

THE ALGORITHM

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THE ALGORITHM

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*To everyone who enjoys a good mystery, suspecting everyone, going
back to reread a clue, and reaching the end thinking that, after all, it had
been there from the start.
This book is for you.*

Prologue

Tomás and Leonor's House, Braga
Friday, October 9, 2026, 7:14 a.m.

Leonor heard Tomás open the wrong cabinet twice before he appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"The cups are still in the same place."

He kept his hand on the handle.

"I know."

"Then what are you looking for?"

Tomás looked inside the cabinet, as though the answer might be behind the plates.

"Coffee."

"In there?"

He closed the door.

"I get it."

Leonor went back to the drawing spread open on the table. A house in Guimarães, two changes the client had requested the day before, and a wall that, if moved another twenty centimeters, would turn the house into a hallway with bedrooms. She had marked the change in red and written no beside the arrow.

Tomás put a capsule in the machine.

He did not press the button.

"Did you sleep?"

"A little."

"How much is a little?"

"Enough."

Leonor looked up.

He was wearing his usual white shirt and dark pants, and his hair was still damp. He looked ready to leave except for his left cuff, which was still unbuttoned, and the expression of someone who had reached the kitchen while still thinking about something else.

"Is that a new unit of measurement?"

"What?"

"Enough."

Tomás finally pressed the button. The machine began to run.

"I have a difficult morning ahead."

"You have plenty of those."

"This one is worse."

He said it with no intention of explaining. Leonor knew the difference. After eight years, there were silences that still called for a question and others that came with the door already closed.

She folded the drawing in half to make room.

"Is your meeting at eight thirty?"

"Yes."

"With whom?"

"The board. Part of the board."

"That sounds healthy."

Tomás picked up the cup before the coffee had finished pouring. Two drops hit the counter.

"Henrique wants to talk about the offer again."

"And you want to talk about not selling again."

"There isn't much more to say."

Leonor wiped up the drops with a cloth.

"That's never stopped you."

He drank the coffee and grimaced.

"It's too hot."

"It just came out of the machine."

"I know."

"You're getting a lot of use out of that phrase today."

Tomás smiled, but the smile did not last.

The phone vibrated on the counter.

He looked at the screen.

He did not touch it.

Leonor went back to the drawing.

"Aren't you going to check it?"

"Later."

The phone vibrated again.

This time, Tomás turned it face down.

Leonor set down her mechanical pencil.

"Did something happen?"

"At the company?"

"I didn't specify."

He leaned against the counter.

"No."

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The answer came too quickly to be a prepared lie and too slowly to be just the truth.

Leonor picked up her mechanical pencil again.

"All right."

The silence that followed was not new. All that had changed in recent months was the ease with which they could both go on inside it.

Tomás opened the refrigerator.

"Is there anything for tonight?"

"There is."

"Are you having dinner here?"

Leonor looked at him.

"Are you asking if I'm having dinner in my own house?"

"I'm asking if we're having dinner."

"That's different."

"That's why I corrected myself."

The refrigerator held a container of vegetables, eggs, cheese, an open bottle of wine, and half an omelet from the night before. Tomás stared at the shelves as though he expected to find a decision waiting for him.

"I might be late."

"That's not exactly new, either."

"Late, but not too late."

"That's still not a time."

He closed the refrigerator.

"Eight thirty?"

Leonor let out a little laugh.

"You just made dinner plans with me using the same method you use to estimate how long a meeting will take."

"It works."

"Sometimes."

Tomás drank more coffee.

Only then did Leonor notice his unbuttoned cuff.

"Let me."

"What?"

She held out her hand.

"Your arm."

"I can fasten a button."

"It doesn't look like it."

Tomás came closer and let her take hold of his wrist.

The buttonhole was frayed. Leonor picked at the fabric with her fingernail, turned the shirt cuff, and managed to work the button through.

"You need to throw this out."

"It's fine."

"The sleeve is coming apart."

"The button hasn't fallen off yet."

"High standards."

She let go of his arm.

Tomás did not move away at once.

For a second, they were too close for two people who, that morning, had talked only about coffee, work, and time.

Leonor saw the fatigue in his eyes.

"Tomás."

"Hm?"

She could have asked him again if anything was wrong.

She did not ask.

He said nothing either.

The phone vibrated a third time.

Tomás moved away and read the message.

Leonor saw only the name at the top of the screen.

Inês.

He typed a brief reply.

"Problems?"

"Work."

"I gathered that."

He put the phone in his pocket.

"I have to go."

Leonor nodded and opened the drawing again.

Tomás picked up the jacket draped over a chair. He searched for his keys in the right pocket, then the left.

"They're in the entryway," she said.

He stopped.

"I knew that."

"Of course."

He went to the kitchen door.

"Leonor."

She looked up.

Tomás seemed to forget what he had been about to say.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You called my name."

"I was going to ask if you need the car tomorrow."

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"Tomorrow?"

"For the weekend."

Leonor slowly set down her mechanical pencil.

"I might."

"All right."

