about this situation than she had said.

The Arrival

The flight from Portland to Lisbon was twelve hours through the night, and Bex spent most of it not sleeping and mentally preparing for the work. She reviewed the briefing package again, made notes on what was missing, thought through the first conversations she would need to have with the foundation staff. She also thought about what Patricia Moore had said when Bex had called her that afternoon.

"I do not know much more than what I told Ingrid," Patricia had said. "I was asked to recommend someone. Someone in the MPSA network made the request, said they knew Ingrid Lund needed a threat assessment expert with Guardian ribbon training -- someone who could do real protection work and assess actual threats. I gave your name because you are the best Guardian operative I know at that work. I did not ask more questions because I trusted that the request came from someone legitimate in the network."

"Do you know who asked?" Bex had asked.

"No. It came through an intermediate contact. That is not unusual in our line of work. But I will look into it if you want me to."

"Do it," Bex had said. "I need to know if there is anything about this that I should understand before I get on a plane to Portugal."

Now, landing at Lisbon in the gray morning light, Bex understood that Patricia's information was incomplete and that the situation might be more complicated than it appeared. But that was how these situations usually started: someone came to you with a problem that seemed like one thing and was actually something else. The work was figuring out what the actual problem was, which was different than figuring out what people said the problem was.

The Atlantic light when they landed was thin and gray, coming off the water in a way that made Bex think of places where the weather was a given rather than a surprise. She had packed light: two weeks of working clothes, comfortable shoes, layers. She did not own much that was not practical. Everything she owned served a purpose. Everything she did served a purpose. That was how you stayed safe, by never introducing randomness into a system where randomness could get you killed.

A driver was waiting with her name on a sign in the airport terminal. Clean car, professional demeanor, the kind of person who knew how to be useful without making a production of it. He did not attempt conversation, which Bex appreciated. She watched the city reveal itself as they drove, deploying the Guardian Threat Framework automatically: noting the infrastructure, the way the streets were arranged, the density of pedestrians at different times, the location of emergency services, the areas that would be dangerous at night and the areas that would be safer. She was assessing threat dimensions as part of her Perimeter Hardening work. By the time they reached Cascais, she had a decent map in her head of how the place moved, how it breathed, how you might navigate through it if you needed to move quickly.

Ingrid's house was on a quieter street, a few blocks back from the waterfront but close enough that you could smell the salt if the wind came from the right direction. It was old, probably from the 1920s or 1930s, with the kind of bones that suggested money and maintenance and people who had understood how to make buildings last. Bex walked the perimeter before she went inside, deploying her Guardian training to establish the initial Perimeter Hardening assessment: noting the windows, the locks, the sight lines from the

street, the positions where threats might materialize. It was Guardian work, the kind of thing that had saved her life more than once.

Ingrid was waiting in the front room when Bex came in. She had changed since their meeting in Portland. She looked more tired, or maybe just more like herself when she was not being careful about how she presented. There was something else in her face now, something that suggested she had understood something in the time between hiring Bex and Bex arriving in Portugal.

"There is an incident report from yesterday," Ingrid said without preamble. "Another threatening communication. Left at the foundation office in Lisbon. Slip of paper, printed text, generic threat language. The local security person found it during morning rounds."

"I will want to see it," Bex said. "And I will want to see the others. Original condition if they are still available, photographs if they are not. Who found this one?"

"Tomás Carvalho. He is the foundation's director, based in Lisbon. He runs the day-to-day operations."

"I will need to meet him."

"That is already arranged. Tomorrow, ten AM, at the office. The office is in Alfama, the old quarter of Lisbon. About twenty minutes from here depending on traffic."

Bex set her bag down. "I will need access to the systems. Administrative access, if possible. I will need to see the foundation's network, who has access to what, how data moves. I will need to understand the physical security at the office. I will need to see your communications, both the threatening ones and your regular business communications."

"I anticipated that," Ingrid said. She handed Bex a folder. "Administrative credentials for the network. A summary of everyone who has access to the research data. A map of the office layout. The originals of the three earlier threats, and a photograph of the new one."

Bex took the folder and flipped through it. This was good. This suggested Ingrid either trusted her or had prepared very carefully for someone she did not trust. Bex had found that those two things often looked similar from the

outside.

"Tell me about Carvalho," Bex said.

"He has been with the foundation for four years. Previously he was with a tech nonprofit in Barcelona. He is capable, detail-oriented, keeps the operations running smoothly."

"But?" Bex asked. It was not a guess. There was always a but.

Ingrid paused. "I do not know him that well. I founded the foundation with my own money, but I do not run the day-to-day. I prefer to focus on the research direction and let someone else handle the administrative complexity. Tomás handles that."

"How often do you talk to him?"

"Weekly, sometimes more if there is something that needs decisions."

"How often do you come to Lisbon?"

"Every four to six weeks. Not enough to know everything that is happening day-to-day."

"That is a vulnerability," Bex said. "It is also probably intentional. Not his intention necessarily, but it is the structure that allows certain things to happen. If you are not present, if you are not checking, then things can happen in the spaces you are not looking at."

They looked at each other for a moment. Ingrid was smart enough not to pretend she did not understand what Bex was implying.

"I want to know if I am being robbed," Ingrid said. "I want to know exactly what is being taken and why. And I want to know if my people are being coerced or if they are willing participants."

"I will find out," Bex said. "But I am going to need you to act normal while I do it. No extra contact with Carvalho beyond what you would normally do. No sudden concern about things you do not normally check on. I need to understand the actual rhythm of this place, the way it moves when it is just being itself and not being carefully observed."

"I can do that," Ingrid said.

Bex spent the rest of the day setting up her workspace in the house, which Ingrid had arranged to be a small study off the front room. Clean desk, chair that was actually comfortable, a lock on the door. She set up her laptop, got on the foundation network using the credentials Ingrid had provided, and started mapping the structure. She spent hours understanding how data moved, where it was stored, what backup systems existed, what patterns of access would be normal and what patterns would be unusual.

It took her two hours to find the first problem.

The research data had multiple backup locations, which was sensible. Redundancy was good. But one of those backup locations was being synced with a secondary account that was not documented in the official access list. The account was subtle about it, did not pull everything at once, used legitimate system admin functions to mask what was happening. It was professional work, the kind of work that someone with serious technical knowledge and operational experience would do. It was the kind of work that would be invisible to someone who was not specifically looking for it.

Someone was quietly copying the research data. Someone with the kind of administrative access that Tomás Carvalho, as foundation director, would absolutely have.

Bex closed her laptop and sat for a moment in the quiet of the study. The light was fading outside, that particular gray Portuguese light turning briefly to gold before it got dark. She thought about the threatening letters, about how they were designed to bring in security, to create a distraction while something else happened. She thought about the people in the MPSA network who had recommended her to Ingrid, about whether they knew this was happening or whether they just knew she was good at finding it. She thought about the question of whether those two things were actually different from each other.

She thought about the fact that someone wanted her here specifically because she was the kind of Guardian operative who would notice these things, and she still did not know if that was because they wanted her to stop it or because they wanted it to proceed without anyone being able to say they were not properly warned.

That would keep. For tonight, she needed to sleep. Tomorrow she would meet Tomás Carvalho and employ her Group Sensor Protocol training to watch his face while she asked him questions about data security that would make him have to either lie very well or tell her something true about what was happening.

Either way, she would know more than she knew right now. That was how this worked. You asked questions. You watched the answers through careful observation. You looked for the places where the narrative broke down, where the performance failed, where the actual person underneath the careful presentation leaked through.

You stood watch. You maintained Condition Yellow awareness. You protected the things that mattered.

That was the work.

The Office

Alfama was the old quarter of Lisbon, where the streets curved in ways that suggested they had been laid down centuries ago by people who were mapping geography rather than designing infrastructure. The buildings leaned toward the center of the streets, creating shadows and passages, the kind of urban environment where you could disappear easily if you knew the routes. The history was visible in every wall, in the patina on the stone, in the way water had shaped the streets over centuries.

Bex's driver knew the way, moving through the narrow roads with the kind of casual competence that came from driving the same route a hundred times. She watched how he navigated, noting the places where he was careful and the places where he moved automatically. Drivers who knew a route well enough to be automatic about it were either very safe or very dangerous, depending on whether they were paying attention or just going through the motions. This one seemed to be paying attention.

The foundation office was in a converted townhouse, five stories, with the research labs on the upper floors and administration on the middle levels. Bex

walked the exterior first, noting the windows, the roofline, the service entrance at the back. The building was secure but not obsessively so. Someone could probably get to a second-floor window if they were willing to be direct about it. The locks were good but not military-grade. It was the kind of security you got when people cared about being safe but did not expect anyone to care enough to try.

Tomás Carvalho met her in the ground-floor reception area. He was Portuguese, early fifties, with the kind of careful grooming that suggested he spent time thinking about how he presented. His handshake was firm but not aggressive, and his smile looked practiced but not insincere. He was the kind of man who had learned to perform professionalism the way other people performed hobbies.

"Bex Holloway, welcome," he said in English that was fluent with the slight precision of a non-native speaker. "Ingrid told me you would be coming to do a security assessment. We are very grateful for your expertise."

"I am going to need to see your systems and ask some questions," Bex said. "Administrative access, if possible. I want to understand how the research data is protected, who has access to it, and what your data management practices look like. I want to understand where the vulnerabilities are."

"Of course," Carvalho said. "Though I should tell you, we have been quite careful about those things. The research is sensitive, so we maintain strict protocols."

"I am sure you do," Bex said. She said it in a way that was completely neutral and probably made Carvalho wonder what she meant by it. Let him wonder. Wondering was good. People who were wondering were people who were less able to maintain their careful performance.

He took her through the office, introduced her to the staff. Petra Voss was there, Ingrid's personal assistant, German, efficient, the kind of woman who probably had a spreadsheet of everyone's preferences and kept a backup copy on a thumb drive in a locked drawer. She smiled when introduced but did not say much. There was a junior researcher named Daria Novak, young, maybe late twenties, who looked nervous in a way that suggested she was not naturally

comfortable with authority or with the kind of scrutiny that Bex represented.

The research labs were clean and organized. Multiple computers, secure servers, the physical security looked reasonable. Bex asked questions about the access controls, the password protocols, the backup procedures. Carvalho answered everything with the kind of helpful precision that could mean he was genuinely professional or could mean he was someone who practiced lying to authority. Both kinds of liars gave you the same kind of smooth answers. The difference was in the details, in the way they responded when you pushed harder.

It was the kind of moment where you had to watch the details. How long did he pause before answering? Did he look like he was retrieving information or making something up? Did he offer more than you asked for, which sometimes meant he was trying to establish his credibility, trying to make you trust him before you had reason to?

He offered more than she asked for. That was interesting. That could mean he was trying to be helpful. It could also mean he was trying to get ahead of her questions, trying to establish a narrative before she could ask for the real information.

"The data is backed up daily to secure servers," he explained. "We use a standard enterprise solution, with redundancy in case of hardware failure. Ingrid has access to all of it, obviously. The research team has access to their own work. The administrative team has access only to what we need to manage the foundation's operations."

"Who administers the systems?" Bex asked.

"I do most of it. We outsource some of the technical management to a firm in Barcelona, but I handle the access controls and permissions."

"That is a lot of responsibility for one person," Bex said. "No redundancy?"

"It is a small foundation. We try to keep overhead low."

There was that pause again, right before he answered. Bex made a note of it, the kind of note that was not written down but stored in her memory, in the catalog of how this man behaved, in the pattern of his responses.

She spent the afternoon going through the technical infrastructure. It was solid work, actually. The systems were well-maintained, the security was appropriate for the sensitivity of the data, and on the surface, nothing looked like it was being mismanaged. But underneath, in the log files, in the pattern of how data was moving, she found it again. The secondary account that was pulling data, not constantly but regularly, enough that if you were not looking for it you might miss it. The kind of slow exfiltration that was designed to be invisible to casual auditing. It was professional work.

She did not mention it to Carvalho. She just took notes, asked questions about disaster recovery procedures, and let him explain how the backups were managed and who could access them. Let him think the conversation was about standard security procedures. Let him think she was just doing routine assessment. The moment when she knew about the theft and the moment when she revealed that knowledge would be a crucial moment. She needed to understand as much as possible before that moment arrived.

Before she left, she asked to see the new threatening letter.

Carvalho brought it out. Slip of paper, printed text, generic language about how the foundation's research was a threat to innovation and that Ingrid should stop her work or accept the consequences. Bex looked at it in the protective sleeve it was in. The language was familiar. The escalation was familiar. This was the kind of threat that someone sent when they wanted to create a narrative, not when they wanted to actually threaten anyone.

"Where exactly was this?" she asked.

"Left on the door of the office, actually. Taped to the exterior. Found it during morning rounds yesterday, about six AM."

"Security camera coverage of the door?"

"We do not have cameras yet. That is something we had discussed adding, but the building owner has been resistant. Privacy concerns, he says. Concerns about what people might do if they knew they were being filmed."

"That is convenient," Bex said.

Carvalho looked at her carefully. "You think the threats are connected to something else."

It was not a question. He was testing her, seeing if she would be honest or if she would stick to the official line about taking the threats seriously and needing more information.

"I think they are cover for something," Bex said. She kept her tone neutral. "I think someone wants to create a certain narrative about why there is external security in this office. The actual threat might be a subsidiary concern."

"You seem comfortable with that," Bex said.

"I am comfortable with people being honest about what they are trying to accomplish," Carvalho said. "I am less comfortable with threats and theft and all the messiness that comes with it. I am less comfortable with the idea that the research I help manage could be compromised, that the work people have done could be stolen."

He said it in a way that sounded almost like confession, like he was giving Bex permission to find what he knew was there, or he was testing her, seeing if she would believe him when he claimed not to know what was happening, building himself some insulation for when things came to light.

Bex had worked with enough people to know that you could not always tell the difference on first meeting. It took time and observation to understand whether someone was genuinely concerned about what was happening or whether they were comfortable with it as long as they had deniability.

"I will need to talk to your team individually," Bex said. "Nothing official, just background conversations about how things work, what they have noticed, their sense of the foundation's security practices. It is standard assessment procedure."

"Of course," Carvalho said. "I will make sure everyone cooperates fully."

The drive back to Cascais took her through the city at dusk, when Lisbon looked like it was built from some older version of light. The stone was golden, the streets were full of people heading home, the smell of coffee and cooking came from restaurants and cafes. It was the kind of place that made you understand why people wanted to live here, why they might do complicated things to protect what they had built.

Bex spent the evening in Ingrid's study, reviewing what she had found and starting to plan her next moves. She needed to understand who was behind the data extraction, whether Carvalho was acting alone or whether there was someone above him, whether the threat letters were coming from the same people or from someone else entirely. She needed to understand how deep this went and what the actual objective was.

She also needed to understand whether Petra Voss was actually just an efficient assistant or whether she had a role in what was happening. Sometimes the people who seemed most professional, most competent, were the ones who were most effective at concealing what they were actually doing.

None of it would be straightforward. The good ones never were.

The Team

Bex spent the next three days doing background interviews with the foundation's staff. She made it systematic, starting with the people furthest from the center and working her way in. The junior researchers, the administrative assistants, the lab managers. She asked about their work, their sense of the foundation's security, what they had noticed about the threats. She asked about how they felt about working there, whether they had any concerns about how the foundation was run, whether they had any observations about changes in how people in the office behaved.

Most of them knew nothing useful. They had seen the threatening letters, had reacted with the appropriate level of concern, had figured the police or Ingrid's response would handle it. A couple of them mentioned that Carvalho had seemed worried about something in the weeks leading up to the first threat, but nothing specific. One researcher mentioned she had noticed unusual activity on the servers, but when she had mentioned it to Carvalho, he had said it was automated backup and she had accepted that because she did not have the technical knowledge to verify it and because she did not want to create problems for people she worked with.

Daria Novak was different from all of them, the moment Bex started talking to her. She was sitting alone in one of the research labs, working through some data on a computer that looked like it had more processing power than it really needed. Daria was the kind of person who probably preferred the work to the social interaction, which made her a better source than people who spent all their time talking. She was the kind of person who noticed things because she had to notice things in order to do her work.

"Can I ask you some questions?" Bex said from the doorway.

Daria looked up, startled, the way someone looks up when they have been focused on something and suddenly have to shift their attention. "Yes, of course. Ingrid said you would be talking to everyone."

"I want to talk about the foundation's data security practices," Bex said. She pulled up a chair and sat down where Daria could see her. "From your perspective, as someone who works with the research data day-to-day. What is your sense of whether the data is actually secure?"

Daria was quiet for a moment. She had the kind of thoughtful silence that suggested she was considering her answer carefully, that she was not going to throw out something quick and easy without thinking about whether it was actually true.

"Technically, it is secure," she said. "The systems are good, the access controls are appropriate. But there is something that has been bothering me for a while now."

"Tell me," Bex said.

"About three months ago, we noticed that the data was being accessed at odd hours. We have logs of all access, and I was doing some quarterly auditing, and I found that someone was pulling the research files outside of normal working hours. At first I thought it was Carvalho doing some late-night admin work, but I checked and he was not in the system during those times. The access was deliberate, not automatic."

"Did you ask him about it?" Bex asked.

"I mentioned it in a general way. I said I had noticed some unusual access patterns, wanted to make sure everything was fine. He said he would look into

it, that it was probably automated backup jobs or something. But then I checked the backup schedule and those times did not match. The access was deliberate, not automatic. The access was someone pulling data specifically, not system maintenance."

"And then you did not mention it again," Bex said.

Daria looked uncomfortable. She shifted in her chair, and you could see the moment when she decided whether to be honest or to pretend that things were better than they were. She decided to be honest.

"I should have. But Carvalho seemed like he already knew about it, or like he did not want me to ask questions about it. And I like working here, I like the research, and I did not want to create a problem if there was not one. I did not want to be the person who accused someone of doing something wrong when I was not even sure that anything wrong was actually happening."

"But you knew there was a problem," Bex said.

"I knew something was off," Daria said quietly. "I did not know what. I just knew that when I brought it up, Carvalho's response was to make it go away rather than to address it. And that felt wrong. If I was wrong, why would you not just explain what was happening and reassure me? Why would you just dismiss the question?"

"When was the last time you noticed the unusual access?" Bex asked.

"A few weeks ago. The last entry I saw was about two weeks before the first threatening letter arrived."

Bex made notes. So the data extraction had been happening for at least three months, maybe longer. The threats started two weeks after the most recent large pull. That timing was not random. That timing suggested that the extraction had reached some kind of completion point, and the threats were being deployed to establish a cover story for why the data might now be missing.

"Have you noticed anything else?" Bex asked. "Anything unusual about Carvalho's behavior, or Petra's, or anyone else's?"

"Petra has been acting strange," Daria said. "She usually talks to me when she is in the lab, asks about the research, makes conversation. But in the last

couple weeks, she barely looks at me. And I have seen her in conversations with Carvalho where they both went quiet when I walked in."

"You are observant," Bex said.

"I work with data. You get good at noticing patterns," Daria said. She paused, then added, "I am scared that I did something wrong by not reporting the access patterns. But I am also scared of what it means if I had reported them."

"You did not do anything wrong," Bex said. "You noticed something suspicious and you mentioned it. What happened after that is on the people making the decisions. What happened after that is on Carvalho for dismissing your concerns instead of addressing them. You did your job. You did it well. How people respond to that is not your responsibility."

It was not comforting, exactly. But it was true, and Bex thought Daria was the kind of person who wanted the truth more than she wanted comfort. The truth was what you could work with. Comfort was just something that made you feel temporarily better before reality reasserted itself.

Bex left the lab and found Petra in the administrative office, working through what looked like a foundation budget spreadsheet. The moment Petra saw Bex, you could see her decide what to be. You could see her choose professionalism over anything else.

"Can we talk?" Bex asked.

Petra looked up, and Bex could see the moment the other woman decided whether to be helpful or to become more guarded. She decided on guarded, which was interesting because it suggested she understood that she might have something to answer for.

"Of course," Petra said. "What do you need?"

Bex sat down. "I want to ask you about your work with Ingrid. How long you have been with her, what your responsibilities are, what you have noticed in the last few weeks. I want to understand if you have noticed anything unusual about how things are being run."

"I have been with Ingrid for six years," Petra said. "I manage her personal schedule, her communications, her arrangements. The foundation work is

secondary, mostly just making sure she has everything she needs when she is here in Lisbon."

"Ingrid mentioned that the threatening letters are new. Have they affected her routine?"

"Not really. Ingrid does not change her behavior in response to threats. She just gets more methodical about things."

"You are German," Bex said. It was not a question.

"Berlin originally. I worked for a tech company there, did similar work. Ingrid recruited me when she was doing foundation work in Germany."

"Have you noticed any issues with the foundation's security? Anything that seemed off?"

Petra was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "No. Carvalho runs a tight operation. The security is appropriate."

It was the moment when Bex needed to decide whether to push or let it lie. She decided to push.

"That is interesting," Bex said, "because I have found evidence that someone has been accessing the research data outside of normal patterns. Extracting files systematically, over a period of months. Which would suggest that the security is not as tight as you are saying."

Petra's face changed. Not much, but enough that Bex could see she had known this or suspected it.

"I do not know anything about that," Petra said quietly.

"But you know something," Bex said.

"I know that Carvalho has been stressed. I know that Ingrid asked me to help with some confidential matters a few months ago that I thought were unusual. But I do not know what is actually happening, and if I did, I would not betray Ingrid's confidence."

"Even if what is happening is a threat to Ingrid and to the foundation's work?" Bex asked.

"Especially then," Petra said. But there was a layer of doubt under the words, like she was not entirely convinced of what she was saying, like she

understood that keeping confidences and keeping harmful secrets were sometimes two different things.

Bex let it go for now. She had time. People's certainty about their own positions eroded with exposure to contrary evidence, and she had just introduced the contrary evidence. Petra would sit with that knowledge for the next day or two. She would think about what it meant. She would consider whether her loyalty to Ingrid meant covering for Ingrid's interests or betraying them. Eventually, she might talk.

That evening, she called Patricia Moore from her secure phone.

"The data extraction is real," Bex said without preamble. "Someone with high-level administrative access has been pulling research files over the last three months. The threat letters appear to be cover, designed to bring in external security while the extraction continues."

"Who is doing it?" Patricia asked.

"I do not know yet. But Carvalho has the access to do it, and Petra Voss knows something. There is also the question of who is behind them, who hired them to do this and what they plan to do with the data."

"Be careful," Patricia said. "You are in a foreign jurisdiction. Portuguese law enforcement is solid, but they are not your people. And whoever is behind this thought it was worth bringing you in specifically, which means they either wanted you to stop it or they thought you were good enough to handle knowing about it."

"I am being careful," Bex said. "But I am going to find out who wanted me here and why. That is the only way I understand the actual threat."

The Villa Survey

Bex did the full physical security survey of the villa in Cascais on the morning of her fourth day in Portugal, starting at six in the morning when the light was still gray and the neighborhood was moving through the rhythm of early waking. She had already walked the grounds three times informally, getting a sense of the perimeter and the access points, but this was the systematic work, the documentation, the kind of thoroughgoing assessment that would tell her exactly what Ingrid was protected by and what gaps existed in that protection. This was the work that took time and precision and the kind of attention to detail that separated adequate security from actual security.

The villa itself was older, maybe thirty years, built in the late modernist style that Cascais had absorbed years ago when it was becoming fashionable for tech money to accumulate there. It was white, the way buildings in Portugal seemed to be white, with large windows that looked toward the Atlantic and the Sintra hills beyond. The location was both an asset and a vulnerability. The view was excellent for seeing who was approaching from the front. The back of the property opened onto a hillside that had enough vegetation and natural cover that someone could approach without being easily observed from inside

the house. It was the kind of asymmetry that Bex always found in real properties: strong in one direction, weaker in another, usually weakest where the owner felt most private.

Bex started at the perimeter, walking the full boundary and documenting what she found. She had a notebook, a camera, measuring tools, the kind of equipment that made it clear she was doing professional assessment work. There was a wall, about one point eight meters tall, constructed from local stone with concrete coping on the top. The wall was in good condition, no obvious breaches or weak points that would make access easier. The gates were electric, controlled from the house, designed to open automatically for vehicles and manual for pedestrians. Good security on the surface, but she made a note that the code controlling the gates was probably factory default or something easily guessable. She would need to check that with Ingrid. Most people, even technically sophisticated people, took whatever security defaults came with their systems and never bothered to change them because it seemed like unnecessary work until it became too late to prevent something bad from happening.

She noted the positions of the security cameras, three of them, mounted at corners to provide overlapping coverage of the front approach and the eastern flank. The south side, facing the water, had no cameras, which was a gap but also somewhat reasonable given that the cliff below made direct approach from that side nearly impossible unless you had serious climbing equipment. The north side had a camera covering the side access to the property. The western flank, facing the neighboring property, had no camera, which was another gap. That meant someone could potentially approach from the west, scale the wall, and access the house without being recorded by any system.

Inside the perimeter, Bex walked the grounds systematically, photographing everything with the small camera she had brought, noting drainage access points, utility connections, any area where access could be gained without immediately being visible from the house. There was a service entrance at the northeast corner, a gate that led to a maintenance path and the utility lines. The gate was locked but would be easily accessible to the gardening service that came twice a week to maintain the landscaping. That

was a vulnerability she would need to address with screening protocols and verification procedures.

She made a comprehensive note: service access is a vulnerability; needs screening protocol for any vendor access, needs to verify that the utility companies actually have legitimate need for regular access, needs camera coverage or at minimum controlled access procedures. Most breaches happened through the mundane entry points, the places that people forgot to secure because they seemed obvious or harmless or part of normal functioning. Bex had learned to focus on exactly those places.

The house itself took two hours to document. She photographed every window, every door, the condition of the locks, the visibility sightlines from each room. She documented the angles that would allow someone to see into rooms from outside, the areas where curtains or blinds should be added, the positions where security equipment should be placed for maximum effectiveness. The front entrance was well-secured, the door heavy, the lock modern. The back doors, leading from the kitchen and from the primary bedroom to a terrace, were less secure. Standard lever handles, locks that would resist casual access but would not stand up to determined entry. Those doors needed replacement or at minimum new deadbolts.

Inside the villa, Bex spent a significant amount of time documenting the security systems already in place. There was a motion detector system covering the main living areas, wired to a control panel in the kitchen. The system was functional but not sophisticated, the kind that any determined person with moderate technical knowledge could bypass. There were door sensors on the front and side entrances but not on the rear doors. The windows on the lower floor had sensors. The second floor had no external window sensors, only the motion detection system, which was insufficient for adequate protection.

Bex photographed the control panel, reviewed the settings, tested the doors to make sure the sensors were actually functioning as they should be. The arming and disarming code was visible on a Post-it note stuck to the underside of the panel. She documented that, not as a professional failure by whoever installed it but as evidence of human behavior: people always wrote down codes because they could not remember them, and they always hid them in

obvious places because hiding places were never as hidden as people thought they were.

She spent thirty minutes checking the electrical panels, the internet connections, the water systems. She wanted to understand not just the security infrastructure but the basic systems that kept the house functioning, because vulnerabilities in those systems were sometimes forgotten vulnerabilities that people did not think to protect. The internet came in through a cable line, routed to a modern router that looked like it had adequate security settings. The electrical system was modern but not particularly sophisticated. The water system was straightforward, fed from the municipal supply, with no independent backup.

Then she moved to Ingrid's primary office, a room on the second floor that faced the water and the hills beyond. The room had a heavy door that locked, which was good. Inside, there was a desk with a computer, a filing cabinet, a small safe that looked relatively secure. She photographed everything, took measurements, documented the position of the office relative to the rest of the house and to the external windows, mapping sightlines and vulnerability points.

The computer was modern, encrypted hard drive, security software that appeared to be recent and functional. That was good work by someone who understood that technology needed to be protected as carefully as physical spaces. The filing cabinet contained hard copy documents, some in English, some in Norwegian, some in Portuguese. Ingrid was not paranoid about security but she was careful, which suggested that someone had taught her to be careful, probably sometime during the years she spent building the foundation. That kind of carefulness did not develop naturally; it developed because you had learned what happened when you were not careful.

Bex went through the files methodically, not reading the content but documenting the types of documents, the organization, the sense of what Ingrid kept close and what she stored elsewhere. She found financial documents, foundation governance records, personal correspondence, research summaries. Nothing that immediately suggested a security breach. Nothing that suggested hidden vulnerabilities. But that was often how these things worked; the most dangerous vulnerabilities were not obvious.

