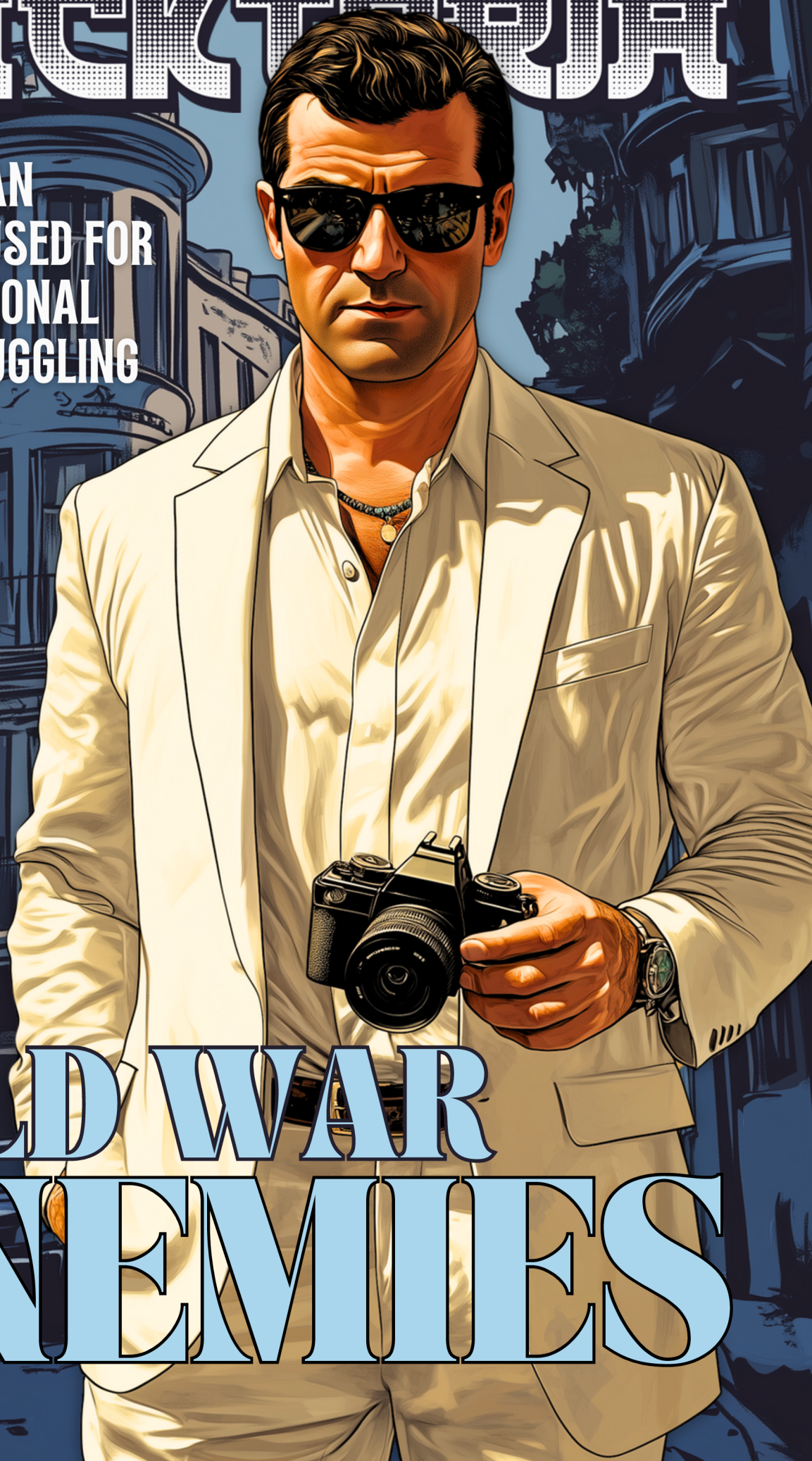


# HACKTERRIA

IDENTIFY AN  
AIRBASE USED FOR  
INTERNATIONAL  
ARMS SMUGGLING

COLD WAR  
ENEMIES





# Chapter 1: Ghost from the Past

December 18, 2022 – Panama City Federal Detention Center

The prison alarm shrieked through the night, slicing through the humid Panamanian air. Guards shouted orders as searchlights swept across the compound.