He did not ask where she was going.

She did not say.

The heat came on beneath the floor.

On the wall, the calendar was filled with blue entries for the following week. On Friday, a red rectangle took up part of the evening, with nothing written inside it.

Tomás looked at it.

So did Leonor.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

"It is."

He waited.

She added nothing.

"All right."

Tomás left the kitchen.

Leonor heard the keys, the entryway door, and then his footsteps again.

He reappeared wearing his jacket.

"I forgot my coffee."

The cup was still on the counter, almost full.

He picked it up and drank so much of it in one gulp that he had to close his eyes.

"Still hot," Leonor said.

"I can confirm that."

He set it in the sink.

This time he reached the door without coming back.

"See you later."

"See you later."

Leonor heard the front door close.

For a few seconds, she held her mechanical pencil suspended over the drawing.

Outside, the garage door began to rise.

She went to the window but did not pull the curtain aside.

The engine started on the first try. The car backed out into the street, stopped for a few seconds, then drove away.

Leonor returned to the table.

She tried to keep working.

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She read the same measurement three times.
Finally, she crossed out the number and wrote the same number again.
Her phone lay beside the drawings.
The screen lit up.
A message.
Leonor read it without touching the phone.
Then she turned the phone face down.
In the kitchen, Tomás's cup remained in the sink.
There was still coffee at the bottom.

Chapter 1

The Door

VETRA Systems, Vila Nova de Famalicão
Saturday, October 10, 2026, 6:52–8:10 a.m.

The blue folder was still under the chair when Afonso Lacerda entered the reception area at VETRA Systems. It had a wide spine, black elastic straps, and a paper label, crumpled by the hand that had held it, bearing the word MEETING.

Teresa Mourão sat in front of it, her arms held tightly against her body. She wore a cardigan over a thin blouse, dark pants, and wet shoes. A National Republican Guard (GNR) officer stood nearby without touching her. The cars' blue lights flashed across the factory's old stone, reflected in the entrance glass.

"Chief Inspector Afonso Lacerda. This is Inspector Carolina Reis."

Teresa looked up. It took her a moment to realize they were expecting an answer.

"I didn't touch him."

"All right."

"I called out. First I called his name. I thought he had fallen."

Afonso crouched down without touching the folder. The label had a water stain in one corner.

"Did you come to deliver this?"

Teresa looked at the floor.

"He asked for it yesterday. Said he needed it before seven. There's a meeting at eight thirty. There was. I don't know."

"What time did you arrive?"

"Six fifty-two. I tapped my card at the entrance and went upstairs. Nobody was here. I mean, the man at the security desk was here. Upstairs, I didn't see anyone."

Carolina moved away to speak to the officer in charge of the initial perimeter. She had arrived five minutes after Afonso and already knew that two medical teams had gone in, that the GNR had sealed off the floor, and that the night guard was still in the building. She spoke quickly and wrote little.

"And the door to the room?" Afonso asked.

Teresa raised her right hand. A red light from the firefighters' device still glowed on the skin of her index finger.

"I held my card to the reader. The light turned green. The door recognized me."

"Was it locked?"

"Yes. I opened it and said good morning. I saw the fallen chair. Then I saw his shoes."

The rest was lost in the movement of her lips. The officer moved a cup of water closer to her, but Teresa did not take it.

"How far did you go in?"

"As far as the table. Maybe. I don't know where I stopped. The folder fell. I called 112. They told me to get out. On my way out, I picked up the folder and took it with me."

Afonso nodded. He did not ask again whether she had touched the body.

VETRA occupied a former textile complex on the outskirts of Fama-lição. The granite walls had been preserved, while the interior had been opened up with glass corridors, metal staircases, and white rooms. At that hour on a Saturday, the company seemed too large for the six people moving silently among strips of barrier tape.

On the first floor, the door to Integration Room 3 was propped open with a wedge left by the firefighters. A black rectangle on the wall lit up whenever someone passed. Carolina waited by the tape, already wearing shoe covers.

"Who went in after Teresa?" Afonso asked.

"The guard. Two firefighters, the medical team, and the GNR. We have names and times. She stayed in the hall until they took her downstairs."

"Photographs before anything was moved?"

"The GNR took some. The medical team moved the chair to reach the body. Nothing else, according to them."

They entered one at a time. The room was the size of a small conference room, but almost the entire wall opposite was taken up by dark screens. There was a long table, six chairs, and a blank whiteboard. The air held a dry odor mingled with the smell of warm plastic.

Tomás Valente lay on his side near the head of the table. He was forty-six, with close-cropped dark hair and a white shirt the paramedics had opened. The dressing they had left in the center of his chest had gone dark. One sleeve of his navy-blue jacket was trapped beneath his body. His right hand remained near his bent leg.

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There was no weapon beside his fingers, under the table, or anywhere within Afonso's line of sight.

The fallen chair showed its underside. One of its wheels was still turning, so slowly that the motion might have been caused by the technicians walking past. Two empty cups stood in a row on a tray at the far end. On the table, an open laptop cast a dim light. The screen was locked. Ariadne appeared above the password field.