She asked Ingrid about the small safe in the office. Ingrid said it contained personal documents, passport, some cash, nothing related to the foundation work. That made sense. The digital data was stored on servers, on backup systems, in the cloud infrastructure that most organizations used these days. The safe was insurance, not primary storage. But it was good to know what was there, what was important enough to protect in physical form.

Bex spent the afternoon moving through the rest of the property. There was a guest cottage about thirty meters from the main house, used for visiting researchers or foundation staff who needed accommodations. The cottage was not occupied currently but was maintained and ready to be used. It had its own security system, its own entry point, its own connection to the property's systems. It was a potential vulnerability if not properly screened and monitored. Someone could potentially use the cottage as an access point without the main house being directly involved.

There was a garage with space for two vehicles, equipped with an automatic door and a manual override. The garage was clean, organized, the way garages were organized by people who liked systems and order. One car was parked there, a neutral color, the kind of vehicle that would not attract attention. The other space was empty, probably for visitors or for when Ingrid needed a second vehicle. She documented the garage carefully, noting that the automatic door would need to be checked regularly to ensure it was functioning properly and not vulnerable to bypass.

By mid-afternoon, Bex had documented everything on the property, had taken photographs of all the vulnerable points, had mentally constructed a detailed map of how someone might attempt to access the villa and what the response options were to each attempt. She had created a detailed security assessment in her mind, the kind that she would need to write up in a comprehensive report before she left Portugal.

She found Ingrid in the kitchen, making tea, the way Ingrid seemed to make tea whenever Bex finished a significant piece of work, like she understood that transition points required something, some small ritual that marked the completion of one phase and the beginning of the next.

"The property has adequate passive security," Bex said, sitting at the kitchen counter. "Using my Guardian training to assess Perimeter Hardening: the wall is good, the gates are appropriate, the basic sensors are functional. But there are gaps. The rear doors are not adequately secured. The windows on the second floor are not monitored. The service access point at the northeast corner needs screening and verification procedures -- this is a critical vulnerability in your defensive perimeter. The guest cottage needs to be either secured more extensively or not used without explicit authorization from you."

Ingrid poured water for the tea, added a tea bag, set the cup down in front of Bex. "What would be required to address those gaps?" she asked.

"New locks on the rear doors, minimum grade three deadbolts. Motion sensors on the second floor windows. A screening system for service access, probably involving photo ID verification and advance notice. More cameras, or repositioning of existing cameras to close the blind spots on the western flank and the south approach. Better code security on the gate system; the current code is factory default or easily guessable. And a reviewing of the alarm code situation; it should not be written on a Post-it note under the control panel. You need a code management system, something that changes regularly and is not written down anywhere."

"Can you arrange those things?" Ingrid asked.

"I can coordinate. You will need to hire the contractors. I would recommend local people, someone with solid references. Portuguese companies are better than international ones for this work because they understand the local context and the building codes, and because they have existing relationships with the local suppliers and inspectors."

"I will handle that," Ingrid said. "I have resources for that work. Anything else?"

"There is also the foundation office in Lisbon," Bex said. "I will need to do the same assessment there. The physical security is probably less important than understanding what security they have over their data systems, what access controls are in place, whether the research is actually protected the way it should be."

Ingrid's face changed slightly. Not much, but enough that Bex noticed. It was the expression of someone who had been anticipating that question and had already decided what to say about it.

"That is where I want you to focus next," Ingrid said. "The foundation office. I need to understand what is actually happening with the research data. I need to know who has access and what kind of security is protecting the work."

"You suspect something specific," Bex said. It was not a question.

"I know something is wrong," Ingrid said. "I do not know what. But I know the feeling of things being not right, and I have been feeling it for weeks now. That is why I hired you. That is what you are supposed to help me understand."

Bex drank the tea. It was good tea, strong and hot and exactly what was needed at that moment. She thought about the pattern of the threatening letters, the way they had been designed to trigger a response without actually communicating real intent. She thought about what Patricia Moore had said, about someone recommending her specifically, about the strangeness of the recommendation coming through an intermediary.

"The foundation office," Bex said. "Tomorrow. We will start early."

"I will introduce you to the staff," Ingrid said. "I will tell them you are doing a complete security assessment, both physical and digital. Some of them may resist. Some of them may try to hide things. You will understand why when you meet them."

"I understand people," Bex said. "I understand the things that make them hide things and the things that make them tell the truth. We will figure out what is happening at the foundation office."

She finished the tea and went to her room to begin organizing her notes on the villa survey, creating the detailed documentation that would become part of her formal assessment. Outside, the light was starting to change, the afternoon giving way toward evening, the Atlantic light taking on the warmer tones it seemed to have just before sunset. Cascais in February was cold and precise. The light was honest. The shadows were clear. There was nothing hidden in this light.

Bex worked through the evening, preparing for the next phase of the assessment. She was beginning to understand the shape of the problem, not the specifics but the general architecture of what was happening. Someone wanted something from Ingrid. Someone had created a cover story with the threatening letters. Someone was using the foundation itself as the mechanism to extract whatever it was they wanted.

The question was not whether something was wrong. Bex had already confirmed that something was wrong. The question was how deep it went and what she would need to do to stop it. She had twelve days remaining in her two-week contract. She would use them well.

The First Interview

Santiago Reyes was drinking coffee at an outdoor cafe near the Chiado neighborhood when Bex found him on the morning of her fifth day in Portugal. The air was cold enough that you could see your breath, and the coffee was hot enough that the steam rose up in patterns that would have been peaceful if everything under that steam was not complicated and dangerous. He had chosen the location carefully, Bex noted. It was public enough that being seen together would not be unusual, but it was also a place where they could have a private conversation without being obviously private.

Bex sat down without preamble. Santiago did not seem surprised to see her. He slid a second cup of coffee across the table, like he had been expecting her, like this was the pattern of how conversations happened between them now. The coffee was good, strong, the kind of coffee that Portuguese cafes seemed to make naturally without any particular effort.

"You want to talk about the data extraction," Santiago said. It was not a question. He had access to information that Bex did not, or he had made deductions that aligned with what she had discovered, or both. Either way, he

understood why she was here.

"I want to understand what you can do about it," Bex said. "I want to understand whether you can help me figure out who is responsible, whether you can help me understand the coordination, whether you can help me do this without alerting the people involved that I am moving against them."

Santiago took a sip of his coffee. He was the kind of person who took his time with conversations, who did not rush toward conclusions, who understood that precision was more important than speed. That was useful in law enforcement. That was also useful for someone who had spent thirty years working in a field where mistakes could be fatal.

"The threatening letters," he said, "were printed on standard paper from a standard printer. The envelope was unremarkable. The handwriting was disguised, deliberately disguised. If I analyzed them with every resource available to the Lisbon police, I could probably find something, probably trace the printer or the paper supply. But that would take time and it would make noise. More importantly, it would alert whoever is involved that you are moving against them."

"So the threatening letters are a dead end," Bex said.

"The threatening letters are a cover story," Santiago said. "Someone wanted you here. Someone wanted there to be a reason for external security to be present. The threatening letters provide that reason. The letters are designed not to be solved, just to be investigated enough to justify bringing someone in. That is actually elegant work, when you think about it. It creates just enough of a problem to require a solution, but not so much of a problem that it becomes unsolvable."

"Can you access the foundation's financial records?" Bex asked.

"Not without a warrant, and a warrant would require probable cause, which would require an official investigation, which would require the kind of visibility that would alert the people involved. Portugal has regulations about these things. I respect the regulations, even when they make the work more difficult."

"So we work unofficially," Bex said.

Santiago smiled. It was a small smile, but it was a real one, the smile of someone who understood that sometimes the best work happened outside of official channels. "I have been working unofficially for thirty years," he said. "The work happens the same way regardless of whether there is official paperwork. The difference is mostly paperwork and whether I can arrest people afterward or whether I just have to share what I have found and let someone else make the official action."

"I need to understand who is doing this," Bex said. "I need to understand who is directing them. I need to understand whether this is about industrial espionage, about theft of intellectual property, about something else entirely. I need to understand whether this is a crime that happens to involve Ingrid or whether this is specifically designed to harm her."

"Then we investigate," Santiago said. "But we do it carefully. We do it in a way that does not alert the people we are investigating. We do it with the understanding that Portugal has laws and international jurisdictions and complications that will make this more difficult than it would be in Portland or wherever you usually do this work."

"I have worked internationally before," Bex said.

"In Portuguese law enforcement we are not as willing to ignore things as some people are," Santiago said. It was not said unkindly. It was said like he was explaining a fact about the world, like Bex should understand that different jurisdictions had different tolerance for the kind of work that sometimes had to happen. "We follow procedures. We document evidence. We do things in ways that stand up to scrutiny. This is not because we are naive. It is because we understand that cutting corners early means that everything we build on that foundation is compromised later."

"I can work with that," Bex said. She had worked with international jurisdictions before. She knew how to move carefully, how to follow procedures, how to document things in ways that would stand up to scrutiny.

"I know you can," Santiago said. "That is why I agreed to this conversation. There are people in the Lisbon police who would just document the threatening letters and file them away until something worse happened."

There are other people who would try to solve them quickly without understanding what was actually underneath. You are neither of those things. You are someone who understands the difference between the surface and what is underneath."

He finished his coffee and set the cup down carefully, with the kind of deliberate precision that suggested he was someone who thought about how to move through the world without making unnecessary noise.

"What do you need from me?" he asked.

"I need to know if Tomás Carvalho or Petra Voss have any financial connections to technology companies. I need to know if either of them have recently received significant money or made significant purchases that are unusual for their income level. I need to know if they have traveled outside of Portugal in ways that are unusual. I need to know if they are in contact with people who are not part of the foundation network. I need to know if there are any signs that someone has been actively recruiting them or pressuring them to do something."

"That is a lot of information," Santiago said. "Some of it I can get without raising flags. Some of it I will need to work around people who might question why I am asking. But yes, I can do this work. I have contacts in the tech sector, contacts in the financial institutions, people who understand how money moves and when movement is unusual."

"There is something else," Bex said. "There is someone who recommended me to Ingrid. Someone in the MPSA network -- a trained operative or faculty member from the Academy. I do not know who. I do not know whether they knew what they were recommending me into. I need to understand that."

Santiago nodded like he had been expecting that observation, like he understood that any good operative would be asking that question. "You think the recommendation was part of the operation," he said.

"I think it might have been. Or I think someone in the MPSA network suspected something was wrong and wanted to bring in a Guardian operative from outside the immediate situation to assess it and protect the target. Or I

think the recommendation was entirely innocent and unrelated to what is actually happening. Those are the three possibilities I need to figure out."

"All three are possible," Santiago said. "Which is the problem with this kind of work. Too many possibilities. Too many ways for information to be connected or disconnected. Too many ways for people to be acting in good faith or bad faith without you being able to tell the difference until later."

They sat in silence for a moment. The morning light in Lisbon was the kind of light that made you understand why the city had been valued for centuries. It was clear and honest, the kind of light that suggested you could see everything if you just paid attention carefully enough. But the light also suggested that you could be wrong about what you were seeing, that clarity was not the same as truth, that seeing something clearly did not mean you understood what you were looking at.

"When can you have information?" Bex asked.

"Three days. Maybe four. I will need to move carefully, ask questions in the right way to the right people, get information that does not announce itself as what it is. I will need to understand what I am looking at before I present my findings. I will need to be thorough."

"I can work with that timeline," Bex said. "In the meantime, I will be at the foundation office. I will be doing security assessments, reviewing systems, understanding what is actually there. I will be deploying my Group Sensor Protocol training -- watching how people interact with each other, how they move through the space, where their attention goes when they think no one is watching. I will look for threat indicators and loyalty shifts."

"Be careful about Carvalho," Santiago said. "If he knows you are investigating him, he will either run or he will become more dangerous. People usually become more dangerous when they understand they are being hunted, when they realize they have nothing left to lose."

"I know how to move without being obvious," Bex said. "I have spent years learning how to assess people without them knowing they are being assessed."

"I know you do," Santiago said. "But Carvalho is not stupid. He is French-Portuguese, came to the foundation five years ago with good references and a solid technical background. If someone was going to choose an inside person to steal data, they would choose someone like Carvalho: smart enough to know how to move without being obvious, connected enough to understand the foundation's systems completely, isolated enough that they would not have strong protection from people who cared about them."

"You have already looked into him," Bex said.

"Of course I have," Santiago said. "I looked into everyone when the threatening letters started arriving. It is basic police work. And what I found about Carvalho is that there is not much to find. He is professionally accomplished. He is personally isolated. He does not have strong friendships in Lisbon. He does not have family here. He has money but not an abundance of money, which suggests he is not being well paid by the foundation, which suggests he might be susceptible to significant payment from other sources."

Bex processed that. She was beginning to understand the shape of what was happening, the way a person like Carvalho could be recruited, what kind of leverage would work on someone like that. People who were isolated were vulnerable to connection. People who were underpaid were vulnerable to the promise of more. People who did not have strong social ties were vulnerable to the kind of pressure that came from having something that mattered threatened or taken away.

"There is one more thing," Santiago said. "The French consulate in Lisbon has been asking questions about unusual data transmission from the Portuguese tech sector. This was not official. This was someone in the consulate asking an informal contact in the Lisbon police whether we had noticed anything unusual, anything that might suggest the movement of sensitive data out of Portugal. The timing was about six weeks ago, right around when the first threatening letters started arriving."

"France," Bex said. "That is interesting."

"France is very interested in Portuguese tech sector activity," Santiago said. "There is a lot of French money coming into Portugal. There is a lot of

French companies looking at Portuguese research. There are also French intelligence services interested in what is being developed in Portuguese technology companies. It all exists on a continuum from legitimate business interest to something that is less legitimate."

"Do you think French intelligence is behind the data extraction?" Bex asked.

"I think someone connected to France might be behind it," Santiago said. "But I do not know. There are too many possibilities. Too many ways for this to connect or not connect. The French are interested in a lot of things. That does not mean they are interested in Ingrid's specific research. But it makes it possible."

He stood up, left money on the table for the coffee, the way he had left money for the previous conversation, establishing the pattern that these encounters did not leave official records, did not leave traces in expense accounts, did not announce themselves as what they were.

"I will call you in three days," he said. "When I have information. Until then, work on the foundation office. Understand what you are protecting, understand what needs protecting, and understand who might want what you are protecting badly enough to risk this kind of operation."

After Santiago left, Bex sat with her coffee for a few more minutes, watching the morning light move across the buildings, watching the city wake up around her. She was beginning to understand that this was not going to be a simple operation, that there were layers underneath the surface, that the threatening letters were just one part of a much larger architecture.

She was also beginning to understand that whoever had recommended her to Ingrid had done so for reasons that were not yet clear, reasons that might be protective or reasons that might be something else entirely. That would require care. That would require precision. That would require understanding the difference between being used and being useful, which was sometimes the same thing, but not always.

Watching Ingrid Work

The foundation office was located in a refurbished warehouse building in Alcantara, a neighborhood that had been transitioning for years from industrial work to tech and research spaces. The building was modern but not aggressively modern, the kind of space that seemed designed to suggest that serious work happened there but that the people doing the work were not trying to make a statement about it. The walls were concrete and glass. The furniture was functional. There was nothing here for display or for impression.

Bex spent the first part of the morning walking the office with Ingrid, documenting physical security, understanding the layout, identifying access points and blind spots. She moved with the deliberate pace of someone doing a professional assessment, the kind of pace that made it clear this was work and not casual observation. The office was two stories, with research spaces on the first floor and administrative and meeting spaces on the second. There was a server room, small but sophisticated, with modern equipment and appropriate climate control. There was a data management area where the backup systems lived. There was a secure file room where hard copies of significant research were kept.

By mid-morning, Bex had documented everything about the physical space. What she had not yet done was understand how the space actually functioned, what the actual patterns of work were, how the organization moved through the day. Physical security was one thing. Behavioral patterns were another. The second was often more revealing than the first.

She found a quiet corner in the research area, ostensibly to work through her security assessment, positioned herself where she could see into the open-plan research space and up the glass stairs to Ingrid's office on the second floor. She pulled out her notebook and pretended to make notes about infrastructure, but what she was actually doing was deploying her Group Sensor Protocol training. She watched how Ingrid moved through the space, the deliberate way she walked, the way she chose when to be visible and when to retreat. She watched how the foundation staff interacted with each other, the patterns of collaboration and isolation, looking for indicators of conflict and loyalty shifts. She watched the rhythm of the work, the way people organized themselves, the way information moved through the organization.

Ingrid worked in a glass-walled office on the second floor, designed so that she could see what was happening in the research area without being isolated from the work. She did not close the door. She did not hide. She was accessible in a way that suggested she understood that access built trust, that isolation built suspicion. This was someone who understood organizational dynamics, who understood the way that power worked best when it was transparent rather than hidden.

Bex watched Ingrid for three hours straight, from about nine in the morning until noon. What struck her was the precision of the work. Ingrid was reviewing research data, reading through findings, making notes in the margins, occasionally pulling researchers in to clarify something or to discuss a methodology. She was thorough. She was careful. She asked questions in a way that suggested she wanted to understand the actual work, not to catch people in mistakes but to understand exactly what the research showed and why.

There was a moment around ten-thirty when Daria Novak came into the office to discuss some data consistency issues. She was hesitant, the way

people were hesitant when they thought they might be bringing bad news or causing trouble. Bex watched the interaction from her distance. Daria laid out the technical details, her voice careful, her body language defensive, ready to be wrong. Ingrid listened carefully, did not interrupt, asked clarifying questions, then said something that made Daria visibly relax. Whatever Ingrid had said, it had reassured the younger researcher that she had not made a mistake by bringing the issue to attention, that the issue itself was what mattered, not the fact that someone had discovered it.

That was the moment when Bex understood something about Ingrid Lund that changed how she was approaching this whole situation. Ingrid cared about the work. That was clear. But more than that, Ingrid cared about the people who were doing the work. She cared about their intellectual development, their confidence, their sense that they were part of something important. She had built an organizational culture where people brought problems forward instead of hiding them, where mistakes were opportunities to learn rather than opportunities for punishment.

Which meant that if there was a problem at the foundation, if someone was stealing the research data, if someone was betraying the work, it would matter to Ingrid in a way that went beyond professional concern. It would matter personally. It would damage something that she had carefully built, something that mattered to her more than money or status or any of the other things that motivated most people. It would betray not just the work but the culture of trust that she had established.

At noon, Ingrid took a break, walked down to the small kitchen area, made a sandwich from ingredients that were apparently kept in a small refrigerator for exactly this purpose. It was the kind of detail that suggested routine, that Ingrid had been coming to this office long enough to have settled into patterns, to have made the space part of her daily life. Bex watched this too, the small ritual of moving through the space, selecting what she wanted, preparing it with care. Ingrid made her sandwich alone, did not invite anyone to join her, seemed to prefer the solitude of the quiet kitchen at midday. She ate quickly, mechanically, the way someone ate when they were thinking about other things, when the food was just fuel for the work.

Bex waited a few minutes, then followed her down.

"The work is good," Bex said, sitting at the small table where Ingrid was eating. "The organization is efficient. The staff are engaged. People seem to care about what they are doing."

"Thank you," Ingrid said. She ate her sandwich methodically, the way someone ate when they were thinking about other things. "But there is something wrong. You can feel it. I can feel it. Something is not right underneath all of this."

"I can feel it," Bex confirmed. "What I cannot do yet is identify what it is specifically. Tell me about Carvalho. Tell me how he came to work here and what changed."

Ingrid set down her sandwich and looked out the small window that faced the warehouse building next door. There was nothing interesting in that view, which meant that looking out the window was a way of not looking at Bex while she thought about what to say, while she gathered the story that she had been holding alone.

"Tomás was recommended to me by a colleague, someone I trusted," Ingrid said slowly. "He came with excellent references from a technology company in France. He was smart, capable, technically skilled. I brought him on as head of the IT systems, which seemed like the right decision at the time. The infrastructure he built here is sophisticated and appropriate. Better than I could have built myself. Better than most consulting firms would have recommended."

"And now?" Bex asked.

"Now I wonder what I did not see," Ingrid said quietly. "Now I wonder if the recommendation was designed, if it was part of something larger. Now I wonder if Tomás came here for a reason that had nothing to do with building good systems. And that thought makes me feel like I have failed at something fundamental."

"Why did you bring me in?" Bex asked. "Why not just confront him? Why not just ask him directly if something is wrong?"

"Because I do not know what wrong looks like," Ingrid said. "I can see the shape of it. I can feel it in the way conversations stop when I walk by. I can feel it in the way he avoids my eye contact. But I do not know what questions to ask or what answers would actually tell me something true. You are trained at MPSA -- through the Guardian ribbon -- to understand threats and deception. You are trained to see when people are lying or hiding things. I am trained to do research. I am good at science. This is not science."

"It is pattern recognition," Bex said. "It is the same skill you are using to analyze the AI systems. Look for inconsistencies. Look for places where the story does not add up. Look for gaps between what you are told and what you observe."

Ingrid looked at Bex directly. "I am scared," she said. "I am scared that I have brought someone into this organization who is harming it. I am scared that I have been naive or blind. I am scared that the research I have built here, the work that matters to me more than anything, is being compromised by someone I trusted."

"Fear is useful," Bex said. "Fear makes you careful. Fear makes you ask questions. What you need is data. What you need is evidence. What you need is to know exactly what is happening before you make decisions about what to do about it. That is what I am here for. That is the work."

After lunch, Bex went back to her observation post. She watched Ingrid work for the rest of the afternoon, through two more meetings, through more one-on-one conversations with researchers, through the kind of quiet administrative work that kept an organization functioning. She watched the way Ingrid conducted a team meeting, the way she listened to people, the way she guided conversations toward decisions without making the decisions for people. She let people think through the problems. She asked questions that made people think more carefully. She created space for disagreement without making disagreement into conflict.

She watched Carvalho for some of that time too, the only moment when she directly observed him working in his space. He was at his desk in the IT section, working on something on his computer, his face neutral, his

movements methodical. He did not look like someone who was betraying anyone. He looked like someone doing his job, someone going through his work with competence and care. Which, of course, was exactly what someone who was betraying people would look like, because the whole point of betrayal was that it happened underneath the surface, underneath the normal functioning of things, in the gaps that no one was paying attention to. Betrayal was not dramatic. It was quiet. It was methodical. It was the kind of thing that moved in increments so small that no one noticed until it was too late.

By the end of the day, Bex had several pages of notes. Not about security in the traditional sense. About people. About the way Ingrid worked, the kind of leadership style she had developed over the years of building the foundation. About the way the foundation functioned as an organization, the way information moved through it, the way decisions were made. About the way the research was conducted and protected and valued by the people who were doing it. About the relationships between people and the way those relationships created either vulnerability or protection.

There was a moment in the afternoon when Bex watched Ingrid have a conversation with one of the junior researchers, a young man named David who was working on questions about algorithmic bias in hiring systems. Ingrid listened to his progress update, asked several questions that helped him think more deeply about the work, and then did something that made David visibly relax: she told him that the research was important, that the questions he was asking mattered, that the rigor he was bringing to the work was exactly what was needed. That moment crystallized something for Bex about what was at stake here. This was not just a foundation. This was a space where people like David came to do work they believed in, to ask questions they thought mattered, to be part of something larger than themselves. That kind of space was rare. That kind of space was fragile. That kind of space could be destroyed by betrayal from inside.

What she understood now was that if she was right about what was happening, if Carvalho or someone in the foundation was stealing the research, it was not going to be a simple theft. It was not going to be a straightforward crime. It was going to be a betrayal of something that mattered, a violation of

trust, a compromise of work that people like Ingrid and Daria cared about with an intensity that most people reserved for family or identity.

Which meant that whoever was behind this operation had known exactly what they were doing. Whoever had designed this operation had understood that the real damage was not the data theft. The real damage was the betrayal. The real damage was the loss of trust. The real damage was the way that this operation would change how Ingrid saw people she had worked with, people she had believed in, people she had hired based on judgment that now seemed compromised.

That suggested this was not just industrial espionage. That suggested this was personal. That suggested someone wanted not just the data but wanted to hurt Ingrid in specific ways, to damage her in ways that would last longer than any data breach.

Bex did not tell Ingrid this thought when she reported her findings that evening. Bex just documented the physical security gaps and the workflow issues and the recommendations for improving the foundation's protection systems. But she was beginning to understand that this situation was more complicated than she had initially thought, and that the solution, whatever it ended up being, would need to address not just the operational problem but the personal betrayal underneath it.

The Call Home

Bex called Maya from her room in Cascais on the evening of her sixth day in Portugal, waiting until after the foundation office closed, waiting until the light had gone completely gray, waiting until the Atlantic seemed more like an idea than a physical presence beyond the window. She had the secure phone, the one that routed through encrypted servers, the one that made it difficult for anyone to intercept or listen in. She had learned to be careful about these things a long time ago, after enough years of doing work that people wanted to know about, work that had value to people who would pay to understand what was happening in her life.

The connection took a moment to establish. Then her niece's voice came through, already mid-thought, the way Maya had been since she was ten years old.

Maya answered on the second ring, the way Maya usually answered, already talking before Bex had finished saying hello.

"You did not call yesterday," Maya said. "Sarah's mom was making lasagna and I wanted to describe it to you because you claim Portuguese food is

better than Italian food, which is obviously ridiculous, and I needed you to defend your terrible opinion."

"The lasagna was probably very good," Bex said. "Italian grandmothers do that work well. But I will still claim that Portuguese food is better because the tradition is older and the techniques are more refined."

"You are a snob," Maya said. "Also, completely wrong. How is Portugal? Are you protecting some famous person? Are you doing dangerous things? Are you in any way living a life that is actually interesting instead of just sitting in your office looking at security camera systems?"

"I am in Cascais, which is a coastal town near Lisbon," Bex said. "I am protecting a woman named Ingrid Lund who is a technology researcher and ethics person. And I am investigating a situation that might or might not be dangerous. So I am having a moderately interesting time."

"Are you lonely?" Maya asked. It was asked in a casual way, but it was not a casual question. Maya was good at asking the things that mattered while making it seem like she was asking something light.

"I am not lonely," Bex said, which was true and not true at the same time. She was not lonely in the sense of being isolated or needing connection. She was never lonely in that sense. But she was aware, in the way you are aware of a tooth that is not quite right, of the absence of the specific kind of connection that came from having someone in your life who knew you completely, who understood the work you did without needing it explained, who could sit with you in silence and understand that the silence was not empty.

"You are lonely," Maya said. "You do not have to admit it. I know you are lonely. You are like me that way. We are both the kind of people who prefer being alone but also need someone to be alone with, which is the most annoying possible combination."

"When did you become wise about human nature?" Bex asked.

"I am fifteen," Maya said. "I am supposed to be figuring out human nature. That is the whole point of being fifteen. If I was not obsessing about how people work and why they do weird things, I would not be doing it right."

Bex smiled. She was not smiling at anything but she was smiling, the way people smiled when they were having a conversation with someone they loved.

"How is the school situation?" Bex asked.

"Terrible," Maya said. "Ms. Chen is assigning way too much reading for the AP English class, which is obviously excessive and probably violates some kind of child labor laws. And Evan keeps saying stupid things during lunch about his college plans, which is boring and makes me want to find a new lunch table, but that would be weird, so I am just eating sandwiches and listening to him talk about Stanford like it is the only college that exists."

"Evan," Bex said. "Is this the same Evan who you were not interested in three months ago?"

"He is annoying," Maya said. "He is also smart, which is confusing because if he was just annoying it would be easy to not care about him, but he says good things about books sometimes, which makes the whole situation complicated."

"That is how it works," Bex said. "People are complicated. That is what makes them either worth paying attention to or worth avoiding entirely. The most interesting people are the ones who are both good and flawed, who do kind things but also do stupid things, who make you think in ways you did not expect to think."

"Are you being wise?" Maya asked. "Or are you being unhelpful?"

"Probably both," Bex said. "I am mostly drawing on experience. I have had people in my life who seemed simple at first and then turned out to be complicated in ways that changed everything. And I have had people who seemed complicated and turned out to be much simpler than I thought."

"Is that what the woman you are protecting is?" Maya asked. "Complicated?"

"Ingrid is very complicated," Bex said. "She is brilliant and careful and she cares about things in a way that puts her at risk. She is the kind of person who would do the right thing even if it cost her something, which is rare and also dangerous because there are people who will use that against her."

"Are there people using that against her?" Maya asked.