In the confusion, a black SUV with diplomatic plates slipped away from the service entrance, carrying a ghost —Maksim Kotova, the Russian politician whose smuggling operation SERPENT had dismantled just months earlier.

July 14, 2024 – Shadow Wing, cruising at 40,000 feet over the Mediterranean

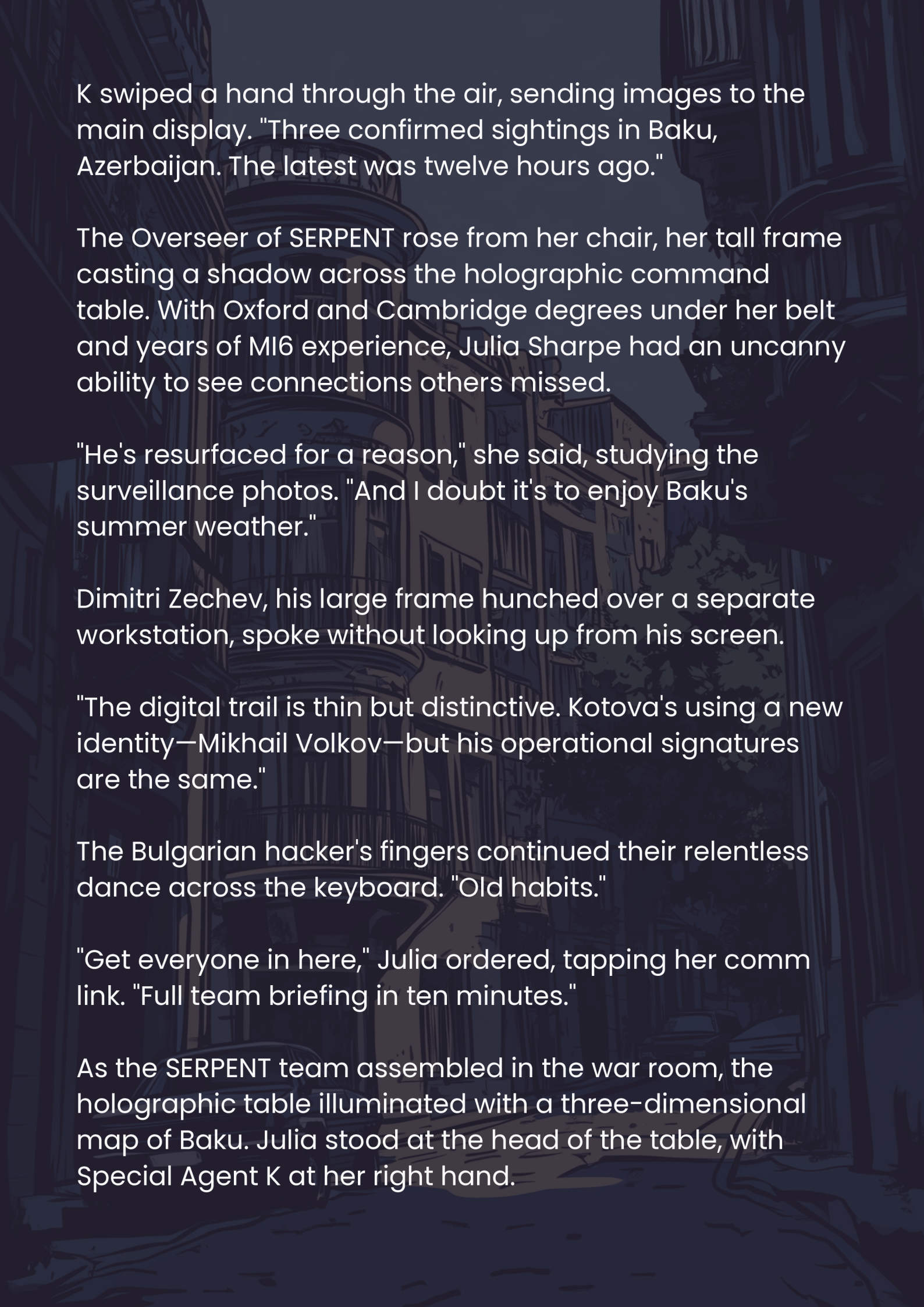
Special Agent K's fingers flew across the holographic keyboard, eyes narrowed at the data stream flowing across multiple screens. Three separate facial recognition hits in the past week, each flagged with increasing confidence levels: 68%, 79%, and finally 92%.