"It's their product," Carolina said.

Afonso approached the body without crossing into the area marked in the first photographs. A fixed glass panel occupied half a wall, with no opening of any kind. On the other side was a narrow courtyard between two granite buildings and, beyond them, the gray morning.

"One shot?"

"Looks that way. They didn't see any other wound during the initial examination."

Afonso scanned the room again. On the table lay a pad of unlined paper, an uncapped pen, and the victim's phone turned face down. No broken glass. No chair, apart from that one, out of place. The door they had entered through closed by itself once the wedge was removed.

In the hall, a man in a reflective vest waited between two officers. He was the night guard. His sweater was tight around his neck, and the keys clipped to his belt knocked together.

"Did you hear a shot?" Afonso asked.

"No. The walls are thick here. And there's the ventilation machinery. I thought Mr. Valente had left without going past me."

"Did you see him come in?"

"I did. It must have been a little after ten. He said hello. He was alone."

Carolina appeared with a printed sheet inside a clear plastic folder. She did not hand it to Afonso; she tilted it so they could both see. There were only a few lines, times, and names. The first entry belonged to Tomás Valente. The last, many hours later, to Teresa Mourão.

"Where did this come from?" he asked.

"The access-control system. The technical team is still on its way."

"Between the two?"

Carolina ran her finger over the blank space.

"No one else appears."

Afonso returned to the room. From the doorway, he could see the body, the table, the fixed glass, and the glowing laptop. The door brushed his back as it closed with a soft click.

Downstairs, Teresa had stood up. She was finally holding the cup of water, still full. When Afonso asked who could enter that area unaccompanied, she named the departments, then three job titles, then stopped.

“Mr. Valente could get in everywhere. So could I, almost everywhere. Security, of course. The technical leads. It depends on the day.”

“I want the complete list.”

An employee in a wrinkled shirt, called in from home to give them access to the systems, set his laptop on the reception counter. Carolina asked him to limit the search to the overnight hours and the Room 3 area. He pressed two keys, waited, and turned the screen toward them.

“Just this.”

“Is that the list of everyone who could get in?” Afonso asked.

“No. It’s everyone who did.”

Between the end of the workday on Friday and Teresa’s arrival, there was only one name.

Tomás Valente.

Chapter 2

Room Three

VETRA Systems

Morning of October 10, 2026

“Don’t step there.”

Afonso stopped with his foot in midair. Mafalda Rios pointed to a white mark on the floor, almost hidden beneath the end of the table, then turned back to the body. The dressing left by the paramedics had already been removed. The forensic pathologist knelt beside the body, making small movements, while the photographer changed position around her.

Small numbered markers now dotted the wooden floor. The fallen chair had been measured before they set it upright. The laptop, phone, and pen were marked. The portable lamps washed out the gray morning light.

Afonso stepped back toward the wall.

“What’s the mark?”

“A fragment.”

Mafalda tilted Tomás’s face, examined his neck, and called the photographer over.

Carolina waited by the door with a diagram of the room clipped to a rigid board. She had marked the objects’ original positions using the GNR photographs and the images taken before the body was removed. When Afonso looked over, she tapped the head of the table.

“He was here. The chair fell backward and a little to the right. If he was sitting, he stood up or started to.”

“Or it was pulled.”

She drew a small arrow and moved the pen away.

Mafalda stood, removed her gloves, and asked for a fresh pair.

“One shot. Entry wound to the chest. Close range.”

“How close?”

“Close. There’s residue on the shirt and skin. I’ll be more precise after the examination.”

“Did he die right away?”

“Quickly, most likely.”

She put on the new gloves and examined Tomás’s hands. Afonso studied the space between the chair and the body. There were no signs that he

had tried to reach the door. Nothing suggested he had used the table to defend himself. A shirt button, torn off by the first responders, lay beside his leg.

“A struggle?” he asked.

“I don’t see any defensive injuries. The clothing is torn only where the medical team worked. He may have been taken by surprise.”

The photographer asked Afonso to move to the left. He complied and found himself in front of the exterior glass. The metal frame had no handle or hinges.

“Does this open?”

Carolina came closer without touching it.

“No. It’s a fixed panel. They checked from outside.”

The courtyard was one floor below. A strip of moss ran along the gutter. Two members of the forensic team were searching the wet ground beside the wall.

They began removing the body shortly after nine. Afonso stepped into the hall as the gurney came in. Teresa had already been taken to an office farther away, accompanied by an officer. In the sealed-off area, only the click of case latches and the steady noise of the ventilation system could be heard.

Carolina called him from inside the room.

She was crouched in front of a gray panel in the side wall. Seen from the entrance, it blended into the acoustic paneling. It was nearly two meters tall, with a recessed handle at waist height.

“Did you find a cabinet?”

“Not yet.”

She handed him the floor plan. The line of the wall was broken by a narrow rectangle marked with a letter and a number.

“Technical door,” she said. “That’s what maintenance called it.”