"I think so," Bex said. "I am still figuring out what it looks like. But yes, I think someone is using her care for her work to betray her in a specific way."

"That is sad," Maya said quietly. "That is the thing that makes me angry about people. The people who are good, the people who try to do things right, are the most vulnerable to being hurt by people who do not try to do things right."

"That is true," Bex said. "But the people who are good also have resources that other people do not have. They have the willingness to look at difficult truths. They have the strength to change when they need to change. They have people around them who care about them enough to protect them."

"Is that what you are doing?" Maya asked. "Protecting her?"

"I am trying to," Bex said. "I am trying to understand the threat and to neutralize it before it can do serious damage."

They talked for another twenty minutes, about school and friends and the small details of Maya's life that made up the landscape she moved through. Bex held these details carefully. They were the things that mattered, the things that kept her connected to home while she was in Portugal doing work that was necessary and difficult and that sometimes felt like it was removing her from the things that actually mattered. Maya talked about the drama of the senior class, about the way people were starting to make decisions about college and moving away and the way those decisions were making people anxious and weird. She talked about her debate competition coming up in March and her uncertainty about whether she wanted to go to Berkeley or Yale, as though those were the only two options in the world and she could not decide between them. She talked about her mother, Bex's sister, and the way her mother had started dating someone new and the complications that arose from that.

When they hung up, Bex sat for a moment in the darkness of her room, listening to the Atlantic outside, feeling the way that ocean sounds traveled through walls and time and distance. Maya was right that Bex was lonely. Bex was also right that being alone and being lonely were two different things. You could choose solitude without choosing loneliness. But you could also choose both, could arrange your life in ways that protected you from the complications

of other people while also leaving you isolated from the things that made the work worth doing.

The decision to build a life around protection work had been made a long time ago, back when Bex was young enough to believe that she could keep the personal and professional completely separate, that she could do work that mattered without it costing her something in her actual life. She had learned over the years that was not true. The work took things from you. The work required you to see the worst in people, to understand the ways that betrayal happened, to recognize how trust was a vulnerability. That learning changed how you moved through the world.

She thought about Ingrid, sitting in her office, looking at research that was being stolen by someone she trusted. She thought about what it meant to care about something enough that losing it would change you fundamentally. She thought about why Ingrid had really hired her, what Ingrid was really scared of, what Ingrid was really hoping Bex would be able to do. Ingrid was scared of loss. Ingrid was scared of betrayal. Ingrid was scared of the moment when she would understand that she had been wrong about someone she believed in, and that understanding would reshape how she saw the world.

Bex thought about her own experiences of that kind of loss, the relationships that had ended badly, the people she had trusted who had turned out to be less trustworthy than she had believed. There were professional relationships and there were personal relationships, but the loss was similar in both cases. It was the loss of a narrative you had been telling yourself about the world, the loss of the belief that if you paid attention carefully enough, you could prevent bad things from happening.

She thought about calling Patricia Moore again, pushing harder on the question of who had recommended her, whether there was something about this situation that Patricia was not telling her. But it was late, and Patricia was on the West Coast, and Bex decided that some conversations were better in the morning when you were not tired and lonely and thinking about things that were difficult to think about. Those conversations required precision and attention, and Bex was too tired for that kind of work.

Instead, she opened her laptop and began organizing her notes, creating the architecture of what she knew and what she suspected and what she still needed to figure out. She was looking at it from every angle, holding multiple possibilities in her mind at the same time, waiting for something to shift, waiting for a pattern to emerge that would make sense of all the separate pieces. She organized her notes by source: information from Daria, information from Petra, information from the physical security assessment, information from Paulo about the server systems. She looked for contradictions in the narratives people had provided, for inconsistencies in the timeline, for gaps in the explanation that suggested people were hiding things.

The work was clear. The work was always clear. It was the things around the work, the personal costs of the work, the ways the work connected to actual people with actual lives, that made things complicated. Bex understood that her job was not to make things simpler for Ingrid. Her job was to reveal the truth, to make visible what had been hidden, to create the possibility for Ingrid to make informed decisions about what to do next.

Bex worked late into the night, past midnight, into the early morning hours when the Atlantic was quiet and the town was completely asleep. She reviewed every note she had taken since arriving in Portugal. She thought through the sequence of events, the pattern of when things had started happening, the way the threats had been deployed at a specific moment in time. She thought about who would have had the knowledge and the access to orchestrate this kind of operation, who would have understood the foundation well enough to know what would work and what would not.

She also thought about the human side of this problem. She thought about Ingrid, about the moment when Ingrid would understand what had happened, about how that moment would change her. She thought about the other researchers at the foundation, about how they would react when they learned that someone they worked with had betrayed them, that their research had been stolen, that the open collaborative environment they had built was vulnerable to violation.

She thought about the research itself, about the work that David and Daria and the other researchers were doing, about the importance of that work in a

world where artificial intelligence systems were being deployed without adequate scrutiny. That research mattered. That research was being stolen by people who wanted to prevent it from being published, who wanted to prevent the public from knowing about the gaps and vulnerabilities in those systems. That was a form of harm that was not immediately visible, but it was real.

When she finally slept, around four in the morning, she did not sleep easily. She dreamed about the Atlantic, about walking along a beach in the dark, about searching for something that had been lost in the waves. The dreams were not comforting. The dreams were the kind that left you more tired when you woke up than you had been when you fell asleep, that drained your energy rather than restoring it.

The Technical Anomaly

The server room was accessible only to Carvalho and to Petra, or at least that was what Bex had been told in the official security briefing. Bex spent the morning of her seventh day in Portugal with a technical consultant from Lisbon, someone Santiago had recommended, someone who understood server systems and data management and the technical architecture that most security assessments assumed was beyond the scope of physical security evaluation.

The consultant's name was Paulo, he was in his fifties, he had spent decades working with government agencies on their IT security, and he had the particular combination of skepticism and precision that suggested he had seen things go wrong before and had figured out how to identify problems before they became disasters.

They started with the basic architecture: what servers were in the room, what systems they controlled, what kind of access they had to the foundation's network. The systems were good, modern, well-configured with appropriate redundancy. The security protocols were appropriate for an organization of this size. The backup systems were properly isolated from the primary systems,

which was excellent design work.

"So far so good," Paulo said. "Nothing that sets off obvious red flags. But let me check the access logs."

He plugged in a secure laptop and began accessing the server management systems, reviewing the audit trails that tracked who had accessed what and when. This was the part of the work that most people skipped over because it was tedious and technical and required knowing what normal looked like in order to identify what was abnormal.

Paulo knew what normal looked like. He spent thirty minutes reading through the logs without saying anything, his face concentrated, his hands typing methodical queries that would isolate patterns in the data. Then he made a small sound, the kind of sound that suggested he had found something.

"There is a secondary account," he said. "Access-level user, created about three months ago. No documentation of who created it, no authorization request in the system, no record of why it was created or what its purpose is."

"Can you identify who has been using it?" Bex asked.

"Not directly from the logs. But I can tell you what the account has been doing. It has been accessing the research data folders, pulling files, copying them to a secondary location, all during off-hours. The activity is systematic, methodical, the kind of pattern you see when someone is deliberately extracting specific information."

Bex made detailed notes. This was what she had suspected. This was what Daria had noticed. But now they had technical confirmation of it, evidence that would stand up to scrutiny.

"Can you trace where the data is going?" Bex asked.

"It is going to an external server, probably cloud-based, probably paid for with untraceable accounts. The extraction is being done in a way that is designed to avoid triggering alarm protocols. Someone with deep technical knowledge has configured this very carefully. This is not someone's first time doing this kind of work."

"How long would it take to extract all of the research data?" Bex asked.

"At the current rate, about another month. They have already taken maybe sixty percent of it. They are being careful not to take everything at once, not to make it obvious that they are extracting the entire research library. They are leaving some files, taking others, creating a pattern that suggests targeted access rather than comprehensive theft."

Bex thought through the timeline. The extraction had been happening for three months. The threats had started about two weeks ago. The threats were deployed after the bulk of the data had already been extracted. That suggested that whoever was behind this operation was confident they had what they needed, and the threats were being used to establish the cover story, creating the narrative of why the data would soon go missing.

"Is there any way to identify who created the account?" Bex asked.

"Not from the logs. But there might be a way from the administrative records. Whoever created the account would have needed administrative access. That access is limited to Carvalho and Petra. One of them created this account, or one of them provided access to someone else who created it."

"Show me where the data is going," Bex said.

Paulo worked for another ten minutes, tracing the data pathway, trying to identify where the external server was located, what kind of security it had, whether there was any way to determine who owned it.

"The server is located in France," Paulo said finally. "Paris, specifically. It is probably part of a commercial cloud service, probably rented by someone using false credentials. I could get more detail with deeper forensic investigation, but that would require involving law enforcement and would announce that the security has been compromised."

"France," Bex said. "Santiago mentioned that the French consulate has been asking questions about unusual data transmission from the Portuguese tech sector."

"Then you have your answer," Paulo said. "Someone in France wants the research data. They hired someone at the foundation to extract it. They created the false threats to provide cover. And they have probably already downloaded most of what they need."

"Can you stop the extraction?" Bex asked.

"I can change the account passwords, disable the secondary account, implement monitoring protocols that will alert you to any attempt to recreate similar accounts. But that would announce that the compromise has been discovered. Right now, whoever is behind this does not know that you know. If I disable the account, they will know you know. It would be like turning on a light and announcing to everyone that you have been standing in the dark watching them."

Bex thought about that carefully. She was at the critical decision point that her Guardian training had prepared her for. This was Incident Commander Protocol work -- she needed to Orient herself (assess the full situation), Declare the nature of the threat (understand what she was actually facing), and then Assign resources and action (decide how to move forward).

"Leave it," she said. "Monitor it carefully, but leave it. I need time to figure out who is actually responsible and who else might be involved. I need to understand the full operation before I move against it. I need to know whether this is just Carvalho acting alone or whether there are other people in the foundation involved. I need to know who is directing them from France, whether it is a company or an intelligence service. I need to know what will happen after I expose them."

"That is risky," Paulo said. "Every day you wait, more data leaves the foundation. Every day you wait, you are potentially allowing a theft to continue when you could stop it."

"I know the risk," Bex said. "But there is also a risk in moving too early. If I alert them now, they will just disappear. They will move the data somewhere I cannot track it. They will delete evidence. They will escape before anyone can hold them accountable. I need to wait until I understand the full picture before I move."

Paulo considered that. He was the kind of technical consultant who had probably been through these kinds of decisions before, who understood that sometimes the right choice was not the immediately obvious choice. He nodded slowly, the kind of acknowledgment that suggested he understood the

reasoning even if he did not entirely agree with the approach.

"I will set up the monitoring system," he said finally. "I will log everything. I will create detailed records of what they are doing, when they are doing it, where the data is going. If you need to present this to law enforcement later, the documentation will be thorough. But you need to understand that every moment you wait is a moment they are consolidating their theft. Every moment you wait is a moment they are preparing to escape if they realize they have been discovered."

"I understand," Bex said.

"Do you?" Paulo asked. "Because it sounds like you are thinking about this as an investigation, like you have time to be careful and methodical. But the people you are investigating understand that they are being hunted. They may not know that you specifically are hunting them, but they understand that their operation is temporary, that it will be discovered eventually, and they are racing against that discovery."

That was a fair point. Bex had been thinking about this like a security consultant, like someone who had time to gather complete information before taking action. But Paulo was right that the people involved were probably thinking about how much time they had left, how much longer they could continue before someone caught on, how soon they needed to complete the extraction and disappear.

"That is a risk," Paulo said. "Every day you wait, they extract more data. Every day you wait, they move closer to the completion of their operation."

"I know," Bex said. "But if I move too early, if I alert them before I understand the full scope, then they will just disappear. They will go to ground and I will never know who they were or who they were working for. I will never be able to completely neutralize the threat."

Paulo shut down his laptop and unplugged it from the secure connection.

"I will send you detailed technical documentation," he said. "I will also set up a monitoring system that logs any access to the secondary account, any attempts to create similar accounts, any major data movements. You will be able to track what they do in real time without them knowing they are being

tracked. But do not wait too long. At some point, waiting becomes inaction, and inaction becomes complicity."

After Paulo left, Bex went back into the server room alone. She stood there for a long time, not touching anything, just thinking about the architecture of what was happening. Someone in France wanted the research. Someone at the foundation was providing access. The threats were cover. The invitation to Bex was either part of the cover, making it legitimate that external security was present when the data went missing, or the invitation was someone else's move in a game that Bex did not fully understand yet.

She thought about the timing of everything. The secondary account created three months ago. The data extraction beginning immediately and continuing systematically. The threats starting six weeks ago, after the bulk of the important data had already been extracted. The recommendation from MPSA coming at exactly the right moment to bring in external security. Either this was an extraordinarily well-timed sequence of events, or there was coordination beyond what she had discovered so far.

She thought about who would have had both the knowledge and the access to orchestrate this. Carvalho had the technical knowledge. Petra had administrative access. But was one of them the driving force, or were they both being directed by someone else? Was this their operation, something they had initiated and planned, or were they following instructions from someone outside the foundation?

She needed to talk to Santiago. She needed to understand what he had learned about Carvalho and Petra. She needed to understand whether there was evidence of French connection, whether there was money moving in ways that would confirm what she suspected. She needed to understand whether either of them had been in contact with someone at a French company or a French intelligence agency. She needed to know whether they had been recruited or coerced, whether they were acting willingly or under pressure.

But first, she needed to not react. She needed to move through the foundation office as though she had not found anything, as though the secondary account was not evidence of theft, as though the systematic

extraction of data was not happening right now, underneath the surface of normal operations. She needed to act as though she was still searching for answers rather than confirming what she had already discovered.

This was the hardest part of the work. This was the moment where you had to understand something that was happening and pretend you did not understand it. This was the moment where you had to see betrayal and not react to it. This was the moment where you had to know the truth and pretend to be still searching for it. This was the moment where you had to understand the full extent of the problem without showing that you understood it.

Bex was good at this. It was one of the things she had been trained to do during her Guardian ribbon training at MPSA -- Psychological Compartmentalization using the Submarine Model. She had learned to isolate her professional knowledge from her personal reactions, to prevent the stress and complexity of one area of pressure from flooding her other cognitive systems, to move through the world with a false face while holding the real knowledge privately. She had learned to ask innocent questions when she already knew the answers, to engage with people in ways that made them think she did not yet know what she needed to know.

But it was still hard, because now she understood what was at stake. Now she understood that Ingrid's fear was justified, that Ingrid had been right to trust her instincts about something being wrong. Now she understood that the betrayal was real and that it was happening right now, with each passing hour, with each file that was copied to the external server, with each piece of research that was leaving the foundation and moving toward Paris. Every moment she waited to confront the situation was another moment that gave the people involved time to move the data further, to consolidate their theft, to prepare their escape.

She left the server room and walked through the foundation office with the deliberate pace of someone who had just finished a routine technical inspection. She did not speak to Carvalho. She did not look at Petra. She did not do anything that would alert them to the fact that she had discovered what they had done. She simply documented what she had seen, organized it in her mind, and prepared for the next phase of the work.

The Cascais Café

There was a cafe in Cascais, a small place on the main commercial street, called O Repouso, which meant rest or repose, the kind of name that suggested that the cafe existed for purposes other than making money. Bex found it on her eighth day in Portugal, a quiet morning when she had no formal work scheduled, no interviews planned, no systems to assess.

She sat at an outside table, despite the cold, because the vantage point was good and because sitting outside was a particular kind of thinking, the kind where you could be aware of your surroundings while also being absorbed in your own thoughts. She ordered a coffee and a pastry, the kind of small French pastry that Cascais seemed to produce with regular consistency, and she watched the neighborhood move through its morning.

The street was not busy. Cascais in February was not a tourist destination. The restaurants and shops catered to locals, to people who lived in the town, to the permanent population that existed underneath the seasonal attention. The light was the Atlantic light, which was different from other light. It was clean and honest and it showed things the way they actually were, without flattering

them or disguising them.

Bex thought through what she knew and what she was still trying to figure out.

Someone wanted the research data. The evidence for this was clear. The secondary account, the systematic extraction, the technical sophistication of the operation. That was fact, confirmed by Paulo, documented in the server logs.

Someone at the foundation was facilitating the extraction. The evidence for this was Carvalho or Petra, or possibly both. The secondary account required administrative access. The timing required someone who understood the rhythm of the foundation, who knew when systems could be accessed without raising attention, who knew what normal access patterns looked like so they could hide the abnormal ones within them.

The threats were cover. The pattern was too clean, too designed, too obviously a construction. Real threats would have been messier. Real threats would have had specific demands or specific escalation. These threats were just noise, signal without content, the kind of message that looked like a threat because it was supposed to look like a threat, not because it was actually communicating intent.

The French connection was probable but not certain. The server location in Paris suggested French involvement. Santiago's report about the French consulate asking questions suggested French interest. But that could be coincidence. That could be correlation without causation. That could be a false trail designed to mislead.

Bex had to hold all of these ideas at the same time, had to resist the pressure to commit to one narrative, had to remain open to the possibility that she was wrong about any or all of them.

This was the discipline of the work. This was the thing that separated good consultants from people who just imposed their own stories on situations and then looked for evidence to confirm those stories. Bex had trained for years to see the difference between what you knew and what you assumed, to resist the comfortable closure of a solved problem, to sit with uncertainty until the uncertainty resolved itself into clarity.

A woman walked by with a dog, a small dog, the kind that did not seem to have a clear purpose except to exist and to be walked. The woman nodded at Bex, the way people nodded at each other in cafes, the way you acknowledged that someone else existed in your space without requiring anything from that acknowledgment. Bex nodded back.

She thought about Ingrid, about what it meant to build something you cared about and then to have that thing threatened by someone you trusted. She thought about the precision of that betrayal, the way it was designed to hurt not just professionally but personally. She thought about what Ingrid would do when she understood what had happened, when she understood that Carvalho or Petra or both had chosen to steal from her, to betray her work, to compromise the foundation she had built.

She thought about how difficult it was to love your work and have that work endangered. She thought about how difficult it was to believe in people and have that belief violated. These were the costs of caring about things. These were the prices you paid for having something worth protecting.

A man sat down at a table across the street, reading a newspaper, the kind of person who just wanted to drink coffee and read the news without any larger agenda. He was there for maybe fifteen minutes, then he left. Just a person, just someone moving through the morning, just someone living a life that was not connected to Bex's work or Bex's situation or any of the complications that Bex was holding in her mind.

That was the thing about investigations. They consumed you. They made you see everything as potentially connected, as potentially meaningful, as potentially part of the puzzle you were trying to solve. But most of the time, people were just people. Most of the time, a person drinking coffee and reading a newspaper was not part of any larger operation. Most of the time, people were not connected to your work or your life at all. They just existed in proximity to you for a moment and then they moved on.

The coffee was good. The pastry was good. The light was clean and honest and it showed everything the way it actually was, without embellishment or disguise.

Bex thought about what she needed to do next. She needed Santiago's information about financial connections and travel. She needed to know whether Carvalho or Petra had been in contact with French nationals, whether money was moving in ways that would confirm the hypothesis of paid theft. She needed to understand whether the recommendation from MPSA was part of this operation or whether it was something else entirely.

She also needed to understand the limits of what she could do in a foreign jurisdiction, what kind of evidence would stand up to Portuguese law enforcement scrutiny, what kind of actions she could take without creating legal problems for herself.

But for now, she sat with the uncertainty. For now, she let her mind move through the possibilities without committing to any of them. For now, she drank her coffee and watched Cascais move through its morning and she held the knowledge that something was happening underneath the surface of ordinary life, something that was designed to be hidden, something that required her complete attention and her full professional skill to address.

This was the work. This was the part that people did not usually see, the part that was not dramatic or exciting or particularly visible. This was the part that was just sitting and thinking and noticing and being patient with the process of understanding. This was the part that took discipline and precision and the willingness to be uncomfortable with not knowing.

Bex had always been good at this. It was one of the things that made her good at her work. She could sit with uncertainty. She could hold multiple possibilities. She could wait for the moment when things became clear without pushing for that clarity too early.

She sat at the cafe for another hour, finishing her coffee, watching the light move across the buildings, watching Cascais reveal itself in the honest Atlantic light. The town moved at its own pace. People came and went. The neighborhood had its rhythms that had nothing to do with her work, with the investigation, with the complexity that she was holding in her mind.

This was something Bex had learned over the years. Most of the world moved forward without any knowledge of the problems you were trying to

solve. Most people went about their days without any awareness that there were operations happening underneath their radar, betrayals taking place, systems being compromised. That was both comforting and unsettling. It was comforting because it meant that her work did not have to be perfect, that mistakes did not have to be catastrophic. It was unsettling because it meant that most of the harm that happened in the world was invisible to the people living in proximity to it.

She thought about what would happen after she presented her findings to Ingrid. She thought about the confrontation that would have to happen, the moment when Carvalho or Petra would understand that they had been discovered, that their operation had been exposed. She thought about how that moment would change things, how it would mark the boundary between the time before people knew and the time after they knew.

She had done this work before. She had brought bad news to clients. She had presented evidence of betrayal. She had watched people process the understanding that someone they trusted had hurt them. It was never easy. It was never clean. It was always complicated by the emotions underneath the information, by the ways that people did not want to believe what they were being told, by the cognitive dissonance between what they had believed was true and what the evidence showed was actually happening.

Bex finished her coffee and ordered another one, not because she needed the caffeine but because she wanted to sit a little longer, to think a little longer, to be in the present moment without having to move forward into the next phase of the work.

She thought about the pattern of the investigation so far. She had come to Cascais ten days ago. She had done physical security assessments of both the villa and the foundation office. She had interviewed the staff and observed how the organization actually functioned. She had confirmed the data extraction. She had begun to understand the shape of the operation. Within a few days, Santiago would have financial information. Within a few days, she would have the pieces necessary to present a complete picture to Ingrid.

And then what? Then she would have to decide what to do with the information. Then she would have to decide whether to go to the police, whether to confront Carvalho and Petra directly, whether to give Ingrid the information and let Ingrid decide what to do. Those decisions would have consequences. Those decisions would move the situation from the investigation phase into the action phase, and once things moved into the action phase, they could not be reversed or undone.

In her experience, the moment when you had to act was usually harder than the moment when you were still investigating. Once you had the information, the work became much simpler in some ways and much harder in others. It became simpler because you were no longer holding uncertainty; you knew what had happened and you knew what needed to happen next. It became harder because people did not like having their betrayals revealed, and the person who revealed the betrayal was often held responsible for the emotional fallout that came from it.

She thought about what kind of person Carvalho was, whether he would accept responsibility for what he had done or whether he would try to minimize it, to explain it away, to justify it as something he had been forced to do. She thought about Petra, whether she had been a willing participant or whether she had been coerced, whether she had known the full scope of what Carvalho was doing or whether she had just been helping with something she did not fully understand.

The light was starting to change, the afternoon starting to give way toward evening. Bex had maybe three more hours before she needed to be back at the villa to meet with Ingrid for the evening check-in. She used those three hours to sit with the knowledge she had accumulated, to think through the implications, to consider what information she still needed before she was ready to present her findings.

She thought about the MPSA network and who had recommended her. She thought about whether that recommendation had been part of the operation or whether it had been separate from it. She thought about whether Patricia Moore knew more than she had said, whether there was something about this situation that had not yet been revealed. Those were questions she would

pursue, but not urgently. The answers to those questions would not change the fundamental facts of what was happening at the foundation.

When she finally left the cafe, she felt more organized in her thinking than she had before she arrived. She had moved through the uncertainty without trying to resolve it. She had held multiple possibilities without committing to any of them. She had been patient with the process of understanding.

The afternoon stretched ahead of her. There was more work to do. But the work was clearer now. The pattern was becoming visible. She just needed to wait for Santiago's information and then for all the pieces to fall into place and then for her to understand exactly what she was dealing with and what she needed to do to stop it. She needed to be patient a little longer, to hold the knowledge quietly, to move through the remaining days of her contract with the kind of precision and care that would allow her to do this right.

The Police

Santiago Reyes had the kind of weathered face that came from working in law enforcement for thirty years and never quite getting used to how people treated each other. He was in his early forties, Portuguese, with the practical demeanor of someone who understood that most crime happened because people wanted something and did not think about the actual consequences of taking it.

They met at a cafe in Lisbon, near the police headquarters, the kind of place where conversations could happen without anyone particularly noticing. He was already there when Bex arrived, a coffee waiting on the table across from him. He must have been informed that she preferred coffee without a lot of ceremony. That suggested he had been briefed about her, which suggested that Ingrid had a better relationship with the Portuguese authorities than her previous comments had suggested.

"You look good," Santiago said when Bex sat down. "Ingrid said you would probably want to talk. I am glad. These threats have been confusing. They do not fit the normal pattern of harassment we see."

"What is the normal pattern?" Bex asked. She sat down and took a sip of the coffee. It was good, strong, the kind of coffee that Portuguese cafes seemed to produce naturally. "Tell me what you usually see when someone is genuinely threatening someone else versus when someone is creating a cover story."

"Usually, if someone is threatening a public figure or a businessperson, they have a specific demand or they have a pattern of escalation," Santiago said. "These are neither. They are generic, they do not demand anything specific, and there is no escalation. First one arrived, then another, then another. All basically the same content, same delivery method, no progression."

"So either it is a performance," Bex said, "or it is genuine but poorly executed. Or both."

"Or both," Santiago agreed. "Ingrid said something similar when she called us. She said the threats did not feel real to her, they felt designed. I am trained to believe threats. But I am also trained to understand the difference between a real threat and a message that someone wanted to look like a threat."

Bex leaned back in her chair. "I have found evidence of data extraction from the foundation's systems. Files being accessed and copied outside of normal patterns, over a period of at least three months. The threats start appearing about two weeks after the most recent large data pull. That timing suggests the threats are either cover for the ongoing extraction or a way to establish that there was a security breach happening, so if the data ends up public, there is a narrative for how it leaked."

Santiago was quiet, processing. "You are suggesting that someone brought in external security, possibly specifically you, so that when the data extraction was later discovered, there would be evidence that there was a security problem that an outside consultant was brought in to address."

"It is one possibility," Bex said. "It establishes plausible deniability. The foundation can say there was a data breach, they brought in security to address it, and the data was stolen during that period despite their best efforts."

"But you are not buying that," Santiago said.

"No. I think the data extraction is happening with internal cooperation. I think someone inside the foundation is working with someone outside it to pull the research files. The threats are cover, yes, but they are also creating a context where people are distracted, where questions about data security are framed as part of the threat response rather than as suspicious activity."

"Who is inside it?" Santiago asked.

"That is what I am still trying to figure out," Bex said. "But it is someone with high-level administrative access. Likely Tomás Carvalho, probably with cooperation from Petra Voss. Whether they are doing it willingly or under coercion, I do not know yet."

Santiago pulled out a notebook. "Tell me what you have found technically. I need specifics if I am going to be able to help you without it becoming an official investigation, which would alert whoever is involved."

Bex walked him through the technical details, the access patterns, the secondary account that was syncing data without being documented in the official access logs. She explained how the extraction was being done slowly, systematically, in ways that looked like normal administrative activity if you were not specifically looking for the pattern. Santiago took notes, asked clarifying questions, the kind of systematic approach that suggested he had been good at his job for a long time.

"The question is motive," Santiago said when she was finished. "Why would Carvalho steal research data? Why would Petra be involved? What is the value here, beyond the obvious?"

"The research data is valuable because it exposes compliance gaps in major AI systems," Bex said. "Companies are spending a lot of money on those systems. If the research is published, it forces them to redesign, retest, potentially face regulatory action. Someone wants to prevent that research from being published, or they want to get the data before it is published so they can work preemptively."

"Tech companies," Santiago said. It was not a question. "They have hired someone to steal the research so they can understand what the foundation knows about their systems."

"Probably. Which means whoever is directly involved, whoever is pulling the data, is probably working for someone else. They are the foot soldiers, not the strategists."

"That would make Carvalho less likely to be the mastermind," Santiago said. "He is too central to the foundation. If this goes wrong, he is exposed."

"Unless he has been promised something. A new job somewhere else, protection, money, something that makes the risk worth taking."

Santiago closed his notebook. "Let me see what I can find out through official channels about Carvalho and Voss. Nothing that would alert them, just background checks, financial information, anything that shows whether they have been contacted by outside parties or whether they are in financial difficulty. It is possible I will find something, possible I will not. But it is a place to start."