"I've got him," K announced, voice cutting through the ambient hum of Shadow Wing's command center.

Julia Sharpe looked up from her tablet, her steely gaze focusing instantly. "Kotova?"

"Yes. After eighteen months of radio silence."





K swiped a hand through the air, sending images to the main display. "Three confirmed sightings in Baku, Azerbaijan. The latest was twelve hours ago."

The Overseer of SERPENT rose from her chair, her tall frame casting a shadow across the holographic command table. With Oxford and Cambridge degrees under her belt and years of MI6 experience, Julia Sharpe had an uncanny ability to see connections others missed.

"He's resurfaced for a reason," she said, studying the surveillance photos. "And I doubt it's to enjoy Baku's summer weather."

Dimitri Zechev, his large frame hunched over a separate workstation, spoke without looking up from his screen.

"The digital trail is thin but distinctive. Kotova's using a new identity—Mikhail Volkov—but his operational signatures are the same."

The Bulgarian hacker's fingers continued their relentless dance across the keyboard. "Old habits."

"Get everyone in here," Julia ordered, tapping her comm link. "Full team briefing in ten minutes."

As the SERPENT team assembled in the war room, the holographic table illuminated with a three-dimensional map of Baku. Julia stood at the head of the table, with Special Agent K at her right hand.





The faces around them were intent, focused—each member of this elite unit bringing specialized skills to the mission.

"As most of you remember," Julia began, "we apprehended Maksim Kotova in Panama in January 2022 during Operation Broken Arrow. He was trafficking stolen Russian weapons through a diplomatic channel."

Isabella Moreno, SERPENT's historian and cultural expert, nodded. "He was a mid-level politician with unusually high-level connections. The Kremlin distanced themselves publicly, but..."


"But privately, they arranged his escape eleven months into his sentence," Julia finished. She gestured to K, who brought up prison security footage showing the moment of Kotova's escape—guards mysteriously absent, security systems temporarily disabled.

"Since then, he's been a ghost," K continued. "Until now." The display shifted to show the recent Baku sightings.

"He's meeting with people. Important people."

Mei Huang, the team's psychologist and interrogation specialist, studied the images with intensity. Her analytical mind was already working, reading body language and behavioral patterns.





"He's not hiding," she observed. "These meetings are in semi-public venues. He wants to be seen by certain people."

"Which means he's back in business," James Brown added, the former MI6 operative straightening his impeccable suit. "And feeling protected."

### January 17, 2022 - Panama City, Operation Runner

James Brown adjusted his bowtie in the mirror of the luxury hotel bathroom. The International Defense Contractors Convention was in full swing downstairs, and his cover as a British arms dealer had already opened several doors.

"Target has entered the ballroom," Cassandra Laurent's voice came through his earpiece. The French diplomatic expert was working the room in a stunning evening gown, champagne flute in hand.

"Confirm visual," James replied quietly, exiting the bathroom and making his way toward the grand ballroom.

In the van parked three blocks away, Special Agent K monitored their feeds while coordinating with Dimitri, who had hacked into the hotel's security systems.

"Kotova is meeting with a Paraguayan official at the bar," K informed them. "Dimitri, can you enhance the audio?"





"Working on it," came the Bulgarian's reply. "Their phones are paired to the hotel's Bluetooth system. Amateurs."

On Shadow Wing, circling above Panama City, Julia Sharpe monitored the operation while Gabriel Adams and his BTRU team stood ready for potential extraction.

The operation had been weeks in the making, tracking a weapons shipment from a Russian air force base all the way to Panama.

What they hadn't expected was finding Maksim Kotova—a Russian politician with known Kremlin ties—personally overseeing the transaction.

As Cassandra drifted closer to Kotova, her diamond earrings capturing every word of his conversation, the pieces fell into place.

The weapons were headed for a conflict zone where Russian involvement would cause an international incident.

"We need him," Julia decided, her voice firm in everyone's earpiece. "Change of plans. We're taking Kotova."

Within hours, a perfectly executed sting operation left Maksim Kotova in Panamanian custody, the weapons seized, and SERPENT with a wealth of intelligence on Russian smuggling operations.