The handle did not give. Carolina shone a small flashlight along the seam. Paint had built up around the edges, and in the upper corner was a plastic inspection tag with the date almost worn away. Near the floor, a thin line of dust ran along the base of the panel. To the left of the handle, it disappeared for a few centimeters.

“Photograph this.”

A forensic technician came over. Carolina stepped back.

Afonso read the date on the tag.

“How long has it been closed?”

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“The maintenance man says years. They used it while work on the building was still underway. There are cables and conduits on the other side.”

“And the tag?”

“Inspected eight months ago.”

The technician placed a scale beside the break in the dust and took several photographs. Then he examined the tag through a magnifying lens.

“It doesn’t span the seam. We’ll open it once everything has been documented.”

Mafalda went past them alongside the gurney. She did not look at the technical door. The bag was closed, the shape of the body a low rise beneath the black plastic. Afonso let the team leave before returning to the head of the table.

With Tomás gone, what remained were small traces, measuring tapes, and an area of flooring no one had yet stepped on.

“If someone had been standing in front of him,” Carolina said, positioning herself on the other side of the table, “he would have seen them come in through the main door.”

Afonso sat in the neighboring chair, not the victim’s.

“He knew them.”

“Maybe.”

“He didn’t protect himself.”

Carolina looked at the distance between the two of them.

“Or he didn’t have time.”

The main door opened. A tall man with a short beard and puffy eyes stopped when he saw the markers on the floor. A black backpack hung from one shoulder, and his company badge was facing backward.

“Gabriel Seabra?” Carolina asked.

“Yes. Security. Cybersecurity. They told me to come immediately.”

He tried to move forward. The forensic technician by the door told him to wait and handed him shoe covers. Gabriel put them on clumsily, tore the first one, and swore under his breath.

“I need to see the system before they start shutting things down.”

“No one is going to shut anything down for now,” Afonso said. “We were told the log shows no anomalies.”

Gabriel looked sharply at him.

“Who said that?”

“One of your colleagues.”

“I don’t know what query they ran. That screen isn’t enough.”

Gabriel tightened his grip on the backpack strap.

“Then check.”

“I need to see the source before I can answer. And I need my workstation.”

“Gabriel,” Carolina interrupted. “Could someone have come in here without showing up?”

He opened his mouth and took a moment to answer.

“From what I’ve seen, Tomás is the last person recorded as present. Beyond that, I don’t know yet.”

“I want a copy,” Afonso said.

“I can export it.”

“That’s not enough.”

Gabriel looked at Carolina.

“Two copies,” she said. “One with you, one with us. No one works on it alone until we’ve preserved the data.”

“I don’t alter logs.”

“No one said you did.”

“You’re asking as if the answer’s already... All right. I’ll set up access.”

Only then did he notice the empty space beside the table. The company badge swung against his chest. In the photograph, his beard was shorter, and he had an angry look that might only have been the sun in his eyes.

“Was he here last night?” he asked.

“You’ll help us establish the times,” Afonso replied.

Gabriel lowered his head, opened the backpack, and took out a laptop without turning it on. His fingers missed the zipper pull on the side pocket twice.

The team finished documenting the outside of the technical door at 9:50. In the presence of Afonso, Carolina, and two forensic technicians, they opened the panel. It resisted for the first few inches, then yielded with a brief creak from the hinges.

On the other side were darkness, a narrow metal platform, and vertical pipes. The air that came out smelled of damp concrete. A yellow cable crossed the passage at knee height. Farther on, three steps led down into a space the flashlight could not fully illuminate.

“This isn’t an exit,” Afonso said.

“Not here,” Carolina replied.

The maintenance man brought plans from several stages of the conversion. Some had corrections in pencil; in others, the old walls no longer lined up with the new ones.

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Carolina spread two of them on the hallway floor and aligned them using the stairwell as a reference. Afonso returned to the open platform, where the forensic team's light died a few meters ahead.

"Afonso."

On one of the plans, the corridor continued beneath the building. On the other, the line disappeared behind a wall added years later.

"How far does it go?"

The maintenance man shook his head. The next sheet was missing, and no one there could say whether the passage had been sealed off, rerouted, or simply forgotten.

Carolina folded the plans along the margins and handed them to the forensic team.

Chapter 3

Twenty-One Days Earlier

VETRA Systems

Night of September 18, 2026

The list reordered itself before Tomás Valente touched the mouse.

He had asked for the results to be sorted by date. For a few seconds, the lines appeared in the order he expected: first the tasks completed that night, then the older ones. A status box lit up in the corner of the screen, and the order changed. Three items rose to the top. They were neither the most recent nor the ones with the highest priority.

Tomás set the slice of pizza on the box and wiped his fingers on a napkin. He clicked the filter. Date. Descending order. Apply.

The same three lines returned to the top.

Integration Room 3 was almost dark. Only the worktable and a strip along the wall were lit. On the larger screens, the test graphs remained still. Outside, the rain beat against the fixed glass and broke up Tomás's reflection: sleeves rolled up, stubble, a sauce stain near one cuff.