"Be careful," Bex said. "If this is coordinated with people outside Portugal, they might have someone watching the official investigation."

"I am always careful," Santiago said. "It has kept me alive this long."

They finished their coffee in silence. When Santiago left, he left cash on the table for both cups, the way someone leaves a tip when they want to remember that this conversation never happened. He also left an email address written on a card. "Use this instead of the official channels," he said. "For anything you need."

Bex walked back toward Alfama, thinking about the shape of the problem. Someone wanted the research data. Someone had recruited people inside the foundation to extract it. Someone had created a cover story with the threatening letters and brought in external security to add authenticity to the cover story.

The question was whether the person who hired Bex knew all of this or whether someone else had made that recommendation separately.

She thought about calling Patricia Moore again, asking directly whether the MPSA network had knowledge of this operation going in. But she already knew the answer would be complicated. Patricia would not have recommended her if she had had direct knowledge that Bex would be walking into an ongoing theft. But Patricia might have had suspicions without knowledge. Patricia

might have known something was wrong without understanding exactly what the problem was.

That would have to wait for later, though. For now, she had immediate work to do. She needed to understand who Carvalho was in communication with, whether there was evidence of external contact, whether money was moving in ways that suggested he was being paid. She needed to understand what Petra Voss was actually afraid of. And she needed to understand whether there were other people in the foundation who were involved, people she had not identified yet.

As she navigated the narrow streets of Alfama, Bex deployed her Ghost ribbon training -- maintaining Environmental Blending as she moved through the neighborhood. She was just another person moving through the afternoon, unremarkable, belonging to the background. This was the work of Signature Reduction: managing all the physical signals that made her memorable, blending completely into the context so that the brain categorized her as background rather than as significant. No one noticed her. No one was tracking her. She moved like someone who lived here, someone ordinary, someone not worth attention.

The afternoon light was coming through the narrow streets of Alfama in that specific way it had, golden and precise, and Bex used it to guide herself back toward where she had arranged to meet Ingrid at the house in Cascais.

They had work to do. The kind of work that required patience and precision and the willingness to sit with incomplete information until the pieces started to fit together.

Bex had always been good at that. It was one of the things she had been trained to do, and it was one of the things that made her useful in situations like this one.

The Pattern

By day eight, Bex had mapped the data extraction in detail. She had traced the secondary account back to an IP address that routed through three different VPN services, which meant whoever set it up knew what they were doing technically. The files being pulled were systematic: first the raw research data, then the analysis documents, then the methodology papers. It was the work of someone who understood what was valuable and in what order they needed to access it.

She had also confirmed that Carvalho's personal finances showed a deposit three months ago, the same time the data extraction started. The deposit came from an offshore account that traced back through shell corporations, the kind of financial maneuvering that suggested professional work. Twenty thousand euros for what appeared to be two weeks of work, then nothing since. That was interesting. It suggested that Carvalho had been paid upfront and might have been promised additional payment upon completion, or it suggested that the payment structure was designed to keep him dependent on whoever was doing the paying.

She had found emails between Carvalho and an address that did not have a name attached to it, just a string of numbers and letters. The emails were oblique, talking about deliverables and timelines and the need to move things forward. Nothing explicit enough to be direct evidence of the theft, but explicit enough to suggest coordination with someone outside the foundation. The email address traced to a server in Spain, which meant the person Carvalho was communicating with was probably based somewhere on the continent or was using Europe as a false trail.

When she had all of this documented and verified, she sat down with Ingrid in the study and laid out what she had found.

"Carvalho has been copying your research data for at least three months," Bex said. "He received a payment three weeks ago that appears to be compensation for his work. He is in communication with someone outside the foundation, probably coordinating the extraction. The threatening letters appear to be part of the cover, designed to establish that there was a security breach happening and to provide a narrative for how the data could have leaked."

Ingrid listened without interrupting. She sat very still, the way people sit when they are receiving confirmation of something they have suspected but have been hoping was not true. When Bex finished, Ingrid was quiet for a long moment.

"Is he working for someone specific?" she asked.

"I do not know yet. The email contact is anonymous. The payment came through an offshore account. But based on what you told me about the research, I would guess one of the major tech companies. Someone who wants to know what you know about their systems before you publish."

"What do we do about it?" Ingrid asked.

"That depends on what you want," Bex said. "We can go to the Portuguese authorities, let Santiago handle it officially. We can confront Carvalho and see if he cooperates, if he will tell us who hired him. Or we can try to let the extraction continue while we figure out who is on the other end of it."

Ingrid looked like she was going to say something, then stopped. She got up and walked to the window, looking out at the Atlantic light. There was anger in the set of her shoulders, the kind of controlled anger that came from understanding that you had been betrayed and that the person who betrayed you had done it for reasons that made a kind of sense, even if sense did not make it acceptable.

"There is something I have not told you," she said finally. "About why I founded the foundation in the first place."

Bex waited. This was the moment where the real story came out, the moment where the official explanation gave way to the actual experience that had motivated the work.

"A tech company used one of my algorithms to filter loan applications," Ingrid said. "They told their customers that the algorithm was objective, that it made decisions without bias. But it did not. They had trained it on historical data that was biased, and then they had adjusted it to match their existing customer base, which meant it was designed to reject applications from people who were not like their current customers. The algorithm looked objective, but it was systematically biased."

"You found out," Bex said.

"I found out by accident. I was consulting with them on an unrelated project, and I saw something in the training data that did not make sense. I asked questions. They asked me to drop it. I did not. They made my life very difficult until I left."

Ingrid turned back from the window. "That is why I started the foundation. Because I wanted to understand how these systems actually worked, what they were really doing, what gaps existed between their marketing and their reality. I wanted to expose it so that people knew to be skeptical, so that regulators understood what questions to ask."

"And someone does not want that," Bex said.

"Several someones. We have been getting indirect pressure for the last six months. Tech companies asking if they could fund our research. Consultants offering us partnership opportunities if we would adjust our methodology.

People trying to hire the researchers away from the foundation."

"And now they are stealing the research directly," Bex said.

"Because the indirect pressure is not working," Ingrid said. "So they have escalated. They want to know what we know before we publish it, so they can anticipate what changes they will need to make, or so they can discredit the research, or so they can buy time to adjust their systems quietly."

"What do you want to do?" Bex asked.

Ingrid was quiet for a long moment. "I want to know who is doing this. I want to know which company, which person made the decision to steal from me. And I want to make sure that when this is all over, my research gets published anyway, and the world knows exactly what happened here."

"That is going to require going through the authorities," Bex said. "It is going to require giving Santiago enough to work with that he can trace the other end of the operation. It is going to be messy."

"I am ready for messy," Ingrid said. "I am tired of being careful. I am tired of people trying to make this go away quietly. I want them to have to face the actual consequences of what they have done."

Over the next three days, Bex conducted the most thorough analysis of the data extraction patterns that she could manage without alerting the people who were doing the extracting. She worked with Santiago's team to recover deleted files, to reconstruct the data that had been accessed, to understand the full scope of what had been compromised.

The picture that emerged was both reassuring and troubling. The people who had stolen the data had gotten the raw research files, the analysis documents, and the methodology papers. But they had not gotten the complete synthesis, the final conclusions that Ingrid had been holding separate from the main database, protecting them through a level of compartmentalization that had actually worked.

It meant that the people who had stolen the data had the building blocks of Ingrid's research but not the fully integrated picture of what it all meant when combined. It meant that Ingrid's actual findings, her real conclusions about what the AI systems were doing and how significantly the compliance gaps

were, that was still protected.

"That is actually good," Bex told Ingrid. "It means the research that you publish is going to say things that the people who stole the data did not anticipate. They will be caught off guard by the actual conclusions."

"Unless they figure it out," Ingrid said. "Unless they combine the stolen data with their own knowledge and come to the same conclusions."

"They might," Bex said. "But the advantage of publishing first is that you control the narrative. You get to explain what the research means, what the implications are. They are going to be responding to your framework instead of setting the framework themselves. That matters. That changes the conversation."

The Confrontation

On day eleven, Bex decided that the time had come to stop gathering information and start asking direct questions. She arranged to meet with Carvalho privately, in a location that was secure enough for a serious conversation. She chose a cafe near the waterfront, public enough to be safe, but not so crowded that people would pay attention to them.

When Carvalho arrived, he looked like someone who had not slept well in days. His carefully maintained appearance was starting to crack. There was a tremor in his hands when he ordered his coffee, a tension in his shoulders that suggested he understood exactly why Bex had asked to see him.

"We need to talk," Bex said once they had ordered.

"I know," Carvalho said. "I have been expecting this."

"Tell me about the data extraction," Bex said.

Carvalho closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he looked smaller, like the weight of maintaining the pretense had been the only thing keeping him upright.

"I have a daughter," he said. "She is fourteen. She has a condition that requires treatment that is not covered by Portuguese health insurance. The treatment is available in Switzerland, but it is expensive. Very expensive. The kind of expensive that I could never afford on what I make at the foundation."

Bex said nothing. She had heard variations of this story before, but variations did not make it less true. Desperation was desperation, and it made people do things that they would not do if they had other options.

"Someone approached me," Carvalho continued. "They knew about my daughter. They knew about the expense. They said if I could provide them with access to Ingrid's research data, they would pay enough money that my daughter could get the treatment. They said the research would not be harmed, that it was just for internal review, that no one would ever know it had been taken."

"Who approached you?" Bex asked.

"I never met them. It was all through email. They said they represented a consulting firm that worked with tech companies on regulatory compliance. They said the research data would help their clients understand what adjustments needed to be made to be compliant with emerging EU regulations."

"And you believed them," Bex said. It was not a question. It was an observation of what had happened, a statement of the facts of the situation without judgment, though judgment was there underneath, in the way she said it.

"I believed them enough to justify what I was doing," Carvalho said. "I told myself that the research was important and the EU regulations were coming anyway and all I was doing was accelerating the timeline a little bit. But I knew, really, that it was theft."

"How much money have they paid you?" Bex asked.

"So far, just the initial payment. Twenty thousand euros. They said there would be more once the data was fully transferred and secure."

"And you have not finished the transfer yet."

"No. I have been scared. I have been scared since that day when you started asking questions about the access patterns. Daria mentioned something

to me about unusual activity. I thought I was caught. Then when Ingrid said she was bringing in external security, I thought it was definitely over."

"But it was not over," Bex said.

"I did not stop," Carvalho said. "I was too far in. The money was already being used for my daughter's treatment. If I stopped now, I would have to explain to her why her treatment was ending, and I could not do that."

Bex understood the logic. She also understood that it was the kind of logic that got people deeper into situations they could not get out of. It was the logic of someone who had made one bad choice and now was making subsequent bad choices because stopping the bad choices meant accepting the consequences of the first one.

"I need you to give me the email address of your contact," she said. "And I need you to stop the data extraction now."

"If I stop, they will know something is wrong. They will disappear. They will take the money and disappear."

"That is going to happen anyway," Bex said. "But right now, we still have a chance to understand who they are and what they are doing with the data. If you keep going, we will catch them with the data in hand. That is stronger than stopping the extraction halfway through."

Carvalho was quiet for a long moment. "If I do this, if I cooperate, what happens to me?"

"That depends on what you mean by cooperate. If you just stop the extraction and give me information, you are still guilty of theft and breach of trust. If you actively help me catch the people on the other end, if you become a witness, there might be ways to mitigate that. But I am not a lawyer and I am not a judge. I am just telling you that your current trajectory ends with you in a Portuguese prison unable to pay for your daughter's treatment."

"So I am going to be in trouble either way," Carvalho said.

"Yes," Bex said. "But there are degrees of trouble. Right now you can still choose which degree you want to experience. You can cooperate and face charges that are reduced because of cooperation. Or you can continue and face charges that are more severe because you continued the operation even after

you were aware that someone was investigating."

Carvalho gave her the email address. She already knew what it was, but having him confirm it was useful. It was the difference between suspicion and verification, between what she could infer and what she could prove. She also asked him for details about the communications, the promises that had been made, the timeline the people on the other end had given him.

"They said they needed the full research data by the end of February," Carvalho said. "That was the deadline they gave me. After that, they said they did not need anything else. They would have everything they needed."

Today was February 14th. That gave them two weeks before the extraction was supposed to be complete. Two weeks to understand who was on the other end of that email address and what they planned to do with the research. Two weeks to stop the operation before it reached its intended conclusion.

"What happens now?" Carvalho asked.

"Now you stop the extraction and you cooperate with law enforcement," Bex said. "You tell them everything you know about the people you have been communicating with, the timeline, the payment structure, all of it. You become a witness to what happened, and you hope that your cooperation is enough to get you a sentence that is survivable."

After Carvalho left the cafe, Bex sat alone with her coffee and thought through what she knew. Someone on the outside had money and motive to steal Ingrid's research. Someone had the sophistication to set up email systems that routed through multiple layers of anonymization. Someone knew Carvalho existed and knew about his daughter's medical condition.

That last part was important. It meant either someone had done serious background work on Carvalho or someone inside the foundation had given them information about him. She needed to find out which.

The Exposure

When Carvalho's data extraction abruptly stopped on February 15th, it triggered something in the system that was monitoring the operation. By the next morning, Bex received an email through her secure account. The message came from an address she did not recognize, routed through servers that would be impossible to trace. It was short and direct: "You are not helping. You are making things worse. Consider the consequences of continuing to interfere."

It was not a threat in the traditional sense. It was not specific enough to constitute a direct threat. It was more like a warning, a statement that whoever was sending it understood the situation clearly and understood what Bex was doing and had the ability to hurt her or the people around her.

Bex forwarded it to Santiago immediately.

"They know you are investigating," Santiago said when they met later that afternoon. "They know Carvalho has stopped cooperating with them. They are scared, which makes them dangerous."

"They are also operating from outside Portugal," Bex said. "They are depending on people inside the foundation to give them information about what

is happening. If Carvalho has stopped cooperating, they need to understand what that means and whether the operation is compromised."

Over the next day, Bex watched the email systems carefully. There was a spike in activity, emails going back and forth, the kind of frantic communication that suggested panic and reorganization. The operation that had been carefully planned, that had been methodical and slow, was suddenly becoming desperate.

She also started noticing something else. The emails that had been coming from the anonymous contact were now going unanswered. Carvalho was no longer responding to the coordination attempts. For the first time, the people on the other end of the operation understood that their carefully executed theft had been disrupted.

"I need to talk to whoever is running this," Bex told Ingrid. "I need to understand the structure of the operation and whether there is someone above the email contact, someone who is actually orchestrating what is happening."

"How do you propose to do that?" Ingrid asked.

"I am going to respond to the email. I am going to tell them that Carvalho has turned over to authorities, that the operation is compromised, and that if they want to understand how bad the situation is and what the actual exposure is, they need to talk to me."

"That is risky," Ingrid said.

"Yes," Bex said. "But it is also the fastest way to understand the scope of what we are dealing with. Right now we have evidence of theft, we have Carvalho's cooperation, we have the communication infrastructure. But we do not know who is actually directing this operation or what company is paying for it. We need that information."

Bex composed the email carefully. She identified herself as the external security consultant who had discovered the data extraction. She explained that Carvalho was no longer available to the operation and that his cooperation with authorities was imminent. She suggested that the operation had significant exposure and that understanding the full scope of what had happened was the best path to damage mitigation.

She hit send and waited.

The response came back in twenty minutes, which was faster than she expected. It was from a different email address, one that seemed to be less carefully anonymized than the previous contact.

"I need to understand what you want," the email said. "Are you offering to negotiate? Are you trying to trap me? Who are you actually working for?"

"I am working for the people who were harmed by the theft," Bex responded. "I want to understand the operation, and I want to know who is running it. If you are willing to have a conversation about that, I can arrange for us to meet and discuss it in person."

There was a longer pause before the response came. "There is a cafe called Tejo near the waterfront in Lisbon. Tomorrow at three PM. Come alone. We can talk."

Bex showed the email to Santiago immediately.

"It is a trap," Santiago said immediately. "He wants to get you away from the house, away from Ingrid, somewhere he can control the environment."

"Probably," Bex said. "But I am going to go. I want to talk to him, to understand what he was thinking, to see if he will give up who he is working for."

"I will have people positioned nearby," Santiago said. "We will monitor the situation. But if it goes wrong, we are coming in."

"Understood," Bex said. "But I want to talk to him first. I want to know how this works, what he was trying to accomplish, why he thought it was worth stealing research data and setting up a complicated operation to cover it up."

The Meeting

The cafe called Tejo was exactly the kind of place where someone who understood tactical situations would choose to meet. Busy enough that violence would draw attention, visible enough that he could see Bex coming, positioned near enough to the water that he would have a sense of escape routes. It was the kind of tactical thinking that came from someone who understood how to operate in hostile territory or how to avoid situations that might become hostile.

Bex arrived at fifteen minutes before three, giving herself time to assess the location. She ordered a coffee at an outside table, positioned herself where she could see the entrance and the main pathways through the cafe. Santiago had people positioned in nearby buildings and at another table nearby, but they were maintaining enough distance that they would not be immediately obvious to someone who was not specifically looking for surveillance.

The man who arrived at exactly three was older than Bex had expected. He looked to be in his early fifties, with the kind of weathered face that came from years of doing complicated work in complicated situations. He moved like someone who understood his own capability and was comfortable with it,

the kind of confidence that came from having succeeded at difficult things.

He sat down across from her.

"You look good," he said. "Training has kept you young."

Bex recognized him then. Not from anything specific, but from the tone of his voice and the way he moved and the comfortable assumption that he knew who she was. This was someone she had trained with years ago, someone from the MPSA network, someone named Marcus Reid who had been good at operational security and had disappeared from the organization about eight months ago.

"Marcus," she said. "I did not expect you."

"Nobody ever does," Marcus said. "That is part of how I have managed to stay in the business as long as I have. People expect to confront a stranger, not someone they knew years ago."

"Why did you bring me into this?" Bex asked. She was not interested in small talk. They were past that, and Marcus was smart enough to understand that.

"Because I needed you to find the theft," Marcus said. "I needed someone smart enough to identify the data extraction, thorough enough to document it properly, and famous enough in the MPSA network that when people looked back on this, they would see that an expert had been brought in to assess the situation. Your involvement legitimizes the security breach narrative."

"What security breach narrative?" Bex asked, though she already knew the answer.

"The narrative that the foundation's research was compromised by external threat actors, that Ingrid brought in expert consultants to assess the damage, that the theft was never preventable. I needed that narrative in place before the research data disappeared completely from the foundation's control. I needed a story for how the data left the building without anyone being able to stop it."

"So people can blame the theft on a mysterious external threat instead of on the people who actually stole it," Bex said.

"So people can accept that sometimes valuable things get stolen and the best you can do is understand what was taken and move forward," Marcus said. "So Ingrid and the foundation can move on without being destroyed by the knowledge that one of their people betrayed them."

"That is a nice story," Bex said. "But it is not true. Carvalho was approached, he was paid, he was directed to extract specific data. That is not a mysterious external threat. That is a coordinated theft operation."

"I know it is," Marcus said. "I am the one who coordinated it. But the narrative I am creating is more elegant than the actual truth. It is the narrative that people will accept because it is less uncomfortable than the truth."

He said it without shame, without apology. Just stating facts about how the world worked, how people preferred stories to truth, how a good narrative was more valuable than evidence. He looked tired, the way someone looks tired when they have been carrying a burden for a long time and have finally set it down.

"Who is paying you?" Bex asked.

Marcus smiled slightly. "Now we get to the part where you are trying to get me to confess. I appreciate the attempt. But I am not going to tell you who is paying me. I am going to tell you that you need to walk away from this investigation, that you need to tell Santiago and the Portuguese authorities that you have completed your assessment and found that there was a security breach that was successfully defended against. You need to tell Ingrid that her systems are now secure and she should consider upgrading her infrastructure as discussed in your preliminary report."

"I am not going to do any of those things," Bex said.

"Then you are going to regret it," Marcus said. "Not because I am going to hurt you. I am not stupid enough to add a corpse to this equation. But because people are going to start asking questions about your involvement, about whether you were complicit in the theft, about whether your appointment was legitimate or whether it was part of the scheme. Your reputation is going to become a liability."

"That is a nice threat," Bex said. "But it does not work if I am the one telling the story. If I document everything that happened here, if I show that you approached me through the MPSA network under false pretenses, if I make clear that you were orchestrating the theft while pretending to have walked away from active operations, the narrative works very differently."

"It does if anyone believes you," Marcus said. "But I have resources and I have time. I can make your story seem less convincing. I can suggest alternative interpretations. I can work the network and undermine your credibility."

"You can try," Bex said. "But you are going to lose. You might be good at operational logistics, but you are not good at the part that comes after the operation. You are not good at managing the fallout. And that is the part that actually matters."

Marcus leaned back in his chair. He looked tired, like the conversation was exhausting him in a way that operational planning did not.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Tell me what you want and maybe we can work something out."

"I want to know who is paying you," Bex said. "I want to know which company wanted the research data and why. I want to know how deep this goes. And I want you to stop trying to stop me from finding those things out."

Marcus was quiet for a long moment. He looked out at the water, at the boats moving across the harbor, at the tourists walking along the waterfront in the late afternoon light.

"I used to believe in the work," he said quietly. "I used to think that what we did mattered, that protecting people and protecting information actually contributed to something good. But then I saw a lot of ways that did not work. I saw good people get destroyed because they tried to do the right thing. I saw systems protect themselves instead of protecting the people who were actually vulnerable. And I got tired."

The Agreement

Marcus told Bex everything over the course of the next two hours. He explained how he had been approached by a consulting firm that worked on behalf of tech companies who wanted to understand what Ingrid's research was going to reveal before it was published. He explained how he had set up the infrastructure for the data theft, how he had identified Carvalho as a vulnerable point, how he had created the threat letters as cover.

He also explained what he had been paid and what he had been promised, and most importantly, he explained that he had known from the beginning that Bex would be the one to discover the theft.

"I recommended you specifically," Marcus said. "I knew that if Ingrid brought in outside security, it would be you. I knew that if you were looking at the systems, you would find what Carvalho was doing. I needed that to happen because the people paying me need evidence that there was a security breach so they can argue that the data was stolen from outside the foundation, not taken from inside."

"You were using me as cover," Bex said.

"I was using you as validation," Marcus said. "Your involvement legitimizes the theft as an external threat. If Ingrid had dealt with this internally, if she had fired Carvalho quietly and covered it up, then the narrative would be that the foundation was incompetent. With you involved, the narrative is that even expert consultants could not prevent a sophisticated external threat."

"That narrative is going to collapse the moment I tell Santiago and Ingrid what actually happened," Bex said.

"Yes," Marcus agreed. "Which is why I am going to help you."

Marcus explained that he was afraid. He was afraid of the people who had hired him because they had leverage over him and because they had shown a willingness to be ruthless in pursuit of their objectives. He was afraid that if he continued to work for them, he would become a liability that needed to be eliminated. He was afraid that running would not save him because they had resources that extended across borders and organizations.

"I want to cooperate," Marcus said. "I want to give you everything I have about the companies that hired me, the people I have been in communication with, the money that has changed hands. I want to turn myself in and I want to accept the consequences of what I have done. But I want protection while I am doing it. I want to know that the people who hired me cannot reach me while I am cooperating with authorities."

Bex called Santiago immediately and told him what Marcus had said.

"Bring him in," Santiago said. "I will arrange for safe custody while he gives his statement. Once he has cooperated fully, we can negotiate what happens with the charges he is facing."

Marcus came with Bex to Santiago's office voluntarily. He gave a full statement about the operation, the people who had hired him, the money that had been paid, the timeline for the theft. He gave them the names of the companies that had been involved in the coordination, the consultants who had worked on the theft operation, the bank accounts where the money had come from.

By the time he was finished, it was clear that the theft operation was not a simple matter of one bad actor. It was a coordinated effort by multiple tech companies who had pooled resources to steal Ingrid's research before it could be published and damage their competitive positions.

"This is bigger than Portugal," Santiago said to Bex when Marcus had finished. "This is going to require international law enforcement coordination. This is going to require working with regulatory authorities in multiple countries."

"Can you handle it?" Bex asked.

"We can handle our part," Santiago said. "But you need to go back to Ingrid and tell her that the research needs to be published immediately. If we delay, if we give these companies time to coordinate a response, they are going to find ways to discredit the research or suppress it. But if Ingrid publishes first, the research becomes part of the public record and the companies will be responding to her framework instead of setting their own."

When Bex returned to Ingrid's house in Cascais, she explained everything that had happened: Marcus Reid's involvement, the companies behind the theft operation, the coordination that had been required to extract the data. Ingrid listened carefully, taking notes, understanding the implications.

"How long until Marcus's statement becomes public?" Ingrid asked.

"That depends on how the investigation proceeds," Bex said. "But Santiago is going to push for speed. He understands that delay gives the companies time to coordinate a response."

"Then I am publishing tomorrow," Ingrid said. "I am going to compile the final analysis, and I am going to release it publicly. I am going to explain what the research shows, what the compliance gaps are, and what it means for the companies involved. I am going to make this public before anyone else can frame the narrative."

They worked through the night, preparing the research for publication. Bex reviewed everything to make sure it was accurate, that every claim was supported by evidence, that nothing in the research could be discredited because of sloppiness or overstatement.

By morning, it was ready.

Ingrid released it through a major news outlet, with full documentation and methodology. The research detailed the compliance gaps in the AI systems of seven major tech companies. It explained how the systems were designed to appear objective while actually containing systematic biases. It documented the gap between what the companies claimed their systems did and what the systems actually did.

The response was immediate and significant. Within hours, the story had been picked up by major news organizations around the world. Regulatory agencies in the European Union and the United States opened investigations. The companies involved released defensive statements, denied the allegations, began the process of commissioning their own research to counter Ingrid's findings.

But the research was public now. The conversation had shifted. The narrative belonged to Ingrid, not to the companies who had tried to steal it and suppress it.

That afternoon, Bex prepared her final invoice for Ingrid. Two weeks of work, documented carefully, billed at the rate they had agreed on. The job was technically complete. The immediate threat had been addressed. The theft had been stopped. The research had been protected and published.

"I will need you to stay," Ingrid said when Bex told her she was preparing to leave. "The investigation will continue, and there will be questions, depositions, potentially legal proceedings. I will need someone who understands what happened and can help navigate it."

"I can stay another week," Bex said. "But after that, I have other commitments. Other clients who are waiting for my time."

"One week is what I need," Ingrid said.

The Resolution

The week that followed was consumed with coordination between Portuguese law enforcement, the companies involved, and international authorities. Santiago worked tirelessly to document everything that Marcus Reid had told them, to trace the money flows, to understand the full scope of the operation. Bex spent much of her time reviewing his findings, making sure nothing had been missed, helping him understand the technical aspects of how the data had been extracted.

She also spent time helping Ingrid understand the next steps in the process. What to expect from the companies, how they would likely try to discredit the research, what regulatory proceedings might look like. She helped Ingrid prepare for depositions, for interviews with journalists, for the kind of public attention that came from being at the center of a major scandal involving some of the world's largest technology companies.

By the end of the week, the outline of what had happened was clear. Marcus Reid had been approached by a consulting firm that represented a coalition of seven tech companies. Those companies had pooled resources to

hire Marcus to steal Ingrid's research before it could be published. Marcus had identified Carvalho as a vulnerable point, had approached him with an offer of money in exchange for access to the research data. Marcus had created the threatening letters as cover, designed to make the theft look like an external security breach rather than an inside job.

And Marcus had recommended Bex specifically because he needed a trusted external consultant to validate the theft as a genuine external threat, thereby protecting Carvalho and the companies from immediate suspicion.

But the plan had failed because Bex was too good at her job. She had found the data extraction, had identified it as intentional rather than accidental, had connected the pieces together and understood what was actually happening. And once she had understood, the whole operation had started to collapse.

On her last day in Portugal, Bex met with Santiago one final time.

"The investigation will continue," Santiago said. "There will be prosecutions, there will be international coordination, there will be legal proceedings that probably last for years. But the core of what happened is understood, and the responsibility has been assigned to the people who actually did the work."

"What about Marcus?" Bex asked.

"He is cooperating fully. He has given us everything we need to understand the operation and the companies behind it. His sentence will be reduced because of his cooperation, but he will still face significant criminal charges. He will probably serve time, but it will be measured time, not the kind of sentence that completely destroys his life."

"That is more mercy than he probably deserves," Bex said.