## Back to July 14, 2024 – Shadow Wing

"He gave us valuable intel during his interrogation," Mei reminded the team. "Multiple leads on Russian black market operations. But he always held something back about his own network."

"Because he planned to use it again," K concluded, bringing up new data. "I've been data-mining his known associations from the Panama operation. One name keeps appearing in peripheral communications: Vasili Semenov."

The holographic display shifted to show an elderly man with a stern face and cold eyes.

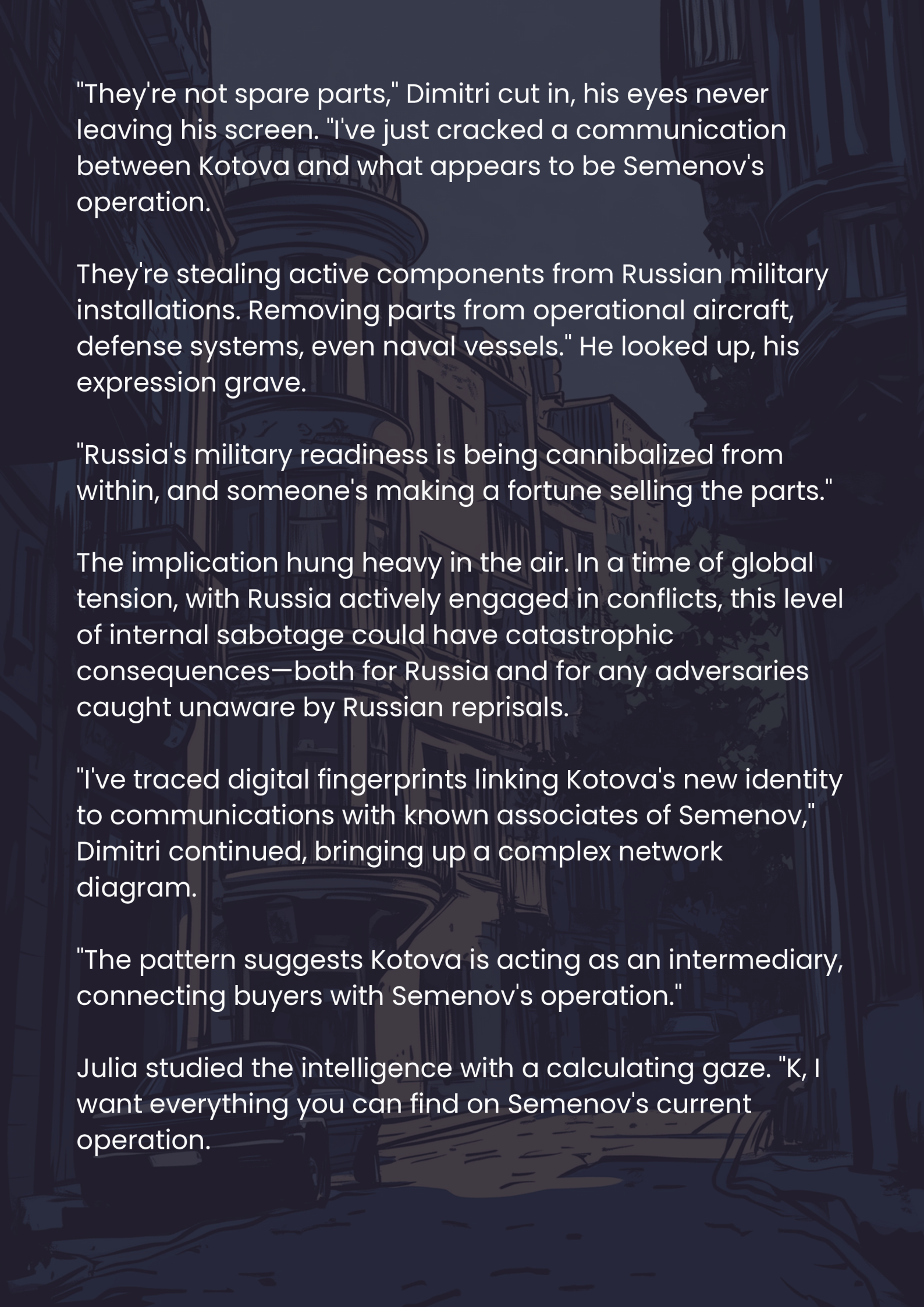
"Semenov was KGB during the Cold War," Isabella explained, her historian's knowledge filling in the background. "He and Kotova worked together in the late 1980s, just before the Soviet collapse. When the empire fell, Semenov disappeared from official records, but rumors placed him in various black market operations."