CONTINUITY appeared in the upper corner of the interface. The name did not yet appear in VETRA presentations or contracts. It was an experimental branch of Ariadne, separate from the product used by customers and linked that night to some of the company's own services.

Tomás opened the first result. A task he had considered closed was back on the list. He closed it again. A little later, it reappeared.

The door opened behind him.

"Still here?"

Inês Faria stepped two paces inside and stood looking at the pizza box, the coat thrown over a chair, and the four glowing screens.

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I left my phone. I think I left it. I called it from the car and heard it ringing in here."

Inês turned on the main light. Tomás squinted.

"Don't do that."

"You look like a bat."

She searched near where she had worked that afternoon. She lifted a notebook, moved two cables aside, and peered under the table. The phone began to ring inside a drawer.

“Was that you?” Tomás asked.

“I called again. It was faster.”

She opened the drawer and retrieved the phone. Its green case was cracked at one corner. She checked the time and grimaced.

“It’s eleven twenty.”

“I know.”

“Are you coming in tomorrow?”

“For a bit.”

Inês moved closer to the central screen, still holding the phone.

“You’re in CONTINUITY?”

“I’m testing something.”

“In production?”

“No.”

She pointed to a small symbol beside the name of a service.

“That’s production.”

“It’s a live service. That’s not the same thing.”

“It is if you’re on the receiving end.”

Tomás returned to the list. One of the lines moved up two places.

“Look at this.”

Inês set the phone down beside the pizza and leaned toward the screen.

“What did you ask for here?”

“To display them by date.”

“Then why is this one moving up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you touched this since Tuesday?”

“No.”

Inês opened the history, scrolled through the latest changes, and returned to the list.

“There’s something here I’m not seeing.”

“Neither am I.”

“Then why are you pleased?”

Tomás picked up the slice of pizza, noticed the napkin stuck to the bottom, and set it down again.

“I want to see if something I leave unfinished keeps running when I come back. And figure out why these three insist on rising to the top.

“I closed the session and came back an hour later. The task was still running.”

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Inês looked again at the symbol on the panel.

“And who authorized this to touch live services?”

“I did.”

“On your own?”

“It was an internal test.”

“That made changes to scheduling and customer support.”

“For two hours on a Friday night.”

“Two hours is enough if you’re on the receiving end.”

Tomás leaned back. One of the chair’s wheels struck a cable and stopped.

“It’s temporary.”

“Until when?”

“Until I figure out whether it works.”

Inês exhaled through her nose and straightened up. She checked the time again.

“At least bring Gabriel up to speed.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Today.”

“It’s eleven twenty.”

“Exactly.”

She slipped the phone into her coat pocket. Before leaving, she turned back to close the drawer she had left open.

“If you need me, call. But don’t make any more connections.”

“Go home, Inês.”

“I’m going.”

The door closed. Tomás waited until he could no longer hear her footsteps in the hallway, then returned to the list. He cleared the sorting criteria and compared the three items that had risen. They shared an old dependency, created during an earlier test and never resolved.

He opened the first task, then the second. The third showed a timestamp that did not fit the test. Tomás opened the history; he could not find the point in that session when the task had been created.

He went back two days, then a week. The task was still there, with a brief objective that meant nothing to him. He did not remember creating it.

He reached for the mouse to delete it.

Instead, he opened it.

Chapter 4

Leonor's House

Tomás and Leonor's House, Braga

Afternoon of October 10, 2026

Leonor Salgado dropped the key between the gate and the first step. She did not bend down immediately. She looked at Afonso Lacerda and Carolina Reis, waiting by the wall, then at the unmarked car across the street.

The taxi pulled away behind her.

"They told me you were coming tomorrow."

"If you'd prefer, we can come back," Afonso said.

Leonor picked up the key. She was forty-one, with her hair carelessly tied back and a red mark beside her ear. She opened the gate.

"There'll be more people here tomorrow. Today I can still talk."

The house stood on a sloping street in Braga, between a new apartment building and a derelict house. Outside, it retained its dark stone and tall shutters. Inside, a wooden staircase divided the long living room. There were books on low shelves, cardboard models under a glass dome, and two matching lamps, one on either side of the sofa.

Leonor set her handbag on a bench in the entryway. Beside it, two bowls kept their keys separate. In one were a VETRA badge and coins; in the other, a coiled tape measure and a small set of keys with a cork fob.

"Would you like coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"I'm going to make one."

They followed her into the kitchen. The counter was clean except for a cup in the sink and a plate with another plate over it. Leonor filled the machine and waited.

Afonso asked about that morning. Leonor said Tomás had left before eight. They had exchanged a few words about meetings and work; late that afternoon, he had canceled dinner by text.

"I wasn't home yet when he texted. I got back around seven thirty."

"I stayed home," she added.

Afonso looked at the covered plate. The dry edge of an omelet was visible. There was a single used utensil in the dish rack.

She said she had gone to bed around midnight and that, on the second floor, she often did not hear Tomás come in.