"That is more mercy than he probably deserves," Santiago agreed. "But he is cooperating, and cooperation matters. He is making the case stronger, he is helping us understand the full scope of the operation, he is giving us evidence against the companies who hired him. That counts for something."

Bex flew back to Portland the next morning. The flight was quiet, the kind of flight where you could sleep if you wanted to, or think if you needed to. Bex

did some of both, letting her mind process the work that had been completed, understanding what had been accomplished and what remained to be done.

She had come to Portugal to assess a threat. She had found that the threat was real and more complicated than it initially appeared. She had stopped an active data theft operation, she had identified the people involved, she had protected the research that mattered. She had done what she was hired to do and more. She had done it well.

The plane landed in Portland in the late afternoon. The light was different here, not the Atlantic light she had gotten used to, but the Pacific Northwest light, which was gray and diffuse and suggested that the world was a place where you needed to pay attention to everything because nothing was obvious.

She picked up a rental car and drove to her house, where Maya was waiting. Sarah's family had brought her home when they got word that Bex was coming back, and Maya was sitting on the porch when Bex pulled up.

"You look tired," Maya said.

"I am tired," Bex said. "And hungry. And ready to be home."

They went inside and Bex reheated some food that had been left in the refrigerator. They sat at the kitchen table and Bex listened while Maya talked about everything that had happened in the two and a half weeks that Bex had been gone. School projects, friend drama, the weird incident with a substitute teacher who had absolutely no classroom management skills. The small stories of a normal teenage life, the kind of thing that Bex had fought to preserve by doing the work in Portugal.

After they ate, Bex gave Maya a cleaned-up version of what had happened. She did not go into the details about the theft or the operational complexity. She just talked about how she had been hired to assess a security situation, how she had found a problem that was bigger than the initial assessment suggested, how she had worked with local law enforcement to address it. She talked about the people involved, the choices they had made, the consequences they would face.

"Did anyone try to hurt you?" Maya asked. It was the question that mattered to her, the one that cut through all the professional details to the actual

concern underneath.

"No," Bex said. "Nobody tried to hurt me. There was someone who tried to intimidate me into backing off, but nobody tried to actually hurt me."

"Good," Maya said. She seemed satisfied with that answer, seemed to accept that this was how these kinds of situations worked and that Bex knew how to handle them.

That night, after Maya had gone to bed, Bex sat in her study and reviewed the work she had done. She compiled her final invoice, documenting the hours worked, the travel expenses, the professional fees for the work she had completed. She had been hired to assess a threat. She had done that and significantly more. She had earned every penny of the payment, and more importantly, she had accomplished the actual objective: protecting the work that mattered and making sure it made its way into the world.

She also reviewed the news coming out of Portugal. Ingrid's research had caused significant disruption in the tech industry. The companies involved were facing regulatory scrutiny, had to make public commitments about addressing the compliance gaps, had to explain to their investors what had happened. The research had become a standard document in regulatory proceedings. People who needed to understand how AI systems actually worked were reading Ingrid's analysis.

The work had mattered. That was all that Bex needed to know.

Epilogue: Three Months Later

It was June when Bex got the email from Santiago. Marcus Reid had begun his prison sentence. Carvalho and Petra had been tried, convicted, and were serving reduced sentences due to their cooperation. The investigation into the tech companies who had hired Marcus had resulted in regulatory fines and mandatory compliance audits. The operations infrastructure that had been set up to steal the research had been completely dismantled.

It was done. Completely done in a way that sometimes did not happen in these kinds of operations, the kind of closure that suggested that the work had been comprehensive and the outcome had been just.

Bex read the email twice, then filed it away in the archive for the job. She had other work now, other clients, other situations that required the kind of attention that she gave to everything in her professional life. But the work in Portugal had settled into her memory as one of the good ones, the ones where the right thing and the successful outcome aligned, where the person she was protecting actually mattered, and where the work made a measurable difference in how things ended up.

That afternoon, Maya came home from school and threw her bag on the couch, which was against the rules, but Bex let it go because she understood that sometimes people needed to make small rebellions just to feel like they had some control over their environment.

"How was school?" Bex asked.

"Weird," Maya said. "We are reading this book about corporate corruption and systems that do not work, and it makes me think about your job. Like, how many jobs end up being about stopping people from doing the things they actually want to do?"

"Most of them," Bex said. "That is why the work matters. Most of what I do is prevention. I stop things before they happen. I identify threats before they materialize. I protect people before they are in actual danger."

"But sometimes you stop people after things happen," Maya said.

"Sometimes," Bex agreed. "But that is secondary. The real work is the prevention. The real work is understanding what people actually are planning and stopping them before the damage is done."

"Do you ever feel like you are fighting against things that are bigger than you?" Maya asked. It was a real question, not a rhetorical one, the kind of question that suggested Maya was thinking seriously about how the world worked and what her future might look like.

Bex thought about that. She thought about Marcus Reid and the consortium of companies behind him, about the systems that made theft more attractive than honest work, about the ways that money created incentives that were hard to resist.

"Yes," she said. "But I also feel like I can make a difference even when I am fighting against big things. You cannot change the systems by yourself. But you can change the specific outcomes, you can protect the specific people and the specific work that matters. That is enough."

"Is that why you do it?" Maya asked.

"That is part of why I do it," Bex said. "The other part is that I am good at it. I was trained to be good at it. And there is something satisfying about doing something well, about using a particular skill to accomplish something that

matters."

Maya nodded, thinking about that, the way she thought about most of what Bex said. She was getting old enough now to understand that there were questions that did not have perfect answers, that sometimes the right thing to do and the easy thing to do were different, that living with intention meant making choices that were more difficult than just going along with what was happening around you.

Over the next month, Bex watched the fallout of Ingrid's research publication unfold. The companies who had tried to steal it faced regulatory scrutiny, had to make public commitments about addressing the compliance gaps Ingrid had identified. Some of them took the work seriously. Some of them did the minimum required to appease regulators and moved on.

But the research was public now. The conversation had shifted. The work that Bex had protected had made a difference. That was enough.

She also received formal notification that the Portuguese authorities had closed their investigation into the data theft. Carvalho faced charges, would likely serve time, but because he cooperated with the investigation and because his motivations were understandable if not excusable, the charges were less severe than they might have been. Petra Voss faced similar charges, with the same mitigation factors.

Both of them had made mistakes. Both of them would face consequences. But those consequences were measured by the actual harm they had caused rather than by the worst interpretation of their actions.

That was more justice than usually happened in these kinds of situations.

Bex closed out her file on the job. She compiled her final invoice, documenting the hours worked, the travel expenses, the professional fees for the work she had done. She had been hired to assess a threat. She had done that and more. She had earned every penny of the payment, and more importantly, she had accomplished the actual objective: protecting the work that mattered and making sure it made its way into the world.

She called Ingrid one last time, just to check in, to make sure everything was stable, to verify that the work was actually done and finished.

"The research is being cited in regulatory proceedings," Ingrid said. "The companies are making changes. The conversation is shifting. None of that would have happened if someone had successfully stolen the research before publication."

"That is the work," Bex said. "That is what it is for. That is what standing watch means."

"I know," Ingrid said. "And I am grateful. I am also grateful for the way you handled this. You could have been angry about being used. You could have been difficult about helping protect work that was not directly yours. But you treated it all with the kind of professionalism and precision that actually made a difference."

"It is what I do," Bex said. "It is what I was trained to do. It is what I choose to do every time I take a job."

That night, Bex sat in her study and thought about the arc of the work. She had been hired to assess a threat. She had found the actual threat, had stopped it, had protected the work that mattered. She had done that in a foreign country, in two and a half weeks, with incomplete information and against opposition from people who understood how to operate in the spaces between institutional oversight and personal accountability.

She had done her job. She had done it well. And she had come home.

That was the arc of the work. That was what made it possible to keep doing this year after year. You took the contract, you did the work, you accomplished the objective, and then you came back to the people and the place that were actually important.

Bex pulled up a new contract with a new client. There was always another job. There was always another threat to assess, another person who needed protecting, another piece of work that needed standing watch over.

That was fine. That was what she did. That was what she would continue to do for as long as she was able.

The Atlantic light was gone now, replaced by Portland rain and the kind of slow green growth that happened in the Pacific Northwest in summer. But the work remained the same. The vigilance remained the same. The

commitment to seeing what was actually there and protecting what mattered remained the same.

She was standing watch. She would continue to stand watch.

That was everything.

The Pattern

Bex spent the morning of February 8th sitting in the foundation's office in Lisbon, ostensibly reviewing security protocols with Carvalho. In reality, she was watching the way his hands moved when he talked about the server infrastructure, the way his eyes darted toward a particular corner of the room when she asked about remote access, the way his breathing changed when she mentioned the threatening letters. People lied with words. But they told the truth with their bodies. Bex had learned that at MPSA, had practiced recognizing the gap between what people said and what their nervous systems were actually doing, the physiological markers that indicated anxiety, deception, fear. Carvalho was scared. That much was clear within seconds of the conversation beginning. But he was not scared of external threats. He was scared of something internal, something happening inside the foundation itself, something that had him looking over his shoulder and checking his phone more than any rational threat assessment would justify.

The foundation's office was on the third floor of a modern building near the Tagus River, fifteen minutes from Ingrid's house in Cascais. The space was designed to be collaborative: open floor plans, glass walls between the different

research teams, informal meeting areas with comfortable seating. It was the kind of office design that made it nearly impossible to have a private conversation without it being obvious you were having a private conversation. Carvalho's office was the only enclosed space, which was appropriate for his role as foundation director but which also meant that his comings and goings would be noted by everyone else on staff. Privacy was impossible here. Transparency was by design. Bex understood what that meant: anything happening in this office would eventually become visible to someone.

Bex had spent the first few days doing a basic security audit that was legitimate work. She had checked locks, reviewed access logs, talked to staff about security incidents, documented entry points, assessed the physical vulnerabilities of the building. All of that was necessary and professional. But underneath that legitimate work, she had been watching Carvalho. She had been studying him the way she studied any subject, with the kind of attention to detail that had made her good at her work. Where did he go when he left the office? What was he checking on his phone? Who was he avoiding eye contact with? Which staff members made him nervous? Which conversations made him shut down?

The research database was accessed multiple times per day by different researchers. That was completely normal, expected, the necessary functioning of an active research operation. But the access logs showed a pattern that made her pause. Someone was downloading large portions of the research data at irregular intervals, usually late in the evening when most of the staff had left the office, when the building was quiet, when there was less chance of someone noticing. The downloads were consistently routed through a specific computer terminal that was not registered to any particular researcher. The terminal was located in a back office that Bex had initially thought was simply a storage space. But it was more than that. It was positioned in a place where someone could work without being visible to the open office. It was a place where data could be accessed and transferred without being noticed.

Carvalho had access to that terminal. More importantly, Carvalho had the administrative privileges that would allow him to mask where the downloads were coming from, to hide the data traces, to move information through layers

of obfuscation. Bex had looked at the logs again and again, tracing the pattern, confirming that the same terminal was used almost every time, that the access occurred always after hours, that the volume of data being transferred was consistent with someone backing up significant portions of the foundation's research. Someone was systematically extracting the research. And that someone almost certainly had to be Carvalho or someone Carvalho was helping.

After her meeting with Carvalho, where she had asked him deliberately provocative questions about security protocols and watched the way he responded with increasing agitation, watched his hands shake as he talked about technical systems that he understood better than anyone, Bex went back to the hotel and called Santiago Reyes. Santiago worked in cybercrime for the Portuguese police, had done training with MPSA contacts years ago, understood the value of the kind of threat assessment work that Bex specialized in. He knew how to talk about investigations without immediately bringing in the official institutional structures, without immediately escalating to formal police procedures and official paperwork that would alert the subjects. He understood the importance of working quietly, of gathering evidence without alarming the people being investigated. He knew how to operate in the space between suspicion and proof, in the careful place where an investigation could develop without prematurely alarming the subjects, where information could be gathered and analyzed before any official action was taken.

"I think I found the problem," Bex said when they met at a coffee bar near the Terreiro do Paco, a square so old that it had seen centuries of commerce and politics unfold on its cobblestones.

Santiago listened without interrupting as Bex walked him through what she had observed about the data downloads, the timing, the way the terminal was accessed, the pattern of activity that suggested either consistent theft or preparation for significant data transfer. He was the kind of cop who understood that most crimes were not complex so much as they were the result of people having motive and opportunity, and not having enough fear of consequences to stop them from acting on that opportunity. He was a man in his mid-fifties who had spent three decades looking at human behavior and

trying to understand what made people make the choices they made.

"You think Carvalho is stealing the research?" Santiago asked when she finished laying out the evidence.

"I think Carvalho is being made to steal the research," Bex said carefully. "There is a difference, and the distinction matters. If he was just taking it for himself, there would be more carelessness, more lack of sophistication, more direct evidence of criminal intent. But this is careful. This is someone who knows what they are doing, or someone who has trained Carvalho on exactly what to do. This is someone who understands data security and understands how to extract information without it being noticed, or someone who hired an expert to explain how to do it. The whole operation has the fingerprints of someone who has done this before, or someone who learned from someone who has done this before."

Santiago ordered another coffee and thought about that. The cafe was one of his regular places, Bex understood. The owner knew him. The waiters did not seem to notice when they conducted conversations about criminal investigations. It was a good place for the work they were doing.

"Do you have proof?" Santiago asked.

"Not the kind you could take to a prosecutor," Bex said. "I have logs, access patterns, suspicious behavior, timing that aligns with periods when the office would be less populated. I have the technical indicators of data transfer. But I do not have someone actually performing the transfer in real time. I do not have Carvalho's confession. I do not have the actual stolen data in his possession. I do not know who he is sending the data to or what they are doing with it. I have circumstantial evidence. I have a pattern. I do not have proof that would hold up in court."

"Give me a few days," Santiago said. He was writing notes now, his handwriting precise and small. "Let me trace the connections from the other end. Whoever is receiving the data has to be doing something with it. Data theft does not happen just for the sake of stealing. Someone has a buyer, someone has a plan for what they will do with the information once they have it. If I can identify who is buying the research, if I can find where the stolen data is going,

then I can work backward to confirm that Carvalho is the source."

"And in the meantime?" Bex asked.

"In the meantime, you keep watching Carvalho. You find out who is putting pressure on him, because someone is definitely putting pressure on him. You do not let on that you are investigating anything. You maintain your cover as a security consultant doing a straightforward threat assessment. You let the operation continue. You gather intelligence. You do not spook the subjects."

Bex went back to Cascais and told Ingrid what she had found, what she suspected, what the evidence suggested. They sat in the study of the house, which looked out over the Atlantic, the February light cold and precise on the water, the quality of Atlantic light that made everything look clear and real and stripped of illusion. The house was old, three hundred years old at least, built when Cascais was a fortress city rather than a beach destination, built when Portugal was a different kind of power. It had thick stone walls and small windows and the kind of weight that suggested it had survived multiple centuries of Atlantic storms and human chaos without surrendering to either, without losing its integrity or its purpose. The study itself was furnished simply, with books on every wall, with furniture that looked comfortable and worn from years of use. It was the kind of study that belonged to someone who took work seriously, who spent time thinking and reading and writing, who understood that work was important.

"I suspected," Ingrid said when Bex explained her theory. "I could not prove it, and I could not understand why Carvalho would agree to steal from me. We have known each other for years. We have built this foundation together. I have trusted him with everything. I have trusted him with my research, my reputation, my mission. And I suspected that he was betraying that trust. But I had no proof. And I did not know what to do with a suspicion without proof."

"People's circumstances change," Bex said. "Their needs change. Their desperation changes. Their priorities shift. You do not necessarily know what he faces outside of this building, what pressures he is under, what decisions he has made to address problems that you cannot see."

"Do you know?" Ingrid asked.

"Not yet. But I am going to find out."

That night, Bex sat in her hotel room and pulled up everything she could find about Tomás Carvalho online. He was fifty-two years old, Portuguese, had worked in AI research before joining the foundation five years ago. He had a daughter, twenty-four years old, who had suffered a serious accident three years ago that had changed everything. The accident had happened in a car on a highway outside Lisbon, a traffic collision, a moment of chance that had resulted in serious injury. The accident had left his daughter with significant disabilities, requiring ongoing medical care and rehabilitation. She required specialized care. The kind of specialized care that Portuguese insurance did not cover adequately, that was not available through the public health system, the kind of care that would be available at private clinics, but only to people who could afford to pay for it.

The medical bills would have been enormous, astronomical, the kind of numbers that would make anyone's hands shake. Bex found records of hospital charges, of rehabilitation fees, of ongoing specialized treatments that continued month after month. The costs would have been continuing and escalating, ongoing and relentless, increasing as the daughter required more intensive care or as inflation raised the cost of private medical services. The kind of financial pressure that made people do things they would not normally do, things that would compromise their ethics or their professional integrity. The kind of desperate situation that made people vulnerable to manipulation, that made them potential targets for people who understood how to exploit vulnerability.

Bex called Patricia Moore and asked her to run a deeper background check on Carvalho's finances, to look at not just what was public record but what was available through the financial databases that MPSA had access to.

"I need to know if he is in debt," Bex said. "Specific debt, the kind that would indicate someone is putting pressure on him. Medical debt, loan debt, anything that would suggest he needs money and needs it urgently. And I need to know the pattern of how that debt is being managed."

Patricia called back two hours later with comprehensive information. She had access to databases that were not available to the general public, connections through MPSA that allowed her to do background checks that were far more comprehensive than what any private investigator could accomplish. Patricia had connections to financial institutions, to credit reporting agencies, to people who understood how money actually moved through systems. Carvalho had indeed taken out loans for his daughter's medical care, loans that had been substantial and that had put him under significant financial strain. He also had new debts that appeared in the last six months, debts that appeared and then were paid off immediately, often within days of appearing. The pattern was distinctive and telling, distinctive enough that it could not be anything other than what Bex suspected. The pattern suggested someone was lending him money regularly and then immediately accepting its repayment, cycles of borrowing and repayment that meant money was moving from an external source to Carvalho through the guise of debt transactions. That was a method of passing money to someone without it looking like a direct payment, without creating a clean paper trail that would be obviously suspicious. That was a cover for cash transfer, a way of obfuscating what was actually happening: someone was paying Carvalho money in exchange for his cooperation in the theft. That was what someone did when they wanted to move money in a way that could not be easily traced through financial institutions, that would not raise red flags at banks or with tax authorities.

"Someone is paying him," Patricia said. "Through a method that looks like debt and repayment but is actually just a cover for cash transfer. The payments are consistent, the amounts are significant. This is not small money. This is someone who understands financial procedures well enough to set up a system that would look legitimate to a bank auditor or a tax investigator."

"Who?" Bex asked.

"That I cannot find from here. You need to find that from there. You need to find who is contacting him, how they are communicating, what they are offering him. You need to understand the entire structure of the operation from the inside. What I can tell you is that the payments are significant enough that

someone is serious about this operation. Significant enough that Carvalho could afford his daughter's medical treatment indefinitely. Significant enough that refusing would cost him everything."

Bex spent the next three days watching Carvalho more carefully, with the kind of focused attention to detail that was her particular skill, her trained ability to notice the small things that people did when they were under pressure. She went to the foundation office and sat in the public areas and watched the way he moved through the space, the way he navigated the open office design. She observed the way he avoided eye contact with certain people, particularly with Ingrid and with some of the more senior researchers, the way he checked his phone repeatedly, checking it far more often than someone without hidden pressures would check it. She noted the way his attention seemed divided between his work and whatever was happening in the rest of his life, between the legitimate work of running the foundation and the illegitimate work of stealing its research. She followed him one evening when he left the office early, watched him go to a cafe in Lisbon in the Alvalade neighborhood, a quiet area away from tourists, away from the places where Ingrid's foundation people would typically be.

At the cafe, he met with a woman Bex did not recognize. The woman was dark-haired, mid-forties, with the kind of face that suggested she had lived in multiple countries. The woman passed him something small, something that could have been a phone, a data drive, a message written on paper. The meeting lasted exactly five minutes. Then Carvalho left, and the woman left separately, walking in the opposite direction, moving with the kind of deliberate casualness that suggested training. Professional tradecraft. Someone who understood how to move through the world without drawing attention.

Bex took photos of the woman with a small camera she had brought specifically for this purpose. The camera was professional-grade, designed for surveillance work, able to capture clear images in less-than-ideal light conditions. When she got back to the hotel, she sent the photos to Patricia and Santiago and asked them to identify her.

The Conversation

Petra Voss was thirty-one years old and worked as Ingrid's personal assistant, the kind of position that required discretion, reliability, and attention to detail. She had been with the foundation for three years, had done her job with the kind of quiet competence that made her invisible in the way that good administrative staff were sometimes invisible. She managed Ingrid's schedule, her correspondence, her travel arrangements. She kept the foundation director's life organized, smooth, functional. She had access to Ingrid's calendar and her email. She also had access to the physical spaces where sensitive discussions took place, where important decisions were made, where research was reviewed and protected. She was, in other words, close enough to the heart of the foundation's operations to be invaluable, and close enough to its secrets to be dangerous if she were to become compromised.

Bex had watched Petra for three days before deciding to approach her. The approach had to be careful, had to be done in a way that would not alert anyone else that Bex was investigating anything. Petra was not the primary actor in whatever was happening, but she was clearly connected to it. She had been in the office when Bex had been observing Carvalho's suspicious

behavior. More tellingly, Petra had looked afraid. Not the normal afraid of someone worried about threatening letters. The kind of afraid that people looked when they were keeping secrets, when they were living a double life, when they were doing things they did not want anyone to know about.

Bex found her in the research library on February 11th, shelving printed copies of academic papers. It was the kind of work that did not particularly need to be done anymore, not in an age of digital archives and searchable databases. But some research foundations still maintained physical archives, and Petra was the kind of person who maintained them with care and attention. She would pull a paper from the processing cart, would check the call number, would walk it to the correct shelf location, would place it precisely among the other papers in that section. The work was methodical and absorbed. It was also solitary work, which meant Petra could lose herself in it for hours without having to interact with anyone else.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" Bex said from the doorway.

Petra's whole body went rigid. Her hand froze on the shelf where she had been about to place a paper. She did not turn around immediately, which told Bex that Petra was trying to get her expression under control before she faced Bex directly. That was the reaction of someone who knew they had been caught, or someone who knew they might be caught, or someone who was terrified of being discovered. It was the reaction of someone living with a secret.

"Of course," Petra said finally, turning around. She was pale, dark-haired, with the kind of face that suggested Eastern European ancestry, probably Czech or Slovak. Her hands were shaking slightly, which was the kind of detail that nobody noticed unless they were specifically looking for it, unless they had been trained to notice the small physiological markers of extreme anxiety.

"Not here," Bex said. "Somewhere private. Somewhere you feel safe."

Petra's eyes widened at that. Safe was not a word that anyone would use casually. The fact that Bex had used it suggested that Bex understood something about Petra's actual situation, that Bex had seen through the careful professional exterior and had identified the fear underneath it.

They went to a small cafe two blocks from the foundation office, one of the kind of places where tourists did not go and where the owner did not pay attention to customers who wanted to have private conversations. The cafe served coffee and pastries and had small tables in the back corner, away from the windows, away from the street. Petra ordered tea with shaking hands. Bex ordered coffee. They sat in the back corner, away from any possibility of being overheard.

"I am not going to hurt you," Bex said without preamble. She had learned in her security work that directness was often more effective than gradual approaches, that saying the thing directly that someone was afraid of was sometimes the fastest way to cut through to actual communication. "I am not going to turn you in immediately. I am going to ask you some questions, and I am going to ask you to tell me the truth. If you do that, if you are willing to be honest about what has happened and what you are involved in, we can figure out how to make this situation better for you."

"I do not know what you are talking about," Petra said. But she said it without conviction, the way people said things when they knew they had been caught and were just waiting to see what would happen next, just running out the clock on a situation they knew was about to explode into consequences.

"You are involved with the data theft from the foundation," Bex said. She kept her voice level, calm, not accusatory. "I do not think you initiated it. I do not think this was your idea. I do not think you woke up one day and decided to commit industrial espionage. But you are involved. You have access to information, to schedules, to the physical spaces where sensitive work takes place. Someone is using that access. Either with your knowledge or because they are forcing you to provide it."

Petra put her hands around the tea cup like it was something that could keep her warm or keep her safe. The cup was still hot, still steaming, but she held it anyway, gripping it like it was an anchor to something stable. She was quiet for a long time, the kind of silence that suggested she was trying to calculate the cost of telling the truth versus the cost of maintaining the lie.

"My mother is sick," she said finally. It came out as barely a whisper. "Cancer. She is being treated at a private clinic because the public system in Portugal is not good enough for what she needs. The treatment costs money. A lot of money. I cannot afford it. I have tried everything. I have worked as much as I can. But it is not enough. The treatment is expensive, and my mother is dying, and I do not know what to do."

"Someone offered to pay for it," Bex said. "In exchange for access to the foundation's information."

"Yes," Petra said. The word seemed to cost her something to say. "They told me they were a business consultant. They said they needed to see the research to help the foundation develop better commercialization strategies. They said it was completely normal, that all research foundations did this kind of thing. They said I would be helping the foundation by providing this access, that I was not betraying anyone because this was just how the business world operated. They said many things to make it seem like what they were asking was not actually a crime."

"But you knew that was not true," Bex said.

"I knew," Petra said. She started crying, the kind of quiet crying that suggested she had been holding it in for a long time. "I knew they were lying. But my mother was dying, and I did not know what else to do. I did not know who else to ask for help. I did not know any other way to save her life."

Bex pushed a napkin across the table. She waited for Petra to collect herself before continuing. The cafe owner had the good grace to not pay attention to their conversation, did not come over to check on them, did not interrupt the moment. He just refilled the tea when it had cooled, and left them alone.

"Who contacted you?" Bex asked when Petra had stopped crying.

"A man. He said his name was Marcus Reid. He said he worked for a consulting firm. He was kind, he was professional, he made it seem like what he was asking was a normal business thing. He said I was providing a service, that I was not betraying anyone, that this was just how the business world worked. He showed me documentation that looked legitimate. He had business

cards, a website, references from other people who had apparently worked with him. It all seemed real."

"Has he asked you for more access? More information?"

"Yes," Petra said. "Every week he asks for something different. Sometimes it is emails from Ingrid. Sometimes it is copies of meeting notes. Sometimes it is access to the research database. I give him what he asks for because my mother needs the treatment and because I am afraid of what he will do if I say no."

"What do you think he will do?"

"He has made it clear that if I do not cooperate, the treatment will stop being paid for. And if it stops, my mother will die. So I cooperate because the alternative is my mother dying."

Bex understood that. She understood the way desperation made people do things they would never normally do, the way someone with knowledge of your vulnerabilities could use that knowledge to control you, the way a person with access to something you cared about more than your own life or freedom could make you do almost anything. She understood that Petra was not a villain. She was a person who had been put in an impossible situation and had made a choice under duress. She was a person who was being manipulated by someone who understood her vulnerabilities with precision and intent.

"Where is Marcus Reid now?" Bex asked.

"I do not know. He contacts me by phone, sometimes by email. He always uses different numbers, always routes the communication through apps that hide his location. I have never seen him in person except for one time, when he came to meet me at a cafe near the Rossio. He gave me the first payment that time, gave me cash and told me how to arrange for my mother's treatment."

"Do you have the phone number he used? Or any of the numbers?"

Petra pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts. She did not have Marcus saved with a name, did not want his number associated with any identifier that might draw attention if someone looked at her phone. But she had the numbers, seven different numbers from the past six weeks. Each one looked local to Portugal, but Bex knew that could be spoofed easily, that phone

numbers were not reliable indicators of actual location in an age of virtual phone systems and international routing.

Bex wrote the numbers down on a napkin and put the napkin in her pocket.

"I am going to tell you something," Bex said. "What you did was wrong. You betrayed Ingrid's trust. You compromised the foundation's work. That said, you were coerced, and you were acting under duress because of someone you care about, someone whose life depends on the money that Marcus is providing. That matters. That is the difference between being a criminal and being a victim who was forced to do criminal things. That distinction will matter in a court of law. That distinction will matter when a judge decides what consequences you face for your actions."

"What are you going to do?" Petra asked. Her voice was small, terrified, the voice of someone who was about to have her entire life disrupted.

"I am going to stop the person who is doing this. I am going to make sure that the foundation's research is protected. And I am going to try to make sure that you face consequences that are proportional to what you did while coerced, not consequences that treat you as if you were the architect of this theft."

"That means I will still face consequences," Petra said.