"And now?" Julia prompted.

K brought up another set of data points. "Financial analysis shows unusual patterns consistent with large-scale trafficking. Not weapons this time—military parts. Critical components for aircraft, missile systems, radar installations."

"Spare parts don't sound particularly exciting," Fox Meyer commented, leaning forward.



The background is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a city street at night. It features classical architecture with ornate facades and a car parked on the street. The scene is dimly lit, with light reflecting off the wet pavement.

"They're not spare parts," Dimitri cut in, his eyes never leaving his screen. "I've just cracked a communication between Kotova and what appears to be Semenov's operation."

They're stealing active components from Russian military installations. Removing parts from operational aircraft, defense systems, even naval vessels." He looked up, his expression grave.

"Russia's military readiness is being cannibalized from within, and someone's making a fortune selling the parts."

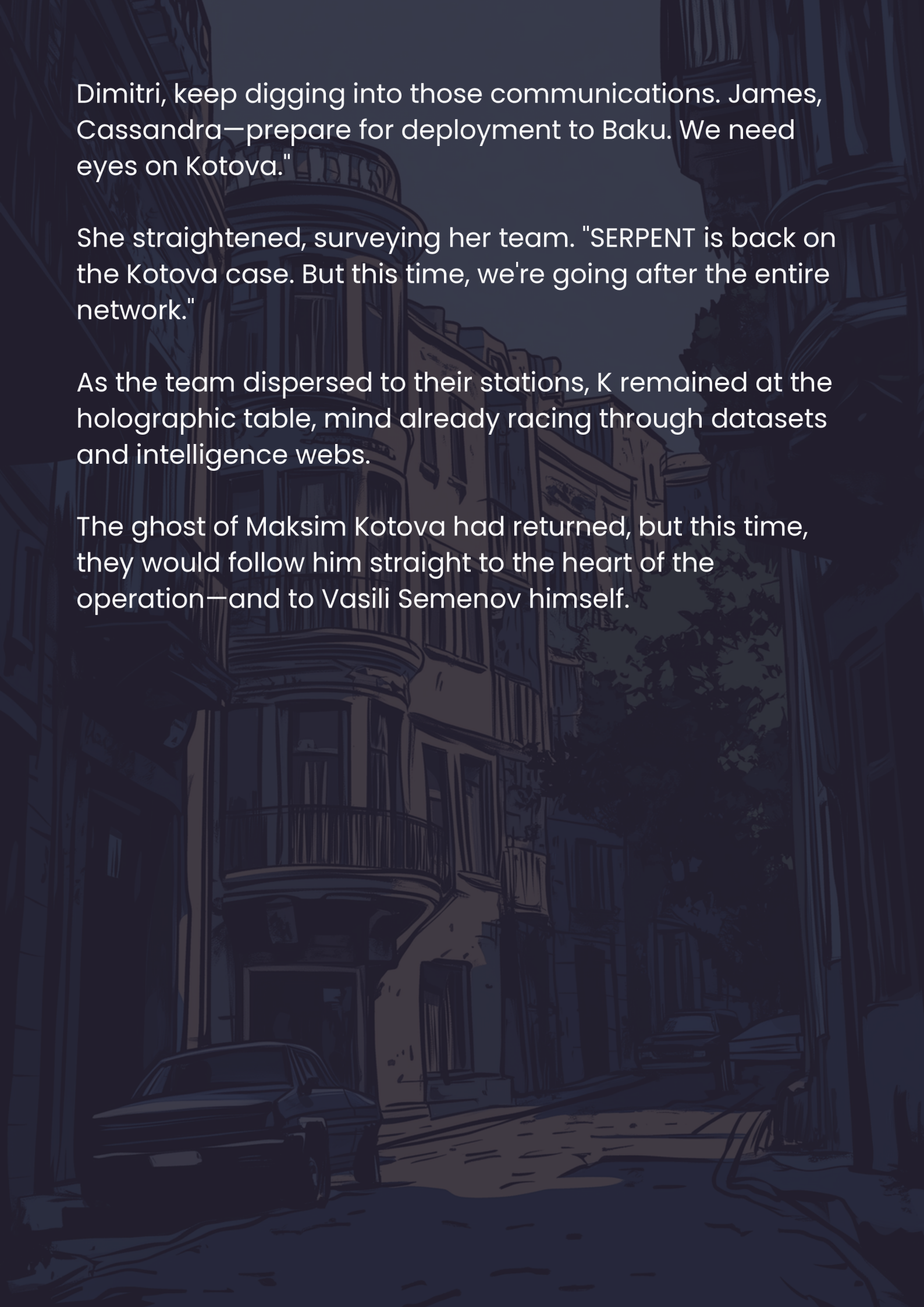
The implication hung heavy in the air. In a time of global tension, with Russia actively engaged in conflicts, this level of internal sabotage could have catastrophic consequences—both for Russia and for any adversaries caught unaware by Russian reprisals.