Carolina tipped her chin toward the full cup.

“Are you going to leave that there?”

Leonor drank too quickly and set the cup down carefully.

“Ask what you have to ask.”

Afonso asked whether there had been any particular reason for their dinner plans. Leonor said it was just Friday.

“It was yesterday, the tenth.”

“Yesterday was the ninth. Today is the tenth.”

Afonso nodded.

“You’re right.”

Leonor waited for more. He added nothing.

Lately, Tomás had been canceling more often. He worked late and came home when he could.

The underfloor heating came on. An architecture calendar on the wall had appointments in two colors. The following week was filled with blue entries; the Friday just past had a red rectangle with no words inside it. Leonor moved until she was standing in front of it.

They had been together for eight years and had lived in that house for five. Tomás used the downstairs study mostly on Sundays; Leonor worked on the floor above.

“Can we see?”

Leonor turned around.

“Why?”

“I want to understand how the two of you lived.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“What I said.”

She poured nearly all the coffee into the sink.

“All right.”

Tomás’s room opened onto a small courtyard at the back. It had a wide desk, two chairs, technical books, and a photograph of the couple on a boat, both wearing sunglasses. On one shelf were three company awards and a box of heartburn pills. There were no clothes. A charger lay coiled beside the lamp, secured with a Velcro strap.

Tomás worked there on Sundays. During the week, he preferred VETRA. Leonor entered the study without hesitation; when they went up to her floor, she let them go first.

They went upstairs. On the second-floor landing, the bedroom door stood open. There were two different nightstands beside the bed, two

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lamps chosen to look alike, and a stack of books on Leonor's side. On the other were a clock, an empty glass, and a cable with no device connected.

Afonso remained in the doorway.

On the floor above, the ceiling followed the slope of the roof. Leonor's workroom had rolls of drawings in baskets, stone samples, a graphite-stained table, and a chaise longue by the window. An open suitcase occupied half the seat.

Two shirts were folded at the bottom. On top were underwear, a zippered toiletry bag, and shoes inside a cloth bag. A coat lay on the table, the dry cleaner's tag still attached to its sleeve.

Leonor stepped forward and lowered the suitcase lid without fastening it.

"Were you going away?" Afonso asked.

"I was going away for the weekend."

"Where?"

"It hadn't been decided yet."

Carolina moved away from the table.

"You packed a suitcase without deciding where you were going?"

"I don't need to know the hotel to choose two shirts."

"Were you going alone?"

Leonor straightened the tag on the coat.

"Does that matter?"

"It might."

"When it does, I'll answer."

Afonso went over to the window. He could see the narrow garden, the garage, and the kitchen roof. A road bike hung from the exterior wall. Beneath it, two helmets hung from separate hooks.

Tomás knew she might be away that weekend; he did not know where. When Carolina asked why she had not mentioned the suitcase, Leonor replied that they had asked about the night, not the following day.

"And today?"

"Today the man I lived with for eight years died. I didn't go anywhere."

Her voice came out louder than she intended. Leonor sat on the edge of the chaise longue and ran a hand across her forehead. They heard the heating pipes and a door slam in the house next door.

Afonso waited.

Afonso asked how things were between them.

"Tired. Of the life we had."

Carolina spoke without moving closer.

"Were there other people?"

Leonor picked up one of the shirts and refolded it.

"I heard the question."

"Tomás's. Or yours."

"I'm not going to answer."

She put the shirt in the suitcase and lowered the lid onto her own hand. She pulled it free and zipped the suitcase shut.

"We can continue tomorrow," Afonso said.

"Tomorrow there'll be a version of me everywhere. Today I'm still here."

"We don't have to continue now."

Leonor stood up, irritated.

"Tomás canceled dinner at seven seventeen. I got home at seven thirty-eight. I heated up what was in the refrigerator, worked until close to ten, watched television, and went to bed before midnight. I didn't go out. I didn't see him again. That's it."

"And the suitcase?" Carolina asked.

"It was already half packed."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday morning. That's enough now."

They went downstairs without returning to the kitchen. In the entryway, Leonor opened the door and kept her hand on the handle. The VETRA badge was still in the bowl of keys. As Carolina passed, Leonor called to her.

"Inspector."

Carolina stopped.

"Don't turn a suitcase into an answer. I don't even know what the question is yet."

Carolina left without answering.

Afonso lingered on the step for a moment. Leonor closed the door, locked it, and slid the upper bolt.

Carolina stood for a few seconds with the car door open. Then she got in. Afonso walked around the front of the car, and neither of them spoke about the suitcase.

Chapter 5

The Board

VETRA Systems Boardroom

Late Afternoon, October 10, 2026

Rui Bastos yanked the cord from the conference phone before the man on the other end could finish his sentence. The unit repeated two clipped words and went dark.

“No one from outside decides this today.”

He stood by the window, sleeves rolled up, his VETRA badge clipped to his belt. At forty-eight, the cofounder had the heavy build of someone who spent too much time sitting and the abrupt energy of someone who had just gotten up to argue.