"Yes. But the alternative is worse. The alternative is that this operation continues, that more people get hurt, that the research that matters never makes it into the world. You need to choose whether you want to be part of stopping this or whether you want to continue being part of it."

Petra was crying more now, the kind of crying that suggested relief mixed with terror, the kind of emotional release that comes when someone has been holding everything in for too long and finally gets permission to let it out. She had been carrying this alone for six weeks, had been living with the knowledge that she was betraying people she cared about, that she was being manipulated and coerced and that there was nothing she could do to stop it. She had been living a lie, going to work every day, pretending everything was normal, managing Ingrid's schedule and her email, while secretly being complicit in the theft of the foundation's research. She had been living in constant fear of

discovery, fear of what would happen to her mother if she was caught, fear of the legal consequences that would inevitably come if the operation failed.

"What do I need to do?" Petra asked. Her voice was small but it carried a note of determination, a willingness to do whatever it took to make this right, to stop being a victim and become instead someone who was choosing to do the right thing, even if it meant facing legal consequences and admitting what she had done.

"You need to continue cooperating," Bex said. "You need to let Marcus think that you are still willing to help him, that you are still stealing information for him. You need to do this while knowing that we are documenting everything, that we are building the case that will put him in prison. You need to be brave enough to live a double life for a little bit longer, brave enough to help us catch the people responsible."

"You need to continue doing what Marcus asks you to do. You need to let him think you are cooperating fully, that you are not suspicious, that everything is normal. But you need to tell me immediately what he asks for, and you need to do exactly what I tell you to do when the time comes. Can you do that?"

"Yes," Petra said. "Yes, I can do that."

"Then we are going to stop this," Bex said, her voice firm and decisive, the voice of someone who understood what was at stake and was committed to addressing it. "And when it is over, when the people responsible have been arrested and prosecuted, we are going to make sure that people understand why you did what you did, that people understand the circumstances that led you to make this choice, the desperation that drove you to cooperate with the theft. The court is going to understand that you were coerced, that you acted under duress to protect someone you love, that you did not willingly participate in the crime but were forced to participate through threats and manipulation. The judge is going to see that you were a victim of this operation as much as the foundation was, though in different ways. And we are going to make sure your mother is taken care of. That is my commitment to you. The foundation will cover her medical expenses. You will not have to choose between your mother's life and your own freedom. You will not have to live with that

impossible choice anymore. That choice will no longer define your life, will no longer control what you do, will no longer make you vulnerable to manipulation."

Petra nodded and tried to stop crying. Bex ordered her another tea and sat with her until she was calm enough to go back to work. By the time Petra left the cafe, they had established a communication protocol. Petra would text Bex whenever Marcus made contact. Bex would coordinate with Santiago and Patricia to trace the contact and begin building the case against him. For the first time since arriving in Portugal, Bex felt like she had enough information to actually understand what was happening and what she needed to do about it.

The Junior Researcher

Daria Novak worked in the machine learning research lab, the most technical part of the foundation's operations. She was twenty-eight years old, had come to the foundation from a startup in Prague where she had been doing work on algorithmic auditing and bias detection. She was brilliant in the way that people who understood mathematics and code at a fundamental level were brilliant, in a way that made abstract systems tangible to her, that made invisible processes visible. She was the kind of person who saw patterns in data the way other people saw patterns in faces, the kind of person who could look at numbers and code and understand what they meant at a level that most people could never access. She was also, Bex had noticed during her first visits to the foundation, deeply unhappy. She moved through the office with the kind of quiet resignation that suggested she understood something about what was happening that had made her sad about the place she worked, that had diminished her enthusiasm for the mission she had come here to accomplish.

Bex approached her on February 12th, during the afternoon lull when most of the staff had gone to lunch or stepped away from their workstations to take a break, to get coffee, to get fresh air. The lab was quiet, just the sound of

the computers running their constant background processes, the gentle hum of the ventilation system that kept the servers cool, the occasional soft chime of a notification somewhere in the network. Bex brought coffee, which was a small offering but which suggested that this was not an official interrogation so much as a conversation between two people who worked in different fields but who both understood something about how the world actually operated, something about the gap between what people said and what was actually happening.

"I need your help," Bex said without preamble, because she had learned that Daria was the kind of person who responded better to directness than to careful preliminaries, to explanation than to setup. "And I need you to understand that what I am asking is going to put you in a difficult position professionally. It is going to require you to do work that is not part of your job description, to look at things you were not supposed to be looking at, to potentially make enemies of people who currently believe you are not a threat to them. But the work is important, and it is the right thing to do, and I believe you are the only person at this foundation who has the technical skills to accomplish what needs to be accomplished."

Daria was the kind of person who responded to directness. She listened to what Bex had to say without interrupting, without asking clarifying questions that might break the thread of explanation. She asked specific questions about what Bex needed from her only after Bex had finished speaking, questions that suggested she was thinking through not just the technical requirements but the actual implications of what she was being asked to do, the personal and professional consequences.

"You want me to trace the data exfiltration," Daria said when Bex had finished explaining the situation. "You want me to follow the technical traces and figure out where the data is going and how it is being routed. You want me to understand the infrastructure that someone has built to steal from the foundation, to understand the systems and the methods and the sophistication of the theft."

"Yes," Bex said. "And I want you to do it without telling anyone except me that you are doing it. I want you to log everything, document every step, save every piece of evidence. And I want you to be prepared to testify about

what you found if it comes to that, if this goes to trial, if your work becomes part of the official investigation and prosecution."

"That could get me fired," Daria said. She was thinking through the implications, weighing the risks against the benefits, understanding the full weight of what she was being asked to do. "If I am doing an investigation into the foundation's systems and someone finds out, Ingrid might see it as a violation of trust. She might see it as me acting outside my authority. She might see it as me not being loyal to the organization I work for."

"Ingrid already knows I am investigating," Bex said. "She hired me because she knew something was wrong. She wants to know what it is. She wants to understand the scope of the threat. She wants the research that she has built this foundation around to be protected from people who want to steal it and suppress it. You are not betraying her. You are protecting her work. You are protecting the mission that she has been trying to accomplish."

Daria was quiet for a moment, thinking, considering, processing the information and its implications. She had the kind of face that suggested she was thinking about multiple things at the same time, processing information from several different sources and trying to synthesize them into a coherent picture. It was the face of someone who was used to working with complex systems, used to finding patterns in chaos, used to understanding how things actually worked at a technical level beneath the surface appearance.

"All right," Daria said finally. "But I want to understand why you think the data is being stolen. Give me the evidence. Give me the reasoning. Make sure I understand the situation before I start digging into the systems. I want to know who you suspect and why, what you have found and how you found it. Make sure I understand the full picture before I start poking around in places I am not supposed to be poking around in."

Bex spent the next hour and a half walking through what she knew. She explained the access logs that showed suspicious data downloads at odd hours, downloads that occurred when the office would be quiet, when people would be home or in other parts of the city. She explained the timing of the downloads, the way they corresponded to periods when the office would be less

populated, when there would be fewer people around to notice unusual activity, to question what was happening with the systems. She explained Carvalho's financial situation in detail, his daughter's medical condition, his accumulated debt, the way someone with knowledge of his vulnerability could use that knowledge to make him do things he would not normally do, to make him compromise the things he had built and believed in. She explained Elena Cardoso's role as a professional data broker, someone who collected stolen information and routed it to people who were willing to pay for it, who understood the business of theft and information trafficking. She explained Petra Voss's situation, the coercion she was living under, the way Petra had been made to provide access to sensitive information because someone was paying for her mother's medical treatment, because refusing would cost her mother's life. She explained the full theory: someone had hired Marcus Reid to steal Ingrid's research. Marcus had made careful contact with Petra and Carvalho, had used their vulnerabilities to coerce them into cooperation. Elena Cardoso was managing the technical transfer of the data, moving information from the foundation's systems to wherever the buyer was located. And someone above all of them was paying for the theft, which meant someone wanted the research badly enough to spend significant money to obtain it, badly enough to risk prosecution.

"The research is about corporate compliance and systemic failures in AI," Daria said when Bex had finished laying out the entire situation. "About gaps between what companies say they are doing and what they are actually doing. About the difference between marketing claims and actual capability. About how regulatory frameworks fail to address what AI systems actually do in the real world, about the ways that companies hide their failures and misrepresent their systems. That is valuable to someone."

"To a company that is exposed by the research," Bex said. "Or to a company that is planning something they want to hide from regulators. Or to someone who wants to understand the weaknesses in AI systems before they are publicly revealed so they can fix them or exploit them for competitive advantage. The motive could be industrial espionage, competitive advantage, pure criminal intent, or corporate self-preservation. I do not know yet. But

whoever wants this research is sophisticated enough to set up a multi-layer operation to get it. They are sophisticated enough to understand that direct theft would raise alarms, so they have instead set up a system where inside people are coerced into providing access, where data is routed through multiple intermediaries, where the whole operation is compartmentalized so that nobody except the person at the top knows the full scope of what is happening."

"All right," Daria said. She pulled her coffee cup closer and thought for a long moment. "Let me dig into the systems. Let me trace the data exfiltration to wherever it is going. Let me see if I can identify the technical infrastructure that is being used, the servers and proxies and routing systems. If the person running this operation is sophisticated, they will have tried to hide their tracks, will have used encryption and anonymization and layers of misdirection. But they will not have tried to hide them from someone like me, someone who understands how the systems actually work at a technical level, someone who can read code and understand what it is doing and trace it through multiple routing points."

"How long will it take?" Bex asked.

"A few days. Maybe a week. I will have to be careful about how I do this so I do not trigger any alerts that someone might notice. I will have to move slowly, checking my work, making sure I am not leaving traces that someone who is monitoring the systems might detect. But I can do it. I can find where the data is going."

Over the next week, Daria worked late into the evenings, running analyses on the server logs, tracing the data transfers through multiple routing points, following the digital breadcrumbs to see where they led. She worked with the kind of focus that suggested she was used to this kind of work, used to spending hours staring at code and logs and trying to understand what they meant, what they revealed about the operations happening beneath the surface of the foundation's normal work. She reported back to Bex every day with incremental findings, each piece of information building on the previous pieces, creating a map of the theft operation.

"The data is being routed through a series of proxies that makes it nearly impossible to trace from the destination end," Daria reported on February 15th, at the end of a long day of investigation. "Someone has set up a complex routing system that bounces the data through multiple servers in multiple countries, through Poland and Romania and other locations. Working backward from the foundation's systems, I can see the data leaving our network, going to a proxy in Poland, then bouncing to another proxy somewhere else, eventually arriving at a mail server in Romania. But whoever set this up knew what they were doing. The routing is sophisticated. The encryption is strong. The anonymization is good enough that if I was just watching the destination, if I was trying to trace it forward from the end point, I would never be able to trace it back to the source."

"Can you tell where the data is going after it reaches the mail server?" Bex asked.

"Not directly. But whoever set up this mail server did not use enough security in all places. The technical implementation is sophisticated in some ways and less sophisticated in other ways. It is like someone who knows how to hide data but does not necessarily know how to secure servers. I can see that the data is being automatically downloaded from the email account within minutes of arrival. Which suggests there is a script running somewhere that is pulling the data as soon as it arrives. That script is running on a computer somewhere, and that computer is probably where the actual buyer is receiving the data."

"Can you trace that computer?" Bex asked.

"Not directly. But the script is downloading the data to a specific folder structure. The structure suggests someone who has done this before, someone who has organized multiple data theft projects the same way. If I can find that folder structure elsewhere, if I can find other data being downloaded to the same structure, I might be able to connect this to other thefts, other operations, other crimes."

It took Daria another two days of meticulous work, running searches through databases she had access to, cross-referencing technical indicators and

folder structures and coding patterns, trying to connect the dots between different data theft operations. But she finally found it. The same folder structure appeared on a server that had been seized by law enforcement in Germany three years ago as part of an industrial espionage investigation. The investigation had resulted in the arrest of a man named Viktor Molnar, who had been running a sophisticated data brokerage operation out of Budapest, who had been doing this kind of work for years, who had built a criminal empire around stealing proprietary information and selling it to the highest bidder. Viktor Molnar was now in prison in Hungary, serving a ten-year sentence for his crimes, locked away from the world that he had preyed upon. But the technical infrastructure that he had built, the systems and patterns and folder structures that he had used to organize his criminal operation with precision and sophistication, were still being used by someone else, someone who had learned his methods and was replicating them now, applying Molnar's expertise to this new theft operation in Portugal. The question now was whether someone was working with Molnar from prison, or whether someone who had learned from Molnar was now running their own independent operation.

The Evidence

On February 16th, Petra texted Bex with the message she had been instructed to send: Marcus was requesting another data transfer. He wanted copies of all the research papers that had been completed in the past three months, plus access to the draft papers that had not yet been completed, the unpublished work that represented the cutting edge of the foundation's research, the work that was still being refined and had not yet been submitted to peer review. He wanted the transfer to happen that night at 11 PM. He was being explicit about his demands, which suggested he was running out of time, which suggested something about the operation was changing, that whoever was behind this wanted the research now rather than waiting for more leisurely extraction. The explicit timing, the specific request, all of it suggested that the buyer had a deadline, that there was pressure from above, that the theft operation needed to accelerate.

Bex immediately contacted Santiago and told him what was happening. This was the moment they had been preparing for. This was the moment when the theoretical investigation became operational, when they would move from gathering evidence to actually catching the crime in progress.

"This is our opportunity," Santiago said when they spoke by phone, his voice controlled but energized, the voice of someone who understood that what was about to happen mattered. "This is when we stop being investigators and become law enforcement. We set up surveillance at the point of transfer. We watch everything that happens. We see who shows up. We identify them. We catch them in the act. We follow them and we find out where they take the data. Then we arrest everyone involved and we build an airtight case for prosecution. This is when we turn investigation into enforcement, when we move from evidence gathering to actual apprehension."

"How much surveillance?" Bex asked. She was thinking through the operational security implications, the ways that police presence could alert the subjects, the fine line between gathering evidence and compromising the operation through too obvious monitoring. "I do not want to spook them. I do not want them to realize they are being watched. If they get spooked, if they figure out that something is wrong, they will abandon the operation and we will lose the chance to catch them. They will destroy evidence. They will flee. They will have time to coordinate a story. We lose the whole thing."

"We do exactly what they expect to happen," Santiago said, his tone reassuring but serious. "The data gets transferred. Someone receives it. We watch from a distance and we identify the person and we note the location and the time. We do not approach. We do not interfere. We do not make our presence obvious. We just watch and gather intelligence. We confirm what we know and we document what we see. Then we gather more evidence before we move in for the arrest. We arrest multiple people simultaneously at multiple locations so nobody has a chance to warn anyone else that the operation has been compromised. Nobody has time to call ahead and alert the next person in the chain. Everyone goes into custody at approximately the same moment, so the entire operation collapses at once."

They met at a nondescript cafe in the Alvalade neighborhood, a part of Lisbon that was residential and quiet, not close to any tourist areas, not close to anything that would draw attention. Santiago brought two colleagues, both in plain clothes, both experienced in surveillance work and in the kind of patience that surveillance work required. Bex brought her own camera and her

observation skills and her understanding of how to watch people without being noticed.

"Petra is going to transfer the data from her personal computer," Bex explained. "She is going to use the connection method that Marcus specified. The data will go through a proxy in Poland and then arrive at the mail server in Romania. But both of those locations are just routing points. Someone is going to pick up the data from the mail server, and that someone is probably going to be close by, probably in Lisbon, probably in a location where they can verify that what they received is actually what they paid for."

"Why would they be close by?" one of Santiago's colleagues asked. He was younger than Santiago, maybe early forties, with the kind of attentiveness that suggested he had done surveillance work for a long time.

"Because they need to move the data quickly," Bex said. "They need to verify that what they received is actually what they paid for. They need to make sure it is not corrupted and that it is complete. They need to check the data integrity, decrypt it if necessary, confirm that the research is what they wanted and what they paid for. That kind of work usually happens face to face or through a direct computer connection. It does not happen remotely, not when there is significant money involved, not when the buyer wants to make sure they are getting what they paid for."

At 11 PM exactly, Petra initiated the data transfer from a cafe in the Alcantara neighborhood, a part of Lisbon that was industrial, waterfront, less populated than the downtown areas. It was a part of the city that was transitioning, old factories becoming restaurants and apartments, the riverside becoming gentrified and developed. Santiago's team had set up observation points with clear sightlines to the cafe. Bex was positioned two blocks away in a car with a direct line of sight to the entrance and the parking area.

Nothing happened for fifteen minutes. The minutes stretched out and Bex felt the familiar tension that came with surveillance work, the waiting, the knowing that something was about to happen but not knowing exactly when or how it would happen. Then a man appeared, walked into the cafe with the careful movements of someone who was trying not to draw attention. He was

mid-forties, brown hair, unremarkable in every way except for the fact that he was checking his phone compulsively and looking around the cafe like he was waiting for something specific, like he was meeting someone for a rendezvous.

Bex took photos through the window. She had already identified from Petra's description that this was probably not Marcus Reid, which meant this was probably Elena Cardoso's contact, the person who was picking up the data on behalf of whoever had hired them. The photos came out clear despite the cafe's dim lighting. The man's face was visible. His details were captured. He had become a real person, a real actor in the real crime that was unfolding.

The man sat for ten minutes, ordered a coffee that he barely touched, kept checking his phone. Then he received a phone call. His entire posture changed. His hands started moving. He stood up immediately, paid his bill on the way out, walked quickly to a car parked two blocks away. Santiago's colleagues followed him at a distance, noting the license plate, the direction he was driving. They maintained distance, did not get too close, let the target believe he was moving through the world unobserved.

"We have him," Santiago said into the radio. "Moving north on the Rua da Cintura. Do not follow too closely. We want him to lead us somewhere, to take us to the next person in the chain."

The man drove to a nondescript office building in the Parque das Nacoes neighborhood, close to the Vasco da Gama shopping center, a modern part of Lisbon that had been built and developed in recent decades. He parked in an underground garage with the kind of familiarity that suggested he had done this many times before, that this was a regular destination for him. He went into the building through a service entrance, avoiding the main lobby, using a route that would minimize his visibility. Santiago's colleague followed him as far as possible, watching him move through the building with purpose, watching him access the office without seeming to hesitate or need to look for anything. But then he lost him on the third floor. The building had multiple exits, multiple corridors, multiple routes through the maze of office spaces and storage areas. The target had disappeared into the building's interior, leaving Santiago's colleague unable to track him further without risking detection.

"He went into a unit that is leased to a company called Nexus Analytics," Santiago reported. "Third floor, northwest corner. That is as far as I can follow him without risking being noticed."

By the next morning, Santiago had results. He had run comprehensive company background checks, had found the ownership structures hidden behind multiple layers of legal formation. He had traced the shell companies and the holding companies that had been set up to hide the actual owners, to obscure who was actually behind Nexus Analytics. Nexus Analytics was a shell company registered in Portugal, but it was owned by a holding company registered in the Cayman Islands. That holding company was owned by another shell company, this one registered in the British Virgin Islands. The chain went back five layers, which suggested whoever had set it up had been trying to hide their actual identity behind multiple legal structures, trying to create enough distance and complexity that tracing back to the actual owners would be difficult and time-consuming.

"But here is what is interesting," Santiago said when they met at another cafe. He brought his laptop and brought printouts of documents. "The office lease for the Nexus Analytics unit is paid for by a transfer from a company account. That company account is registered in Portugal, and it is connected to a legitimate technology company called Synthesis AI."

Synthesis AI. The name meant something to Bex. She knew it from somewhere, some piece of background information she had read about the AI landscape in Europe, some article about venture capital and tech startups and the increasingly competitive field of artificial intelligence development. She pulled up her phone and did a quick search, browsing through recent news articles and company information. Synthesis AI was a Portuguese tech company that specialized in large language model development, working on the same kinds of cutting-edge AI systems that all the big tech companies in California and China were developing. They had raised over thirty million euros in venture funding, which was impressive for a company founded less than five years ago. They had been founded three years ago by a group of engineers and entrepreneurs, people who had had the vision and technical expertise to start a company that could compete with much larger,

better-funded operations. One of the founders was a woman named Carolina Silveira, who had previously worked for a major tech company in California, who had been one of the few Portuguese people working in the upper tiers of tech companies in Silicon Valley, but had returned to Portugal to start her own operation, to build something new, to establish a Portuguese company in a field dominated by American and Chinese competitors.

"That is our thread," Santiago said, his voice carrying the satisfaction of someone who had finally identified the actual person responsible for the operation. "Synthesis AI wants Ingrid's research. They want it before it can be published and make their compliance failures public, before it can damage their reputation in the investment community, before it can undermine the narratives they are using to raise money from venture capital firms. So they hired a data brokerage operation, they set up shell companies to hide their involvement, they directed the theft from their offices using a proxy who is probably a contractor or a trusted employee. And Carolina Silveira is probably the person at the top of the entire operation, the person who made the decision to steal the research, who allocated the resources to accomplish the theft, who was willing to accept the risk and the consequences if the operation failed. Silveira is the architect of this crime, even if she did not personally execute it."

"We need proof of the connection," Bex said. She was thinking through what would be necessary for prosecution, what evidence would be required to convince a judge or jury that Synthesis AI was actually behind the theft, that Carolina Silveira had actually hired the people doing the crime. "We need something that connects Synthesis AI directly to Marcus Reid or to Elena Cardoso or to the actual data theft. We need something that shows the deliberate intent, the knowledge of what was being stolen, the authorization to proceed."

"We are building that," Santiago said, his confidence based on having done this kind of investigation before. "Daria is building that with her technical investigation, finding the connections between the mail servers and the Nexus office, showing that the same infrastructure was being used by David Costa. We are building that by tracing the money, by following the financial transfers from Synthesis AI to shell companies to the people doing the actual work. We

are building that by following the connections through multiple sources and multiple methods. But we also need to be careful. If Synthesis AI is sophisticated enough to set up multiple shell companies and complex ownership structures, they are sophisticated enough to cover their tracks well enough that our evidence might not be admissible in court without the right kind of chain of custody, without the right kind of documentation. We need something that is airtight, something that cannot be attacked by a defense attorney, something that is clear and direct enough that it speaks for itself. We need something that even a very good lawyer cannot successfully argue away or reframe as something innocent."

Over the next two days, Daria continued her technical investigation. She traced the data being pulled from the mail server and found evidence that it was being accessed from the Nexus Analytics office using specific IP addresses and specific access patterns. She found evidence of multiple data transfers from the foundation over the past six weeks. She found a pattern of technical communications that suggested Elena Cardoso had been in regular contact with someone at the Nexus office.

But most importantly, she found something in the technical metadata of the data transfers that suggested someone had left a signature in the code. It was a small thing, something that only a highly trained technical person would notice. But it was distinctive. It was like an artist's signature on a painting. It was a pattern of coding style that was unique enough to be recognized and traced.

"David Costa is the person who set up the technical infrastructure," Daria reported. "He is the one who configured the proxies, who set up the mail server, who wrote the script that is pulling the data from the email account. This is his operation. The coding signature matches work that David Costa has done in the past. The organization of the folder structures is the way David Costa organizes his work. Synthesis AI is using him to run the theft."

The Confession

Ingrid had known. That was the thing that struck Bex the most when Ingrid finally said it aloud on the evening of February 18th, when they sat in the study of the house with the Atlantic visible in the darkness beyond the windows. All along, Ingrid had suspected that Carvalho was involved, had sensed that something was wrong with the foundation. She had seen the signs, had noticed the changes in his behavior, had understood that his access and his position made him the logical person to be involved in any internal theft operation. But she had not had proof. She had not had anything concrete that she could take to law enforcement or to the board of directors. She had only suspicions, and suspicions were not enough. She had not known how to proceed without potentially damaging the people she cared about, without exposing the foundation to legal liability, without making accusations that she could not support with evidence. She had been living with the knowledge that her foundation was compromised, that her trust had been betrayed, and that she did not have the tools or the authority to address it directly.

"I knew something was wrong," Ingrid said, looking out the window at the dark Atlantic. "I could feel it. You develop an instinct about these things when

you run an organization, when you work with people every day, when you understand the rhythms of how an organization functions. Something in those rhythms was off. Something in the way people moved through the office, the way conversations stopped when I approached, the way certain people were avoiding eye contact with me. I knew something was happening that I was not being told about."

"Why did you not confront him directly?" Bex asked.

"Because I did not have proof. Because I was afraid of what would happen if I accused him of something and I was wrong, or if I was right but I had no evidence to support the accusation. Because even if I was right, I did not understand the full scope of what was happening. How could I address a problem when I did not fully understand what the problem was? How could I make decisions about people's employment and legal liability when I had only suspicions and no evidence? I would have exposed the foundation to liability. I would have given ammunition to the people I suspected of wrongdoing. I would have made the situation worse instead of better."

Ingrid stood and walked to the window. She was looking out into the darkness, looking toward the Atlantic, but Bex understood she was really looking inward, thinking through the choices she had made and the costs of those choices.

"Three months ago, Carvalho started acting differently," Ingrid said, her voice thoughtful as she recounted the observations that had been accumulating in her mind. "He was still professional on the surface, still competent in his work, still able to do his job as foundation director. But underneath that professionalism, something had changed. He was distracted. His attention would wander. He would make excuses to be in the server room when there was no legitimate technical reason for him to be there. He would ask me questions about the backup procedures and the data storage protocols, questions that a director would not normally need to ask. He would ask about my travel schedule in ways that seemed less about coordinating my work and more about understanding when the office would be less populated, when there would be fewer people around to notice what he was doing. He wanted to know when I would not be here, when there would be fewer people around, when

suspicious activity would be less likely to be noticed by observers."

"Did you ask him about his behavior?" Bex asked.

"I tried once. I asked him if everything was all right, if something was happening in his personal life that was affecting his work. He said everything was fine, that he was just working on some technical upgrades. I did not push it. I should have pushed it, but I did not. I was hoping I was wrong. I was hoping I was misreading the situation. I was hoping that my instinct was just being paranoid and that nothing was actually wrong."

"What else made you suspect him?" Bex asked.

"The threatening letters started arriving, and they seemed designed to do a specific thing: bring in outside security. A legitimate threat would have asked for something or made a specific demand. A legitimate threat would have articulated what the person threatening wanted. But these threats were generic. They were designed to trigger a response, to create the appearance of danger without actually specifying what the danger was. And I thought, who benefits from outside security being brought in? Who benefits from having external consultants around the foundation with legitimate reasons to be asking questions?"

"Someone who wants to use that legitimate access to move data," Bex said.

"Yes. And I also thought about who has consistent access to sensitive information. Who has the ability to move data without triggering alarms. Who understands the foundation's systems well enough to know how to exploit them. And Carvalho was the obvious answer. But I did not have proof. I did not have anything concrete that I could show to a prosecutor or to the police. I had suspicions and instincts and a sense that something was deeply wrong with the foundation."

"Why did you not go to the police?" Bex asked.

"With what evidence? With my suspicion and my sense that something was wrong? The police would not have acted on that. They would have wanted the kind of concrete proof that you have now. They would have wanted technical evidence, financial records, communications. They would not have

wanted the subjective feelings of a business owner who had bad instincts about her employees. And I also wanted to understand what he was doing and why. I wanted to understand the decision-making process, the logic that had led him to steal from the foundation. I have known Carvalho for five years. I have built this foundation with him, worked with him every day, trusted him completely. The work matters to him. Or at least it seemed to matter, seemed to be central to his professional identity and his sense of purpose. I wanted to understand what had changed for him, what had happened in his life that would make him willing to betray the work he had spent years building, the work he claimed to care about deeply. I wanted to know if his commitment to this foundation was authentic or if it had always been conditional, dependent on his personal circumstances, dependent on his ability to maintain the comfortable position he had constructed."

Ingrid turned away from the window and faced Bex directly.

"I also wanted to protect the foundation," Ingrid said. "I wanted to understand the scope of the problem before I took action. If I had fired Carvalho immediately based on my suspicions, if I had gone to the police with only my instincts and no evidence, I would have damaged the foundation's reputation. I would have created a situation where Carvalho could have claimed I was retaliating against him for some other reason. I would have exposed the foundation to legal liability. I would have made it harder for the board to support me. I would have made it impossible to maintain the kind of institutional stability that an organization needs to function."

"You needed someone from outside," Bex said.

"I needed someone who could investigate without all the emotional complications I have. Someone who could see clearly what was happening and do what needed to be done. Someone who could operate in the space where my emotional connection to the people and the work would prevent me from being objective. Someone who could look at this situation without all the baggage of history and relationship and years of working together."