"I've traced digital fingerprints linking Kotova's new identity to communications with known associates of Semenov," Dimitri continued, bringing up a complex network diagram.

"The pattern suggests Kotova is acting as an intermediary, connecting buyers with Semenov's operation."

Julia studied the intelligence with a calculating gaze. "K, I want everything you can find on Semenov's current operation."





Dimitri, keep digging into those communications. James, Cassandra—prepare for deployment to Baku. We need eyes on Kotova."

She straightened, surveying her team. "SERPENT is back on the Kotova case. But this time, we're going after the entire network."

As the team dispersed to their stations, K remained at the holographic table, mind already racing through datasets and intelligence webs.

The ghost of Maksim Kotova had returned, but this time, they would follow him straight to the heart of the operation—and to Vasili Semenov himself.



## Chapter 2: Shadows in Baku

July 16, 2024 – Baku, Azerbaijan

The afternoon sun beat down on the Caspian Sea, casting a golden shimmer across its surface. From his position at the rooftop café overlooking Baku Boulevard, James Brown appeared to be nothing more than another wealthy Western businessman enjoying the view. His tailored linen suit was impeccable despite the heat, an expensive camera resting on the table beside an untouched cup of tea.

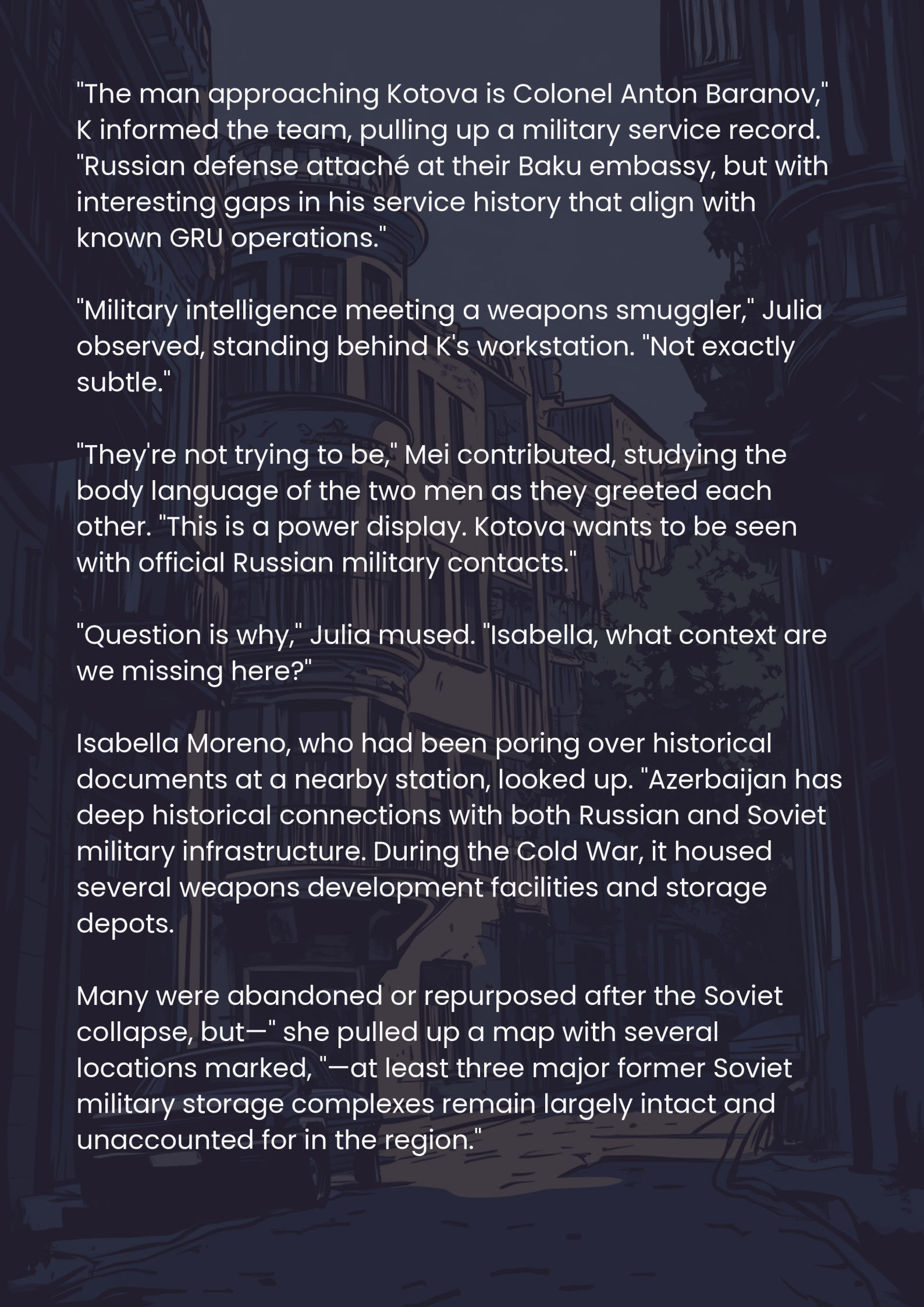
"Target is approaching from the north," Cassandra Laurent's voice came through his barely visible earpiece. She was positioned at street level, browsing through a high-end boutique with a clear view of the promenade. James casually lifted his camera, adjusting the lens. "I have visual," he confirmed, capturing a series of high-resolution images of Maksim Kotova strolling along the boulevard.