Henrique Mendonça did not move. Chairman of the board and an early investor, he sat midway along the table, not at its head. He was sixty-one, with very short white hair and a closed leather portfolio in front of him.

“Call him back.”

“No.”

“That was the company’s lawyer.”

“I heard.”

Miguel Tavares pushed the phone toward the center, though it was disconnected. The CFO kept three sheets covered in numbers under his left hand and his personal phone under his right.

“Can we do this without shouting?”

“We can freeze everything,” Rui said. “Then we can lower our voices.”

Afonso stood by the door with Carolina. They had been called in because the word servers had come up four times in a conversation between management and the team preserving the systems. An officer waited in the hallway. On the other side of the glass, employees walked past slowly, without looking in.

At the head of the table, one seat was empty. A wrapped cup and a notepad bearing the VETRA logo had been set in front of it before anyone remembered that Tomás would not be coming.

“What do you want frozen?” Afonso asked.

All three answered at once.

“Everything connected to Tomás,” Rui said.

“Nothing that affects operations,” Henrique said.

“The bank accounts can’t stop,” Miguel said.

Afonso pulled a chair away from the wall and sat apart from the table.

“One at a time.”

Henrique opened the portfolio but took nothing out.

“The company has clients operating, teams in three countries, and commitments on Monday. The police can preserve whatever they deem necessary. VETRA continues.”

“Continues how?” Rui asked. “The man who approved half the decisions is dead.”

“He didn’t approve half.”

“You’re right. He blocked half.”

“Rui,” Miguel said.

“What? It’s Saturday. On Monday people come in here and do what? Pretend this is an outage?”

Henrique turned his wedding ring.

“On Monday, the company opens. We issue an internal announcement today, speak to our main clients tomorrow, and ensure continuity. That’s what a board does.”

“The board doesn’t even know what happened to his systems.”

“The police are dealing with that.”

“The police are dealing with the death. I’m talking about the company.”

“What does freezing everything mean?” Afonso asked.

“No one changes any code, releases any new versions, deletes anything, or accesses Tomás’s environments.”

“And billing?” Miguel asked.

“It waits until Monday.”

“Billing, payroll, suppliers, authorized payments. All of it waits until Monday?”

“Two days won’t kill the company.”

“If you suspend treasury access without arranging replacements, Monday starts with rejected payments. Some accounts have to remain active.”

“Of course. For you, it’s the accounts.”

Miguel looked up from the sheets.

“I’m the CFO. Yes, it’s the accounts.”

“Was there something you were in a hurry to pay?”

“I’m in a hurry to make sure we don’t miss payroll for two hundred thirty-seven people.”

“Two hundred thirty-six,” Henrique said. “The Madrid contract ended.”

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Miguel stared at him.

"It ended yesterday. Payroll had already been finalized."

Carolina moved closer to the table.

"No one touches the machines or data being preserved without authorization from the team. The bank accounts are another matter."

"Then they can remain active," Henrique said.

"That's not what she said," Rui replied.

"It was enough."

Afonso rested his elbows on his knees.

"Who can authorize payments today?"

Miguel answered immediately.

"I can, within the usual limits. Above that, two signatures. Some required mine and Tomás's."

"Were?" Henrique asked.

"Are. The signing authority doesn't disappear from the system because he died. It has to be reported and replaced."

"Then report it."

"To the bank. Then someone has to be appointed to sign."

Rui let out a short sound and turned back to the window.

"We've already started."

"Started what?" Henrique asked.

"Distributing the keys."

"We're ensuring the company's continuity."

"You've said that three times already."

"Because you still haven't understood."

Henrique turned to Afonso.

"Inspector, do the police want the company running or shut down?"

"I don't want anyone damaging what we need to examine."

"Does that mean running or shut down?"

"It means what I said."

Henrique snapped the portfolio shut.

"The technicians complicate everything. Now the police do too. The servers that have been seized stay seized. The others keep running."

"The hard part is knowing which ones those are," Rui said.

"We draw up a list."

Miguel pushed the sheets away.

"That isn't getting resolved today."

"What gets settled today is the announcement," Henrique said. "Without the word suspension, without speculation, and without any reference to failures by the company."

“A man died inside this company,” Rui said.

“I know where he died.”

“You seem to be worried only about Monday.”

“I’m worried about both things. One of them I can still do something about.”

In the hallway, someone dropped a box. Small objects scattered across the floor, and a woman apologized to no one in particular.

Afonso stood and went to the head of the table. He did not sit down. He pressed the cup’s wrapping, and it gave under his finger.

“Who’s going to be in charge?”

Henrique answered first.

“The board provides governance.”

“Who, specifically?”

“I chair the board.”

“You don’t run the technology,” Rui said.

“And you don’t run the company.”

“I founded it.”

“With Tomás.”

“Before you even knew what it was.”

Miguel ran his hands over his face.

“Day-to-day decisions remain delegated. Everything else requires a resolution. And then there’s Tomás’s ownership stake, which won’t be resolved in this room or today.”