"Why did you not just fire him?" Bex asked.

"Because I did not know if he was the only one involved. Because I did not know if firing him would alert whoever was above him to the fact that I was suspicious. Because if I fired him without proof, he could sue me for wrongful termination. Because I was trying to understand the full scope of what was happening before I took any action that would be irreversible."

Bex understood that completely. She understood the way organizations operated, the way an accusation without proof could be worse than the crime itself, the way even legitimate actions could be characterized as improper if there was enough money behind the characterization, if there were enough lawyers willing to argue that the action was unfounded or retaliatory or discriminatory. Bex understood that this was how the world actually worked.

"Do you think that will matter when this goes to trial?" Ingrid asked. "Do you think the court will understand why you did what you did, why you waited, why you did not act immediately based on suspicion?"

"It will matter to the judge," Bex said. "It will matter to anyone who understands how organizations actually operate, who understands that management decisions often have to be made in ambiguity, with incomplete information, with multiple competing interests to balance. The context matters. The desperation matters. That does not mean Carvalho will not face consequences, but it means the consequences will be proportional to what actually happened rather than being the worst interpretation of his actions."

Ingrid sat back down in her chair. She looked tired, which made sense given that she had been carrying this knowledge alone for months. She had been living with the awareness that her foundation was being compromised, that the work she had built was being stolen, that the person she had trusted was betraying her. She had been carrying that knowledge alone and waiting for someone else to confirm what she already suspected.

"After this is over," Ingrid said, looking tired, looking like someone who understood the magnitude of what was ahead of her. "I am going to have to rebuild the foundation. I am going to have to rebuild the team. I am going to have to figure out how to replace people who betrayed my trust or who were coerced into betraying it. That is going to be difficult in ways that I am not sure

I fully understand yet. That is going to require me to figure out how to trust people again, how to trust my own judgment about people, how to believe that the people I work with are actually who they claim to be. It is going to require me to build new systems of accountability and oversight, to make sure that what happened here can never happen again. But it is also going to require me to do this without becoming paranoid, without becoming so focused on security that I undermine the collaborative, open environment that makes good research possible. That is the hard part. That is the part where security and institutional culture have to find some kind of balance."

"You will do it," Bex said. She understood that Ingrid was facing something difficult, something that would require both courage and patience, both vision and careful management. "You have the work. You have evidence that the work matters, that people care about it enough to risk breaking the law to suppress it. You have shown that there are people willing to go to significant lengths, willing to commit crimes, willing to sacrifice their freedom and their reputations, to suppress the research because it threatens them. That says something powerful about the value of what you have built. That says your research is important, that it matters in ways that go beyond the academic world, that it threatens existing power structures and existing ways of doing business. That is why people wanted to steal it. And that is why protecting it, publishing it, getting it into the world, is so important."

"I suppose so," Ingrid said, her voice carrying the weight of someone thinking through difficult realities. "But I would rather have built a foundation where this did not happen. I would rather have built something where people were content enough, where they did not have secret medical debts or personal crises that made them vulnerable to manipulation. I would rather have built a world where people's medical emergencies did not make them prey for criminals, where desperation was not weaponized against people who were just trying to survive."

"That is not a thing that exists," Bex said. "That is the utopia of people who do not understand how the real world actually works. People always have vulnerabilities. People always have crises. People always have needs that are not being met by their regular employment. The only question is whether those

vulnerabilities are used against them or whether they are respected and addressed. You did not disrespect Carvalho's situation. But someone else did, and they exploited it for profit. That is not your failure. That is their crime."

"Will you be there?" Ingrid asked. "When the police move in, when this operation is stopped. Will you be there to see it through?"

"Yes," Bex said. "That is part of the contract. I will be there until this is resolved, until the research is secure, until you are safe. That is what it means to stand watch. You do not leave until the threat is gone. You do not leave until the work is protected. You do not leave until the people who matter are actually safe."

The Operation

The data transfer was scheduled for February 20th, the same time of night as the previous one, the same methodology, the same pattern. Petra received the message from Marcus on the afternoon of that day, his instructions coming through a burner phone number that he had used once before and then discarded. He requested the package be ready at 11 PM, transferred through the same channels as before. Marcus was requesting the complete technical specifications for the foundation's distributed processing system, the system that allowed the researchers to run massive computational audits on AI systems without having to purchase expensive hardware. It was breakthrough technology. It was worth a significant amount of money. If Synthesis AI could obtain the specifications without having to develop them internally, they could save years of research and millions of euros in development costs. That system was the crown jewel of the foundation's technical innovation.

Bex coordinated with Santiago for a more comprehensive surveillance operation this time. They had learned from the previous operation. They had learned what the pattern looked like. They had learned how the operation functioned. Now they had the opportunity to gather more evidence, to identify

more actors, to follow the chain further up the criminal hierarchy.

They had police units positioned at multiple locations in the city. They had technical monitoring in place to track the data transfer in real time, to confirm that the data was moving through the systems the way they expected it to move. They had everything prepared to move quickly if needed, to arrest multiple people simultaneously if the operation revealed new targets. But the operation had to look normal. It had to look like Petra was simply transferring the data as she had been instructed to do. Marcus could not suspect anything. If Marcus suspected anything, the whole operation would collapse. The subjects would have time to destroy evidence. The investigation would have to start over.

At 10:45 PM, Bex took position in a car two blocks from the Alcantara cafe where Petra was going to initiate the transfer. The car was parked in a way that allowed her clear sightlines to the cafe entrance and the surrounding streets. She had a direct radio connection to Santiago and the other police units. Santiago was in another car with a direct line of sight to the cafe entrance, positioned where he could see who came and went without being obvious about his observation. Two other police units were positioned at key intersections throughout the area, monitoring for anyone who approached with the apparent intention of intercepting the data transfer, for anyone who was coming to collect the data or manage its movement. A technical team was monitoring the servers in real time from a secure location, watching as the data left the foundation's systems, tracking its movement through the proxies and toward the Romanian mail server.

At 11 PM exactly, Petra initiated the transfer from her personal laptop in the cafe. Her hands were shaking terribly, according to Santiago's description over the radio, but she did it. She had the courage to do what Bex had asked, the courage to participate in stopping the operation rather than continuing to be victimized by it. The data started moving through the proxies and toward the Romanian mail server, data that she had been coerced into providing but that she was now helping to recover. Bex could track it in real time through the technical team's monitoring systems, could see the data as it moved through the internet, could confirm that the theft was actually happening, that they had not

missed something, that the operation was real and happening exactly as they had predicted. The data was moving. The theft was happening. The operation was underway. This was the moment where everything they had theorized about, everything they had investigated, everything they had prepared for was about to become a real, visible crime happening in real time.

For five minutes, nothing else happened. The data moved through the internet, through the proxies, through the routing systems that had been set up to hide its origin. Bex watched the technical team's monitors as the data moved, confirming that everything was happening as predicted. The data left the foundation's systems. The data entered the proxy in Poland. The data bounced to the next proxy. The data arrived at the mail server in Romania. The operation was proceeding exactly as they had anticipated it would proceed. Then a car pulled into the parking area of a nearby building, the Nexus Analytics office building where they had been watching for activity. A man got out of the car with the kind of purposeful movement that suggested he knew exactly where he was going, that he had done this before, that this was routine for him. He walked into the building through a side entrance. Within minutes, he had accessed the mail server remotely. Within seconds of that, he was downloading the data, pulling the stolen research from the mail server into his laptop, into the Nexus Analytics systems, confirming that the theft was occurring in real time.

The technical team that Daria had coordinated with began monitoring what was being downloaded from the mail server, began tracking which specific files were being accessed, which research papers were being pulled down, which technical specifications were being retrieved. They confirmed that it was the files Petra had transferred, the research documents that she had been instructed to upload. They confirmed that the data was complete, that the transfer was working as expected, that the theft was proceeding exactly as the perpetrators had planned it.

"We have visual confirmation," Santiago reported through the radio, his voice calm and professional despite the significance of what was happening. "A man is in the building, accessing the data remotely from an office on the third floor. He appears to be verifying the transfer, confirming that what he received

is legitimate. He is accessing files, opening them, checking their integrity. He is confirming that the research is actually what he wanted and what he paid for. The operation is proceeding. The theft is happening in real time."

"What building is he in?" Bex asked.

"The Nexus Analytics office," Santiago confirmed. "The same location from the previous surveillance. Same floor. Same general location. This is their operation. This is where they are managing the data theft."

The man spent fifteen minutes at the location, confirming the data, verifying that what he had received was legitimate and complete, that the theft had been successful and the data was usable. Then he packed up his laptop carefully, locked the office, and walked back to his car with the kind of practiced care that suggested he was trying not to draw attention, trying to move through the world like someone who was doing nothing wrong, who had nothing to hide. He drove to another location, this time a parking garage in the Alvalade neighborhood, one of the older parts of Lisbon where the buildings were residential and the streets were quiet and where nobody paid attention to people coming and going. He parked the car, left the parking garage on foot, and walked to an apartment building, moving with the kind of deliberate casualness that suggested he had done this before, that he knew how to move through urban spaces without being noticed or remembered.

"We have the address," one of Santiago's colleagues reported. "We have the location. We have visual confirmation of the subject entering the building. We know where he lives. We can bring him in for questioning whenever we want."

"Not yet," Santiago said. His voice was calm, professional, the voice of someone who understood that patience was part of the operation. "Let him go home. Let him report to whoever he is reporting to. Let them think everything went smoothly. Let them believe the operation is proceeding normally. We want to gather more evidence before we move in for arrests."

But while they were following the man to his apartment, another element of the operation unfolded. Daria, monitoring the data transfer from a technical perspective, monitoring the servers, tracking where the data was going and

what was happening to it, noticed something unusual. The man at the Nexus office had not just verified the data. He had also initiated a separate transfer, sending some of the files to a different location. But he was not sending all the files. He was selecting which files to keep and which files to send somewhere else. He was keeping the most technical and detailed specifications. But he was sending the most valuable and most sensitive information elsewhere.

"He is not keeping all the data," Daria reported to Bex. "He is selecting which files to keep and which files to send somewhere else. Which suggests he is not the final recipient. Which suggests there are at least two buyers. One buyer gets the complete technical specifications. Another buyer gets a smaller, more valuable subset of information."

"Can you trace where he is sending the smaller subset?" Bex asked.

"I am trying. Give me a moment. The data is being routed through multiple proxies, through multiple servers. But I can trace it. I can follow the digital breadcrumbs."

The data was being routed through multiple proxies, through multiple servers in multiple countries. But Daria was working backward from the point of origin, following the digital breadcrumbs, trying to understand where the data was ultimately going, who was ultimately receiving it, what the final destination was.

"It is being sent to a server in Miami," Daria reported after several minutes of intense technical work. "The server is registered to a company called Vertex Solutions. Vertex Solutions is a venture capital firm that invests in AI companies. That is interesting because Carolina Silveira has been trying to raise additional funding for Synthesis AI. Which suggests maybe she is not just stealing the research to develop her own system. She is stealing it to show potential investors what kind of research she can develop."

"She is using your research as a portfolio piece to attract investors," Bex said to Ingrid, who was waiting in another vehicle nearby, close enough to monitor the operation, far enough away to not be directly involved. "She is using your work to prove the value of her company, and she is selling access to that work to potential investors. She is leveraging your intellectual property to

raise capital."

Ingrid was quiet for a moment, processing what that meant, understanding the full scope of what was happening, understanding that this was not just theft. This was a systematic exploitation of her work for profit on a scale she had not fully appreciated.

"That makes it worse," Ingrid finally said. "That makes it corporate theft on a much larger scale. That means multiple parties are involved. That means the research has been compromised in ways I did not understand."

"Yes," Bex said. "And it also makes it prosecutable in multiple jurisdictions. Portugal for the theft from the foundation. Miami for the secondary transfer. And if Vertex Solutions is a U.S. company, then it is potentially federal intellectual property theft, which brings in much more serious charges, federal law enforcement, and much more serious consequences."

At midnight, Santiago gave the order to move in. They had the evidence. They had the locations. They had identified the key actors. It was time to move from investigation to enforcement.

Police units went to the apartment where the man had gone. They arrested him without incident. His name was David Costa, thirty-five years old, the security engineer that Daria had identified from the coding signatures. Costa's apartment contained computers with copies of the stolen research. His company laptop, seized by police, contained the communication records with Elena Cardoso and the Nexus office contact. His phone contained text messages from Carolina Silveira, messages in which she had explicitly instructed him to steal the research and send specific files to the Miami address.

It was enough. It was more than enough. It was overwhelming evidence of a coordinated, systematic, carefully planned operation to steal intellectual property for profit. It was evidence that would hold up in court, evidence that a judge would find compelling, evidence that would justify criminal charges and potentially support convictions.

Over the next two hours, carefully coordinated police units moved simultaneously against multiple targets at multiple locations. This was

precision work, the kind of coordinated enforcement action that required timing and communication and trust in the other team members. They moved against Petra Voss at her apartment in the Alvalade neighborhood, arresting her before she could make phone calls or warn anyone else that the operation had been compromised. They moved against Carvalho at his home, taking him into custody as he was preparing for bed, as he was settling into the evening routine of someone who thought tomorrow would be a normal day at the foundation. They moved against Elena Cardoso at her office, cutting off her ability to access her computer systems or destroy evidence. And they moved against the office of Nexus Analytics, securing the offices, seizing all computers and documents and hard drives. They found evidence at every location. They found the data transfer systems, the proxies and the scripts and the infrastructure. They found communications that documented the entire operation, emails and messages and encrypted conversations. They found bank records and financial transfers that showed the flow of money through the operation. They found every piece of evidence needed to prosecute the crime, to convict the people responsible, to ensure that justice was served.

The Aftermath

Carvalho was brought to a police station for questioning on the morning of February 21st. He had been arrested at his apartment as he was preparing breakfast, a simple meal of coffee and toast, as he was getting ready for another day at the foundation, for another day of maintaining the facade that nothing was wrong, that his life was normal, that his actions had no consequences. He had been arrested without violence, without drama, without physical resistance, with the kind of professionalism that Portuguese police exercised when they arrested people who were not violent, who were not dangerous, who were simply engaged in crimes of theft and deception. Two officers had come to his door with a warrant. He had read the warrant. He had understood what was happening. He had gotten dressed and gone with them without protest.

Bex was present for part of his questioning, observing from behind a one-way glass that allowed her to see into the interrogation room without being observed herself. She watched the way he broke down when Santiago began to explain the scope of what had been discovered, when Santiago laid out the evidence in careful detail, when the full weight of the investigation became clear. She watched the man who had been so careful, so methodical in his theft,

so precise in his operations, collapse entirely when confronted with the consequences of his actions. She watched him understand that his daughter's medical treatment, paid for through money he had accepted in exchange for betraying the people who trusted him, was about to become very complicated. She watched him understand that the path he had chosen, the compromise he had made to save his daughter's life, was about to cost him everything: his freedom, his career, his future.

He confessed to everything that had happened, holding nothing back. He provided names of everyone he had communicated with, dates of when the communications had occurred, amounts of money that had been transferred, the complete structure of the operation from the perspective of someone at the center of it. He explained how he had been approached, how he had been recruited, what he had been promised. He provided something else too: he provided context. He explained that Marcus Reid had approached him through an intermediary, someone who had known about his daughter's medical condition, someone who had done thorough background research on him and understood his vulnerabilities precisely. The intermediary had explained the opportunity. The intermediary had explained what would happen if Carvalho cooperated. The intermediary had explained what would happen if he refused. He explained that he had been promised the money would continue for as long as he cooperated, that he had been assured his daughter's treatment would not be interrupted, that if he stopped cooperating the payments would stop and the treatment would end.

"They told me it was normal business practice," Carvalho said during his questioning, his voice small and broken. "They told me that research theft happened every day, that nobody got hurt, that the research would be replicated eventually anyway. They told me many things to make it seem like what I was doing was not actually a crime. They told me I was providing a service, that I was not betraying anyone, that this was just how the business world operated. They told me many things because they understood that I was desperate and that I needed to believe those things in order to live with what I was doing."

Santiago looked at him with something that might have been sympathy, but which Bex understood was really just professional understanding. Santiago

had heard this before. He had heard it from dozens of people who had convinced themselves that their crimes were not really crimes, that their betrayals were not really betrayals, that the money they were receiving justified the compromises they were making. He understood that people were capable of extraordinary rationalization, extraordinary self-deception, when they were desperate enough.

After the questioning, Carvalho was processed and held pending arraignment. He would face charges of theft, breach of fiduciary duty, industrial espionage, and conspiracy. Because he had cooperated with the investigation, because he had provided testimony that would be useful to the prosecution, the prosecution agreed to recommend a reduced sentence. But he would still go to prison. That was unavoidable. The crime had been committed. The harm had been done. Consequences were necessary.

Petra Voss was more difficult to watch than Carvalho. During her questioning, she cried, but not the tears of someone experiencing remorse so much as the tears of someone experiencing terror, pure terror about what would happen to her mother, about whether her mother's medical treatment could continue without the payments that had been making that treatment possible. The payments had become the lifeline that her mother depended on. Without them, the treatment would stop. Without the treatment, her mother would die. That was not an abstract fear. That was a concrete, immediate, devastating reality. She understood that she had made a terrible choice, that she had compromised her integrity and betrayed the trust of people she cared about. But she also understood that the choice had seemed necessary at the time, that the alternative had been allowing her mother to suffer, to decline, to die. How could she choose anything else? How could she have made a different decision when the stakes were literally her mother's life?

"The foundation will help," Ingrid said when Bex told her about Petra's situation. Ingrid's voice was firm, decisive, the voice of someone who had made a decision and was committed to it. "We will find a way to ensure that her mother's medical bills are covered. Petra made a mistake under extreme duress. That does not absolve her of responsibility for the consequences of her actions. But it also does not mean I am going to let her mother die because

Petra was vulnerable to manipulation. Petra's mother will receive the medical care she needs. The foundation will ensure that."

Bex contacted Santiago and told him that Ingrid wanted to work out an arrangement where the foundation would cover Petra's mother's medical expenses pending trial and sentencing. Santiago checked with the prosecutor, who saw no legal problem with it. The foundation providing medical care to Petra's mother would not constitute obstruction of justice or tampering with a witness. It would be seen as an act of institutional mercy, as a gesture of compassion from an organization that understood the human cost of the crime that had been committed.

"She will still face charges," Santiago said when he delivered the news to Petra. His voice was kind, but firm. She understood that this was not forgiveness. This was a recognition of context, a mitigation of one of the pressures that had driven her to cooperate with the theft. "She will still be prosecuted. The justice system will still hold her accountable for her actions. But the foundation has committed to covering her mother's medical expenses, which means the duress argument becomes much stronger. Which means the sentence will likely be lighter. Which means she might be able to rebuild her life after this is over."

Petra broke down again when she heard the news, but this time with relief mixed with the fear. She had made a terrible choice under pressure, but she was not being abandoned in the aftermath. She was not being left to figure out how to care for her dying mother while facing criminal prosecution. The foundation was extending compassion to her even as the justice system extended accountability.

Elena Cardoso was a different case entirely from Carvalho or Petra. Elena was a professional criminal, someone for whom theft and data brokerage were simply business, the way that accounting was business for an accountant or medicine was business for a doctor. She had chosen this work. She had cultivated this skill set. She had made a career out of stealing information and selling it to the highest bidder. She had no remorse about what she had done, no explanation beyond the basic fact that she got paid to do this work and she did it well. She had multiple prior arrests for similar crimes in other countries. She

had spent time in prison before for her work. She understood that she would spend time in prison again, that this was an occupational hazard of her chosen career.

But what was interesting about Elena was what she said when she was questioned about who had hired her for this particular operation. She did not hesitate to implicate Carolina Silveira and Synthesis AI. She did not try to protect the person who had hired her. She simply explained the contract, the payment structure, the technical requirements, and pointed the investigation directly at Synthesis AI. She explained that the contact had come through intermediaries, that she had never met Carolina Silveira directly, that she had only communicated through cutouts and secure messaging systems, but that she had no doubt about who was ultimately responsible for hiring her and directing the operation.

"I do not have loyalty to clients," Elena said during her questioning. "I have a contract with them, and I fulfill that contract. When the contract is over, the relationship is over. This is business, nothing more. I was hired to move data. I moved data. I was paid for moving data. I will face consequences for moving data. But I will not protect the person who hired me because loyalty is a luxury that people in my line of work cannot afford."

Carolina Silveira was the most complicated arrest, the one that required the most careful handling to ensure that the evidence against her was airtight and that she could not escape legal consequences through clever legal maneuvering. She was sophisticated enough to know that she should not answer questions without a lawyer present, that anything she said could potentially be used against her in trial. She was wealthy enough to hire a very good lawyer, the kind of lawyer who would find every possible avenue to challenge the evidence and undermine the prosecution's case. She was careful enough that her communications with David Costa had been oblique enough that she could potentially argue that she had not explicitly instructed him to steal the research, that she had simply asked him to investigate whether it was possible to obtain copies of the research for legitimate business purposes like "due diligence."

But David Costa, when he was questioned, was less careful. He had not bothered to hide his communications with Carolina because he had assumed that their encryption and their use of cutouts would protect him. David Costa had messages from Carolina that were explicit and clear, messages that left no ambiguity about what she wanted and what she was willing to pay for it. Carolina had written in one message, "I need the complete technical specifications for the Ingrid Lund distributed processing system. I need it within sixty days. I will provide payment for the acquisition of these materials. This is a priority project." In another message, she had written, "Confirm receipt and confirm timeline. Payment will be available upon delivery and verification." These were not vague requests for information that could be obtained through legitimate means. These were explicit requests for specific proprietary materials that could only be obtained through theft.

It was not technically an explicit instruction to steal. But it was an explicit request for materials that she must have known could only be obtained through theft from the foundation. There was no other way to acquire them. They were not publicly available. They were not published anywhere. They were proprietary research that belonged to Ingrid's foundation. Carolina Silveira must have known that requesting them meant requesting that they be stolen. And it was followed by monthly payment transfers to shell companies that were connected to the data brokerage operation, payment transfers that had been made after each data delivery. The prosecutor's case was strong. The evidence was comprehensive and compelling. The multiple arrest operations had gathered everything necessary to move forward with serious charges against all parties involved.

The Report

Bex spent February 22nd and February 23rd in her hotel room in Cascais, writing the final report. The work was meticulous and thorough, the kind of documentation that would need to stand up to legal scrutiny, that would need to withstand defense attorney questioning, that would need to be clear enough that a judge could understand the full scope of the investigation without having to ask for clarification. It was forty-seven pages in the end, a comprehensive document that laid out everything she had discovered, every step of the investigation, every piece of evidence that had been gathered, every connection that had been established. The report was organized chronologically, walking through the investigation as it had unfolded, showing how each discovery had led to the next, showing how the threat had been identified and assessed and ultimately addressed. The report began with her initial assessment: the threatening letters were designed to bring in outside security as cover for a data extraction operation. The actual threat was internal, rooted in the vulnerability of specific employees and the systematic exploitation of those vulnerabilities by an external criminal operation designed by people who understood exactly how to pressure someone into doing things they would never normally do.

The report then walked through her investigation step by step. The access logs that showed suspicious data downloads at hours when the foundation would be less populated. The financial situation of Tomás Carvalho and how it had created vulnerability. The identification of Petra Voss as a coerced participant, forced into cooperation through threats to her mother's medical care. The technical tracing of the data extraction performed by Daria Novak, the coding signatures that pointed to David Costa. The identification of Elena Cardoso as a professional data broker. The connection to David Costa and the Nexus Analytics office. The ultimate revelation that Synthesis AI and Carolina Silveira were behind the entire operation.

The report included evidence: copies of the access logs, screenshots of the financial transfers, transcripts of key interviews, technical documentation of the data exfiltration infrastructure, communications between the various parties involved. The report was dense with detail, but each detail served a purpose. Each detail was necessary to the prosecution's case.

Most importantly, the report explained the context. It explained why Carvalho had been vulnerable, what circumstances in his life had made him susceptible to the approach that had been made to him. It explained why Petra had cooperated under duress, what pressure had been applied, what threats had been made. It explained what motivated Carolina Silveira, what competitive pressures and financial incentives had driven her to take the risk of stealing research from a foundation run by someone who was making her look bad in the investment community.

But Bex was careful in the report to note that understanding the context did not excuse the behavior. It did not absolve anyone of responsibility. It did not eliminate criminal liability. It simply provided the framework for understanding how such a complex criminal operation had developed, how otherwise reasonable people had been drawn into criminal activity, how desperation and pressure and vulnerability had been systematically exploited.

Ingrid read the report and made suggestions for clarification, but otherwise did not ask for changes. She understood what had happened. She understood the scope of the threat and the way it had been addressed. She understood that Bex had done her job thoroughly and professionally.

"What will you do now?" Ingrid asked when they sat down to discuss the final payment and the closure of the contract. They were in the study again, looking out at the Atlantic, the February light cold and precise on the water, the kind of light that suggested the sky had been washed clean. The study was quiet, peaceful, a place where significant conversations could happen, where important decisions could be made. Ingrid was asking about Bex's future, about what came next, about whether Bex would continue doing this kind of work or whether the Portugal experience had changed her perspective.

"What do you mean?" Bex asked.

"I mean with your life, your work. Will you continue doing security assessments? Will you continue putting yourself in situations where you have to uncover corruption and crime?"

"Yes," Bex said. "That is the work I chose. That is the work I was trained to do. That is what I do."

"Even knowing what the consequences are?" Ingrid asked. "Even knowing that addressing these situations creates collateral damage, that innocent people sometimes suffer because of the actions of the guilty? Even knowing that the financial and emotional costs are significant?"

"Especially knowing that," Bex said. "That is precisely why the work matters. That is why prevention matters. That is why identifying and stopping threats before they metastasize is so important. If I can stop one operation before it fully develops, I can prevent years of consequences spreading out from that operation. I can limit the collateral damage by addressing the threat early. I can reduce the number of people who are harmed. That is the value of the prevention work."

"That is noble," Ingrid said. "But it must be exhausting."

"It is," Bex said. "But it is also necessary. There are people who understand how systems work, who understand how to exploit vulnerabilities, who understand how to move money and data in ways that are difficult to trace. Those people exist. The only way to address them is for other people to understand those systems equally well, to be able to recognize threats, to be able to stop them before they succeed."

"I am grateful," Ingrid said. "I want you to know that. I am grateful for what you have done, for how you have done it, and for the care you have taken to address this situation in a way that is proportional and just. I am grateful that you treated the people involved as human beings, not just as criminals or victims. That kind of nuance is rare."

"It is what you paid me to do," Bex said. "But I am also grateful that the work mattered. I am grateful that you trusted me to figure out what was actually happening, and I am grateful that I was able to stop it before your research was successfully stolen and disseminated and used for purposes that would undermine everything your foundation stands for."

Ingrid made the final payment at the end of the day: fifty thousand euros, in addition to the thirty thousand initial contract and the substantial expenses that had been accrued over three weeks of intensive work in Portugal. By standard rates for threat assessment work in a high-stakes situation with international involvement, by standard rates for security consultation that had required coordination with foreign law enforcement, by standard rates for work that had resulted in the arrest and prosecution of a criminal operation, it was fair payment. The work had been thorough. The investigation had been professional and complete. The outcome had been successful: the research was protected, the criminals were arrested, the foundation was secure and would continue its work. Bex did not negotiate the payment. She knew she had earned it. She understood the value of what she had done, the time she had invested, the expertise she had brought to the problem. She understood that this work could not have been done by just anyone, could not have been done without the specific combination of skills and understanding and professionalism that she brought. She also knew that Ingrid could afford it and was paying it willingly, which meant the transaction was complete in both the financial and emotional sense. This was not a grudging payment or a resentful payment. This was a grateful payment from someone who understood that Bex had done something important, something that had made a real difference in whether the foundation would survive and whether the work would continue.

That evening, Bex called Maya and told her she was coming home the next day. She would be on a flight from Lisbon to Portland in the morning, and

she would be back in Portland by evening, which would give her time to pick up groceries and settle back into normal life before Maya got home from school.

"What time will you be home?" Maya asked.

"Six PM, probably seven," Bex said. "It depends on traffic from the airport."

"I will make dinner," Maya said. "I have been practicing a pasta dish. It might be terrible, but I will make it."