The Russian walked with the confidence of a man who believed himself untouchable, flanked by two bodyguards maintaining a discreet distance.

"Sending feed now," James murmured, the camera's images streaming directly to Shadow Wing.

Miles above Azerbaijan, Special Agent K analyzed the incoming footage in real-time, running facial recognition on everyone in Kotova's vicinity.





"The man approaching Kotova is Colonel Anton Baranov," K informed the team, pulling up a military service record. "Russian defense attaché at their Baku embassy, but with interesting gaps in his service history that align with known GRU operations."

"Military intelligence meeting a weapons smuggler," Julia observed, standing behind K's workstation. "Not exactly subtle."

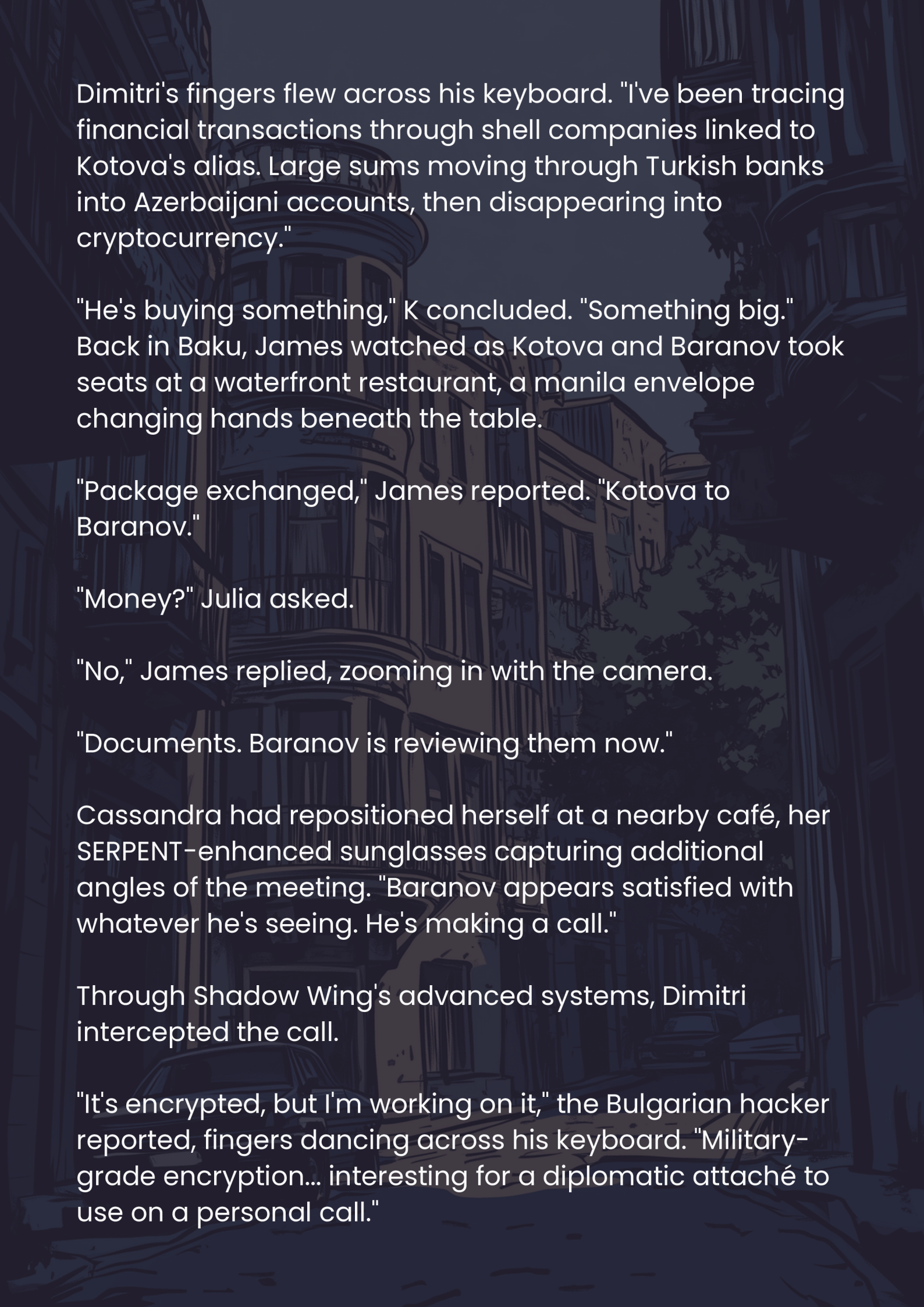
"They're not trying to be," Mei contributed, studying the body language of the two men as they greeted each other. "This is a power display. Kotova wants to be seen with official Russian military contacts."

"Question is why," Julia mused. "Isabella, what context are we missing here?"

Isabella Moreno, who had been poring over historical documents at a nearby station, looked up. "Azerbaijan has deep historical connections with both Russian and Soviet military infrastructure. During the Cold War, it housed several weapons development facilities and storage depots.

Many were abandoned or repurposed after the Soviet collapse, but—" she pulled up a map with several locations marked, "—at least three major former Soviet military storage complexes remain largely intact and unaccounted for in the region."