“But without him, who has the votes?” Afonso asked.

Henrique looked at Miguel.

“The shareholders retain their existing voting rights.”

“He wants to know who can approve a decision,” Rui said.

“I understood.”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

Miguel aligned one of the sheets with the edge of the table.

“It depends on the decision. Day-to-day operations, management, the board, the shareholders. There’s no single answer.”

“And for a sale?” Carolina asked.

Miguel let go of the paper.

Rui turned from the window.

“There it is.”

“What?” Afonso asked.

“The rush.”

“There’s no rush,” Henrique said.

“You had an offer on the table, and now the man who rejected it is dead.”

Miguel closed his eyes for a moment.

“Don’t do that.”

“Tell the police there was an offer?”

Henrique placed both hands on the portfolio.

“It was a preliminary approach.”

“It had a price,” Rui said.

“Everything has an indicative price before negotiations begin.”

“And it had a deadline.”

“Who made the offer?” Afonso asked.

Henrique hesitated. Miguel was the one who gave the name.

“Duarte Neves.”

“Who is he?”

“Businessman. Tech investor,” Henrique replied. “He made an acquisition offer. Tomás rejected it.”

“To acquire what?”

“VETRA,” Rui said. “Control, product, contracts. Everything that matters.”

“Those weren’t the terms,” Henrique said.

“They were. They just had more expensive words around them.”

Carolina looked at Miguel.

“How much?”

“I won’t discuss figures without the lawyer.”

“A minute ago you wanted to call him back,” Rui said.

“I still do.”

“Was it a good offer?” Afonso asked.

Henrique paused.

“It was serious.”

“For whom?”

“For the shareholders.”

“Tomás was the controlling shareholder,” Miguel said. “Without his stake, there was no deal.”

“And now?”

Miguel spread his hands on the table.

“His stake hasn’t disappeared. There are family, representation, and transfer issues to deal with. It won’t happen today.”

“But it can happen,” Rui said.

“With time, yes.”

“Don’t start.”

Henrique pointed to the phone.

“That’s why we need the lawyer.”

Rui reconnected the cable. The phone lit up, and the display showed that the call had ended.

“There. Call him. Ask him who’s in charge of a company when its founder turns up dead less than two hours before a meeting.”

Henrique did not touch the phone.

“That meeting had nothing to do with the offer.”

“I didn’t say it did.”

“You made it sound as if it did.”

“And you were quick to correct me.”

Miguel gathered up the sheets. The first had a list of payments; the second, the names of banks. He turned the third face down before putting it away.

“Who knew about the rejection?” Afonso asked.

“The board,” Henrique said.

“Some people in management,” Miguel added.

“And Duarte,” Rui said. “Presumably.”

“Did he speak with Tomás after that?”

“I don’t know,” Henrique replied.

Rui shrugged.

“Duarte doesn’t usually give up the first time.”

“Do you know him?”

“I know the type.”

“Do you know him?”

Rui pulled out the chair beside the empty seat and sat down.

“I met him twice. Tomás handled the negotiation.”

Miguel closed the folder and left his hand on it.

“We need to decide on the payments before six.”

“We need to decide who speaks for the systems,” Rui said.

“I speak for the board,” Henrique said.

“Then speak. Say VETRA opens on Monday, that no one knows who’s in charge, and that the buyer is still waiting.”

Henrique stared at the empty seat at the head of the table.

“Duarte’s offer was due to expire on Monday.”

Rui leaned back.

“Maybe not anymore.”

Chapter 6

A Man Without a Name

Northern Portugal

Recent Past

The reservation had already been made when he entered the hotel.

The receptionist turned the monitor toward him, pointed to the reservation details, and asked whether they were correct. The man hesitated. He handed over his ID. The receptionist repeated the question in English, and he answered in the same language, with an accent that made the receptionist compare the photograph with his face again. He had a small backpack and a travel bag that fit under the bench where he had waited. He signed and received a white card.

“Breakfast until ten thirty.”

“Okay.”

The room looked out onto the back of another building. There was a narrow bed, a desk mounted on the wall, and two bottles of water, each with a price on the label. The man set the bag on the floor without opening it. He washed his hands, drank tap water, and went back downstairs.

He bought a toothbrush, socks, and a newspaper he did not read. He sat on a concrete bench, put the newspaper under the bag because the surface was wet, and waited for the rain to stop.

The vehicle was in an open-air parking lot a few streets away. He stowed the bag in the trunk, placed the backpack on the passenger seat, and drove off. He watched as the buildings grew lower, warehouses replaced houses, and power lines cut across the fields.

The first message on that channel appeared after he left the hotel.

It was a horizontal photograph of a repurposed industrial building. Granite walls, factory roofs, new glass between two blocks. The photograph had been taken from across a road on a clear day. It showed no people.

Below it was a single line.

Availability: 21:40–22:25.

The man zoomed in on the photograph. In the left corner was a metal gate and, beyond it, a narrow path alongside a wall. Nothing else was marked.