Bex smiled at that. Maya was fifteen years old and had recently decided she needed to learn to cook, which had resulted in a series of experiments that had ranged from actually quite good to genuinely inedible. But the effort of it mattered more than the outcome. The intention mattered. The desire to do something for Bex mattered.

"I am sure it will be great," Bex said. "And I will appreciate it, regardless of how it turns out."

That night, Bex packed her bags and made one final walk through Cascais. She walked along the coast, watching the Atlantic in the darkness, feeling the wind come off the water. She had been here for three weeks and two days, had come to know the place, to understand its rhythms, to appreciate its specific qualities. The light here was different from Portland light. The wind was different. The way the city held history in its buildings and streets was different. The way the Atlantic smelled and moved and sounded was different from the way the Pacific sounded in Portland.

But she was ready to go home. She had done the work. She had accomplished the objective. She had protected what mattered. Now it was time to return to the people and the place that actually mattered to her, to the niece who had been managing without her, to the city that was her home, to the quiet life that sustained her between the intense periods of work.

The Professional Assessment

Santiago Reyes asked to meet with Bex on the morning of February 24th, before her flight. They met at a cafe near the airport, the kind of place where people transacted business before departing the city, where the coffee was strong and the pastries were excellent and the owner did not pay attention to customers who wanted to have private conversations. Santiago brought coffee and the kind of pastry that Portuguese cafes were famous for, and he brought something else: a printed document that he had spent hours preparing in the early morning hours before this meeting.

"This is my professional assessment of your work," Santiago said, sliding the document across the table. "I have written this so that you will have a record of how the investigation was conducted and what the quality of the evidence gathering was. It will be useful for any future claims of credit or professional recognition. It is also a statement of record from law enforcement that you conducted yourself professionally and with integrity throughout this investigation."

Bex read through the document. Santiago had documented everything with the care of someone who understood that professional record-keeping was important, that documentation could matter in future situations, that having official recognition of work well done could make a difference in how that work was understood and valued.

Santiago had explained how Bex had identified and distinguished between the apparent threat (the threatening letters designed to look like extortion) and the actual threat (the systematic data theft). He had explained how she had built the investigation methodically, gathering evidence before making accusations, protecting the vulnerable parties while still ensuring that the actual crime would be addressed. He had documented how she had collaborated with law enforcement without compromising the integrity of either the investigation or the people involved.

Most importantly, Santiago had documented the methodology in a way that suggested this was a model for how this kind of investigation should be conducted. He had documented the care that had been taken to distinguish between victims who were acting under duress and actors who were acting with criminal intent. He had documented the way the investigation had identified the layers of the criminal operation and had worked to address each layer appropriately.

"This is exceptional work," Santiago wrote in the conclusion of the document, his professional assessment careful and detailed. "The investigator identified a sophisticated criminal operation disguised as a simple extortion threat. She conducted the investigation in a manner that protected vulnerable parties while still gathering sufficient evidence to support criminal prosecution. She worked collaboratively with law enforcement without compromising the integrity of either the investigation or the institutional processes. She demonstrated understanding that justice is not simply about punishment, but about understanding context, protecting the vulnerable, and addressing the actual threat rather than the apparent threat. She showed professionalism, care, and ethical rigor in all aspects of her work. This is the work of someone who understands both the technical aspects of security investigation and the human dimensions of criminal justice. This is the work of someone who is excellent at

what they do, who takes the work seriously, and who understands that the most important part of this job is not catching criminals but protecting what matters."

Bex read through the document twice, then looked up at Santiago.

"Thank you for this," she said. "Why did you write it?"

"Because the work deserves to be documented," Santiago said. "Because future law enforcement and security professionals will benefit from understanding how this investigation was conducted. Because you deserve to have your professionalism recognized by someone who understands the field well enough to appreciate the quality of what you did. And because in our fields, reputation is everything, and reputation is built through demonstrated competence and professional integrity."

"This will be useful," Bex said. "Not for ego reasons. But because I do work where people hire me based on reputation and referrals. Having a law enforcement professional document the quality of my work will matter to potential clients. It will matter in the security world. It will matter when I need to demonstrate that I have done this work before and done it well."

They sat and drank coffee together, and Santiago asked her questions about her work, about how she had come to this profession, about what drew her to it. He was genuinely interested in understanding what made her good at this work, asking follow-up questions that showed he was thinking deeply about what she was saying. He wanted to understand the specific skills that made someone good at this kind of investigation, the characteristics that separated excellent investigators from merely competent ones. Bex explained about MPSA, about the training program she had gone through years ago, about how it had been intensive and rigorous and had focused on the intersection of psychology, security operations, and threat assessment. She explained about the specific combination of skills and psychology that made her good at threat assessment work, the way that different parts of her intelligence and personality aligned to create expertise in this particular domain. She explained about the need to see what people were actually thinking behind their words, to recognize what motivated them beneath their stated reasons and explanations, to distinguish between lies and truth, to

understand that people's words often did not match their actual beliefs or intentions. She explained about the importance of noticing small things that other people ignored or overlooked, of paying attention to breathing and body language and eye movement and the way people's hands moved when they were talking about things that made them anxious or defensive. She explained that it was not magic. It was training. It was practice. It was the deliberate development of a particular way of seeing the world, a way of seeing that became automatic over time, a way of seeing that was always active even when she was not consciously engaging it.

"You are good at seeing what people are actually thinking," Santiago said, his assessment careful and appreciative, delivered with the sincerity of someone who had spent a career observing people and understanding what made them tick. "You are good at understanding what motivates them, what drives their decisions, what makes them vulnerable to manipulation or coercion. You are good at recognizing lies, at identifying when someone is saying something that conflicts with what they actually believe or intend, when their words are a performance rather than truth. You are good at identifying truth, at separating the actual facts from the stories that people tell themselves and others, at distinguishing between narrative and reality. Those are skills, but they are also gifts, natural aptitudes that you were born with. You were born with some capacity for them, some sensitivity to the signs and markers that other people miss, some ability to read people that most individuals never develop. And then you trained to refine them, to develop them, to make them systematic and reliable rather than just intuitive, to make them work consistently in different contexts and with different people. That is a rare combination. That is what makes you valuable in this work. That is why you are good at what you do, and why people hire you when they need someone who can see clearly and act decisively, someone who understands the human dimensions of crime and security."

"It is useful in this work," Bex said. "It is less useful in normal life. In normal life, it can make you suspicious, can make it harder to trust people, can make you see threats everywhere."

"I imagine it does," Santiago said. "That must be difficult."

"It is," Bex said. "But it is the price of doing the work. You cannot be good at this without developing a particular way of seeing the world. And once you see the world that way, you cannot unsee it. You cannot go back to innocence. You cannot stop recognizing the patterns that indicate deception or the vulnerabilities that indicate exploitation. That is part of why I need the time away from this work, the time with my niece, the time in my normal life. That is how I keep myself sane. That is how I keep this particular way of seeing from consuming me entirely."

Before they parted, Santiago gave Bex his personal phone number, written on a small card that he handed to her across the table.

"If you ever need law enforcement cooperation again, if you ever need to investigate something from a distance, if you ever just need to talk shop with someone who understands the work, call me," Santiago said. His tone was sincere, suggesting that this was not just a polite gesture but a genuine offer of professional relationship and support. "You will always have a professional colleague here in Portugal. You will always have someone who understands what this work requires, someone who appreciates the complexity of it, someone who recognizes that the most important part of the work is not the arrests but the understanding, not the prosecution but the protection of what matters. There are not many people who understand that. There are not many law enforcement professionals who see it that way. But I do, and I want you to know that whenever you need assistance, whenever you need to work on a case that touches Portugal or Portuguese law enforcement, you can contact me."

"Thank you," Bex said. She put the card in her pocket carefully, understanding its value, understanding that Santiago was offering more than just professional cooperation. He was offering respect, recognition, the kind of collegial relationship that made this work sustainable, that reminded you that you were not alone in trying to do the right thing in a world that often did not reward it.

"Thank you," Bex said. "I appreciate that. The work is often isolating. It is good to know there are people who understand what the work actually requires, people who can speak the language, people who understand that the work is not just about catching criminals but about understanding human behavior and

human vulnerability."

The flight from Lisbon to Portland took eleven hours through the night. Bex slept for part of it, read for part of it, and spent the rest of the time thinking about what she had learned in Portugal, what she had accomplished, what it all meant for her understanding of her work and her place in the world. The operation had been sophisticated, well-organized, carefully planned by people who understood how to operate in the spaces between institutions and oversight. But it had not been invulnerable. It had been built on the vulnerabilities of specific people, on the assumption that those vulnerabilities could be exploited without being addressed, that desperation could be weaponized without consequence. It had assumed that desperation would make people reliable, that coercion would make people compliant, that money would be enough to keep people doing something they did not want to do. All of those assumptions had been wrong. All of them had contained flaws that the investigation had exposed.

But the operation had failed because someone from outside had recognized what was actually happening. Someone had seen past the apparent threat and identified the real one. Someone had investigated carefully enough and creatively enough to understand the whole structure. Someone had understood that the work mattered enough to justify the effort required to protect it.

That was the essence of the work. That was what made it matter. That was why she did it, why she would continue to do it for as long as she was able.

As the plane descended into Portland and she could see the city lights below, Bex thought about Maya, about the home she had built with her niece, about the life she had created outside of the work. The work was important. The work made a difference. But it was the life outside the work that made the work sustainable, that kept it from consuming her entirely.

The Final Report

Bex had not yet delivered the final invoice to Ingrid, which meant the contract was technically not complete. There was one more thing that needed to happen. Bex needed to sit down in her hotel room, one last time before checking out, and write the executive summary that would accompany the detailed report. It was late afternoon on February 24th, the light through the hotel room window was the precise Atlantic light that Bex had come to recognize over the past three weeks, cold and specific and somehow ancient in the way that Portuguese light seemed ancient.

She opened her laptop and began to type with the kind of focused attention that she brought to all her work, careful to be precise, careful to be complete, careful to document everything that mattered.

"THREAT ASSESSMENT SUMMARY: INGRID LUND FOUNDATION Prepared by Bex Holloway, Independent Security Consultant February 24, 2025 Cascais, Portugal

CLIENT: Ingrid Lund Foundation, Lisbon Portugal PRINCIPAL PROTECTED: Ingrid Lund, founder and executive director CONTRACT

DATES: February 3, 2025 through February 24, 2025 CONTRACT VALUE: Eighty thousand euros plus expenses

INITIAL THREAT ASSESSMENT: Client reported receipt of three threatening communications over six-week period, warning against continued operation of foundation research. Client requested professional threat assessment and protective security measures. Initial communications appeared designed to trigger institutional response rather than articulate specific demands.

INITIAL HYPOTHESIS: Communicated threats did not align with standard threat profiles. Threat language was generic, timing was irregular, communications suggested effort to trigger specific institutional response rather than articulate specific demands. Primary hypothesis: communicated threats were cover for internal security compromise.

INVESTIGATION FINDINGS: 1. Systematic internal data extraction operation targeting foundation research 2. Operation motivated by external buyer seeking proprietary research materials for competitive advantage 3. Internal actors identified and assessed as coerced rather than willing participants 4. External operation structured as multi-layer criminal enterprise with compartmentalized roles 5. Evidence of international organized crime involvement and criminal sophistication 6. Multiple jurisdictional implications including federal intellectual property theft

INVESTIGATION TIMELINE: February 3-8: Initial briefing, familiarization with foundation operations, observation of personnel and systems February 8-15: Identification of suspicious data access patterns, financial coercion of primary actor, financial investigation February 15-18: Identification of additional coerced participant, technical tracing of data extraction infrastructure February 18-20: Development of comprehensive evidence portfolio, coordination with law enforcement February 20-21: Real-time surveillance of final data extraction operation, coordinated arrest operations across multiple locations

ACTUAL THREAT: Sophisticated data theft operation targeting proprietary research materials related to artificial intelligence compliance and

regulatory frameworks. Operation structured as international criminal enterprise involving professional data brokers, technical specialists, and corporate actors. Primary motivation: acquisition of research for competitive advantage in venture capital fundraising and potential commercial exploitation. Secondary distribution of research to additional buyers identified.

PROTECTIVE MEASURES IMPLEMENTED: 1. Continuous security assessment of foundation facilities and operations 2. Covert monitoring of employee behavior and threat indicators 3. Technical investigation of data exfiltration infrastructure 4. Financial analysis of coercion mechanisms 5. Collaboration with law enforcement on investigation and arrest operations 6. Protection of evidence integrity for legal proceedings 7. Mitigation of secondary risks from identified actors

OUTCOMES: 1. Foundation research secured and preserved 2. All identified actors arrested and in custody pending trial 3. Comprehensive evidence portfolio compiled for prosecution 4. Investigation expanded to implicate international actors and U.S. venture capital firm 5. Client protected throughout investigation and protective detail period 6. Data theft operation completely dismantled

COLLATERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONTEXT: This investigation resulted in criminal charges against multiple individuals. While all charges are warranted and supported by evidence, the context of individual decisions is important for understanding the human dimensions of the crime:

Tomás Carvalho, foundation director: coerced participant acting under duress related to dependent family member's serious medical condition requiring expensive ongoing care. Financial pressure was systematically exploited through sophisticated research and targeting. Context does not eliminate criminal liability but appropriately informs sentencing recommendations.

Petra Voss, personal assistant: coerced participant acting under duress to provide access needed by primary actor. Financial pressure was specific and targeted. Family member's life was effectively held hostage to ensure compliance. Cooperation with investigation and vulnerability to coercion

should inform sentencing considerations.

The client has committed to institutional mitigation measures regarding Petra Voss's dependent, ensuring that medical care continues despite legal consequences for the primary actor. This demonstrates a model of institutional responsibility and proportional justice.

PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT: This was a high-complexity threat assessment requiring sophisticated threat analysis, multi-layered investigative work, technical collaboration, legal coordination, and understanding of both criminal enterprise structure and human vulnerability. The operation was successfully identified despite its sophisticated design and intentional misdirection. The investigation was conducted in a manner that protected vulnerable coerced participants while still gathering sufficient evidence to support criminal prosecution. The research that was the object of the theft has been secured, preserved, and will be published as intended, protecting the public interest in AI compliance research.

The work is complete. The threat has been addressed. The client is secure. The research is protected. The individuals involved will face appropriate consequences proportional to their actions and their roles in the criminal enterprise.

Respectfully submitted, Bex Holloway Independent Security Consultant"

Bex read through the summary, made several edits for clarity and precision, and then saved it. She attached it to the email with the detailed report and the invoices, sent it all to Ingrid with a note: "Contract fulfilled. All materials attached. All evidence has been provided to law enforcement for prosecution. The research is secure. Thank you for the opportunity to do this work."

Within two hours, Ingrid responded. Her message was brief and warm and genuine. "Thank you for everything. For the work, for the care you took with the people involved, for understanding what actually happened rather than just focusing on the crime. The foundation will recover. The research will be published. What you did made that possible. I will never forget this."

Bex read the message twice and closed her laptop. The work was done. The contract was fulfilled. The client was satisfied. She had accomplished everything she had been hired to do and significantly more. Now it was time to go home, to return to Portland, to spend time with the person who mattered most, to integrate this experience into the broader arc of her life and her work.

That evening, she had dinner in the hotel restaurant, a simple meal of grilled fish and vegetables and a glass of white wine from the Douro Valley. She sat alone, as she often did, at a small table by a window that overlooked the Atlantic. The ocean was dark, barely visible in the evening light, but she could hear it, could smell the salt on the wind that came through the open window. She thought about the three weeks that had just passed, thought about how much had changed in such a short time, how much she had learned about the people involved and the ways that desperation could be used as a tool of manipulation. She had come to Portugal expecting a straightforward threat assessment that would turn out to be something more complex. Instead, she had uncovered and stopped a sophisticated criminal operation that threatened not just one researcher but the entire foundation and potentially the broader conversation about AI compliance and regulation. The research that she had protected would make a difference in how companies were regulated, how their systems were audited, how their claims about AI capability were evaluated.

She had worked with Portuguese law enforcement in a way that had been respectful and collaborative. She had protected vulnerable people while still ensuring that justice was served in a proportional and thoughtful way. She had done work that mattered in a fundamental sense. She had made a difference that would persist beyond this moment.

Now it was time to go home.

She checked out of the hotel the next morning, making sure every detail was settled, that nothing was left undone, that the work was truly complete. She paid the final bills, ensured everything was documented, that all the paperwork was in order. She took a car to the airport and went through security with her carry-on luggage and her laptop, the only things she had brought to Portugal and the only things she was taking back. She had been in Portugal for three weeks and two days. She had arrived not knowing what she would find, had

conducted a thorough investigation, had identified a sophisticated criminal operation, had worked with law enforcement to arrest everyone involved, and had protected the research that mattered. Now she was ready to leave. The work was done. The threat had been addressed. The foundation was secure.

The flight home was uneventful. She watched the landscape below change gradually from Portuguese coast to open ocean to the approach to North America. She could see the continent appearing beneath her, could see the shape of the land as it emerged from the clouds, could feel the sense of coming home even as she was still thousands of feet in the air. She could see Portland from the air, the bridges spanning the Willamette River, the rain that was always present in February in the Pacific Northwest, the city lit by the lights of homes and streets and the ongoing lives of people who knew her. She could see her home from above, could see the city where she actually lived, the place where she was rooted, where Maya was waiting for her, where her normal life continued even when she was away.

By the time she landed at Portland International, it was 6 PM local time. She collected her bag from baggage claim, went through customs with her U.S. passport, felt the small transition of returning to her home country, to the place where she actually belonged. She walked out into the arrivals area where the world smelled like home: coffee and air conditioning and other travelers and the specific humidity of the Pacific Northwest in February. She had been in Portugal for three weeks and three days. She had come as a stranger to investigate a threat. She was leaving having stopped a criminal operation, protected vulnerable people, and saved research that would matter for years to come. She was exhausted from the intensity of the work and satisfied by what she had accomplished. She was ready to go home, to see Maya, to settle back into her normal life, to be just another person in Portland for a while before the next call came and the next threat needed assessment.

Epilogue: Departure

Maya was waiting for her at baggage claim, looking taller than when Bex had left three weeks ago, though that was probably not possible. But there was something different about her, something more present, more aware. The weeks alone, managing without Bex, had done something to her, had matured her in some subtle way that the intervening time had allowed to develop.

"You are home," Maya said, and there was relief in that statement, which was good. Relief meant that Maya had been worried, had understood that Bex had been in a situation that carried risk, and was glad that the risk had resolved favorably.

"I am home," Bex said. "And I am ready for that pasta dinner you were planning to make."

As they drove home through Portland rain, Bex told Maya about Portugal, about the work, about the threat and how it had been addressed. She did not tell her the details that would be too dark, too close to violence or danger. But she told her enough that Maya would understand that the work had mattered, that it had made a difference.

"Did you stop them before they could steal the research?" Maya asked.

"Yes," Bex said. "I identified what was happening, I gathered evidence, I worked with law enforcement to arrest the people involved. The research is safe. It will be published. It will make a difference in how companies are regulated and how AI systems are understood."

"Good," Maya said. "That seems like the point of what you do."

"That is exactly the point," Bex said. "That is why the work matters. That is why I do it."

They got home and Maya started the pasta dinner, which turned out to be surprisingly good. They ate together at the kitchen table, and Bex felt the tension of the past three weeks slowly drain out of her shoulders. She was home. The threat had been addressed. The work was done. For a while at least, there was time to be present, to be with her niece, to be just another person living a normal life in Portland.

But in the back of her mind, she was already thinking about the next call, the next client, the next threat that would need assessing. That was the rhythm of the work. That was how it was sustainable. You completed one job. You came home. You spent time with the people who mattered. And then you went out again, because there were always more threats, always more situations that needed the kind of attention and care that she was trained to provide.

Six days later, on March 3rd, Bex was sitting in the departure lounge at Portland International Airport, waiting for her flight to San Francisco. She had spent the intervening week reconnecting with her home, settling back into her normal routine, and working through the administrative aftermath of the Portugal job. She had received calls and emails. Patricia Moore had called to debrief her on the work, asking detailed questions about how the investigation had proceeded, offering feedback and praise for how thoroughly she had conducted herself. Santiago had sent her a formal letter from the Lisbon police department, documenting her cooperation and thanking her for the assistance provided to the investigation. The prosecutor's office in Portugal had indicated that her testimony would likely be required at trial, which meant she would probably need to return to Lisbon at some point in the future to provide

testimony that would help convict the people who had stolen Ingrid's research.

Ingrid had called to tell her that the foundation was rebuilding, that they had secured additional funding from supporters who were impressed by the foundation's commitment to security and institutional integrity, and that the research was on track for publication within six months. Ingrid had also told her that Carolina Silveira had accepted a plea deal, had agreed to testify against David Costa and the other actors in the conspiracy in exchange for a reduced sentence. "She understood that fighting this was going to be more expensive than accepting what happened and moving on," Ingrid had said. "She made a choice. Now she will live with the consequences of that choice."

Bex had filed her business taxes, had updated her insurance information, had reviewed the contracts of her existing clients and made notes about when various protective details would need renewal or adjustment. She had also received three new inquiries about her services, all from referrals that had come through her MPSA network, all from people who had heard about the Portugal job and wanted to know if Bex was available for similar work.

She had responded to one of them: a tech CEO in San Francisco who was facing a threat profile that seemed similar to Ingrid's initial report, but which Bex suspected would require a different assessment and different approach once she had more information. She was boarding in two hours. She had already reviewed the initial briefing materials. She had already started thinking through what questions she would need to ask, what information she would need to gather.

She had spent time with Maya, had helped her with homework, had taken her to a movie, had had the kinds of conversations that normal families had when they were in the same physical space for consecutive days. Maya had told her about school, about a girl she was developing feelings for, about her ambivalence about college applications even though she was only fifteen.

"You have years to figure that out," Bex had said. "You do not need to have your life planned right now."

"But you knew what you were going to do," Maya had said. "You knew you wanted security work."

"I did," Bex had acknowledged. "But I was older than you when I figured that out, and it took me years to actually develop the skills to do it well. You do not need to have everything figured out now. You do not need to know your entire life trajectory at fifteen."

Now, sitting in the airport lounge, Bex thought about that conversation. She thought about the work she did, the training that had made her good at it, the specific combination of circumstances that had led her to this particular professional path. She had come to MPSA because she had been good at security, because she had trained in protection and threat assessment, because she had seen the world in a particular way and had found a profession that rewarded that particular way of seeing. She had built a career on being able to identify threats that other people could not see, on being able to protect things that mattered.

But it was the life outside the work that actually made it sustainable. It was Maya, waiting at home, asking her about her job and understanding that it mattered, that it required her to be away sometimes, that it required her to put herself in situations that carried risk. It was the community of people she had trained with, the network of professionals like Patricia Moore and Santiago Reyes who understood the work and could speak her language, who could appreciate both the technical skill and the ethical complexity of the work.

It was the places she had known and the places she was coming to know. Cascais in February. The Atlantic light. The way the city had stone buildings that had survived centuries of weather and history. The coffee in the mornings. The way the ocean sounded and smelled.

All of it together made the work possible. All of it together made it sustainable. All of it together made it meaningful. She got on the flight and settled into her seat. She had a book she was reading, a biography of someone who had worked in international diplomacy, which was a kind of work that had some similarities to her own. She had her laptop, where she had started taking notes on what she wanted to remember about the Portugal job. She had her phone, where she had several messages from clients and potential clients waiting for responses.

But for the moment, as the plane took off and climbed above the Portland rain, she just sat and looked out the window and thought about standing watch. Standing watch meant noticing everything. It meant seeing threats before they manifested, identifying danger in the smallest details, recognizing when something was wrong before it became obvious. It meant being present enough to care about what you were protecting, committed enough to do the work thoroughly, skilled enough to do it well.

Standing watch meant working in the space between prevention and response, in the space where most of the actual protection happened. It meant understanding that the most effective security work was the work that nobody noticed, because the threat had been identified and addressed before it could develop into something visible. It meant understanding that you could not be present for everything, could not protect everything, but that you could make a difference in the specific situations you chose to work with.

She called Maya from the plane, during the brief window after takeoff when cell service was available from the airline's wifi.

"I am off," Bex said. "I am headed to San Francisco for a new job. I will probably be gone for two weeks."

"Be safe," Maya said. It was what she always said, and Bex understood that it meant more than just the literal request for safety. It meant come back to me. It meant do the work well. It meant do not lose yourself in it.

"I will," Bex said. "I will always be careful. That is part of what makes me good at this work."

After she hung up, she settled back in her seat and opened her laptop. She had notes to organize, observations to document, patterns to begin to recognize about the new situation in San Francisco. She had work to do, and she understood it deeply: the work was what she did, and it mattered, and it was worth doing well.

Outside the window, the Pacific Coast was visible below, the ocean stretching out to the horizon, the light cold and precise. She was between places now, between one job and the next, between home and the work. She was in the space where she did her best thinking, where she prepared herself for what

came next.

She was standing watch. That was what she had been trained to do at MPSA, what she had practiced and refined over years of work. That was what she had chosen to do, chosen to make her profession and her life purpose. That was everything, the absolute core of her professional identity and her personal purpose, the reason she did this work and the reason she would continue to do it for as long as she was able. The plane continued west toward San Francisco, cutting through the darkness, carrying her toward the next situation, the next threat to assess, the next person who needed protecting, the next piece of work that would matter in ways she did not yet understand but that she knew, from experience, would require her full attention and her best thinking and her deepest commitment to doing the right thing. Bex pulled up her notes on the new client and began to prepare. She had an investigation ahead of her. She had work to do. She had a role to play in a situation that had not yet fully revealed itself, that had not yet shown her what the actual threat was beneath the apparent threat.

She was ready. She had trained for this. She understood the work. She understood what it required. She understood what it meant to stand watch over the things that mattered, to protect what could not protect itself. The work was not glamorous. The work was not immediately visible. But the work was essential, absolutely essential to the functioning of systems that mattered.

And she was at peace with that understanding. She was home in the work, even as she was traveling away from home. She was exactly where she was supposed to be, doing exactly what she was supposed to be doing, and knowing exactly why it mattered. The Atlantic light of Cascais was behind her now, that cold February light that had become familiar to her, that had marked the three weeks she had spent investigating and stopping the data theft. The Portland rain was behind her, the grey drizzle of the Pacific Northwest that was her home. The ocean below her was infinite and cold and vast, stretching out beneath the plane as it carried her toward the next part of her life. But the work was eternal. The work was always there, always waiting for her attention. The work was why she was alive and why she mattered.

She settled into her work, reviewing the notes she had made about the San Francisco client, beginning to formulate questions she would need to ask, patterns she would need to look for, vulnerabilities she would need to understand. She thought about what she had learned in Portugal. She thought about the way that desperation could be weaponized against people, the way that understanding people's vulnerabilities could be used as a tool of coercion and control. She thought about how the most important part of the work was not catching the criminals, not making arrests, not achieving prosecution, but understanding what had led to the crime, what circumstances had made the crime possible, what pressures and vulnerabilities and desperate circumstances had made otherwise good people do bad things. She understood that if she could understand the conditions that made crime possible, she could protect people by addressing those conditions, by identifying the vulnerabilities before they were exploited, by understanding context and motive and desperation before someone decided to weaponize those things against another person.

She let the plane carry her forward, carrying her toward the next moment when she would stand watch, when she would see what others could not see, when she would protect what mattered to people who could not protect themselves. The work continued. The vigilance continued. The commitment to seeing clearly and acting decisively continued without pause. The commitment to understanding context, protecting the vulnerable, and serving justice in a proportional and thoughtful way continued as the foundation of everything she did. The commitment to recognizing that people were more complex than simple judgments allowed, that circumstances mattered, that understanding why people did things was as important as stopping them from doing those things.

That was everything. That was the work. That was her life. That was why she mattered, why the work mattered, why standing watch meant something in a world that often did not recognize the value of the work until it was too late, until the threat had materialized and the damage had been done.

About the Author

Dr. Terry Oroszi is the founder and director of Mission Possible Spy Academy (MPSA) and Mission Possible Institute, based in Dayton, Ohio. A U.S. Army veteran, her career spans academia, federal consulting, and national security -- including research partnerships with the FBI, DHS, and DoD. Her published work includes *The American Terrorist: A 20-Year Study* and *The Complete Guide to Open-Source Security*. The MP SPY ACADEMY fiction series draws on the behavioral intelligence frameworks she designed for the MPSA 10-ribbon pipeline. Pro Bono Non Malo -- For Good, Not Evil.

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