Dimitri's fingers flew across his keyboard. "I've been tracing financial transactions through shell companies linked to Kotova's alias. Large sums moving through Turkish banks into Azerbaijani accounts, then disappearing into cryptocurrency."

"He's buying something," K concluded. "Something big." Back in Baku, James watched as Kotova and Baranov took seats at a waterfront restaurant, a manila envelope changing hands beneath the table.

"Package exchanged," James reported. "Kotova to Baranov."

"Money?" Julia asked.

"No," James replied, zooming in with the camera.

"Documents. Baranov is reviewing them now."

Cassandra had repositioned herself at a nearby café, her SERPENT-enhanced sunglasses capturing additional angles of the meeting. "Baranov appears satisfied with whatever he's seeing. He's making a call."

Through Shadow Wing's advanced systems, Dimitri intercepted the call.

"It's encrypted, but I'm working on it," the Bulgarian hacker reported, fingers dancing across his keyboard. "Military-grade encryption... interesting for a diplomatic attaché to use on a personal call."





"Can you crack it?" Julia asked.

"Given time," Dimitri replied with professional confidence. "But we won't need to. Look."

He pointed to the live feed, where three more men had joined Kotova and Baranov at their table.

"Running facial recognition," K announced, the system working rapidly. "Match on the older man with the cane."

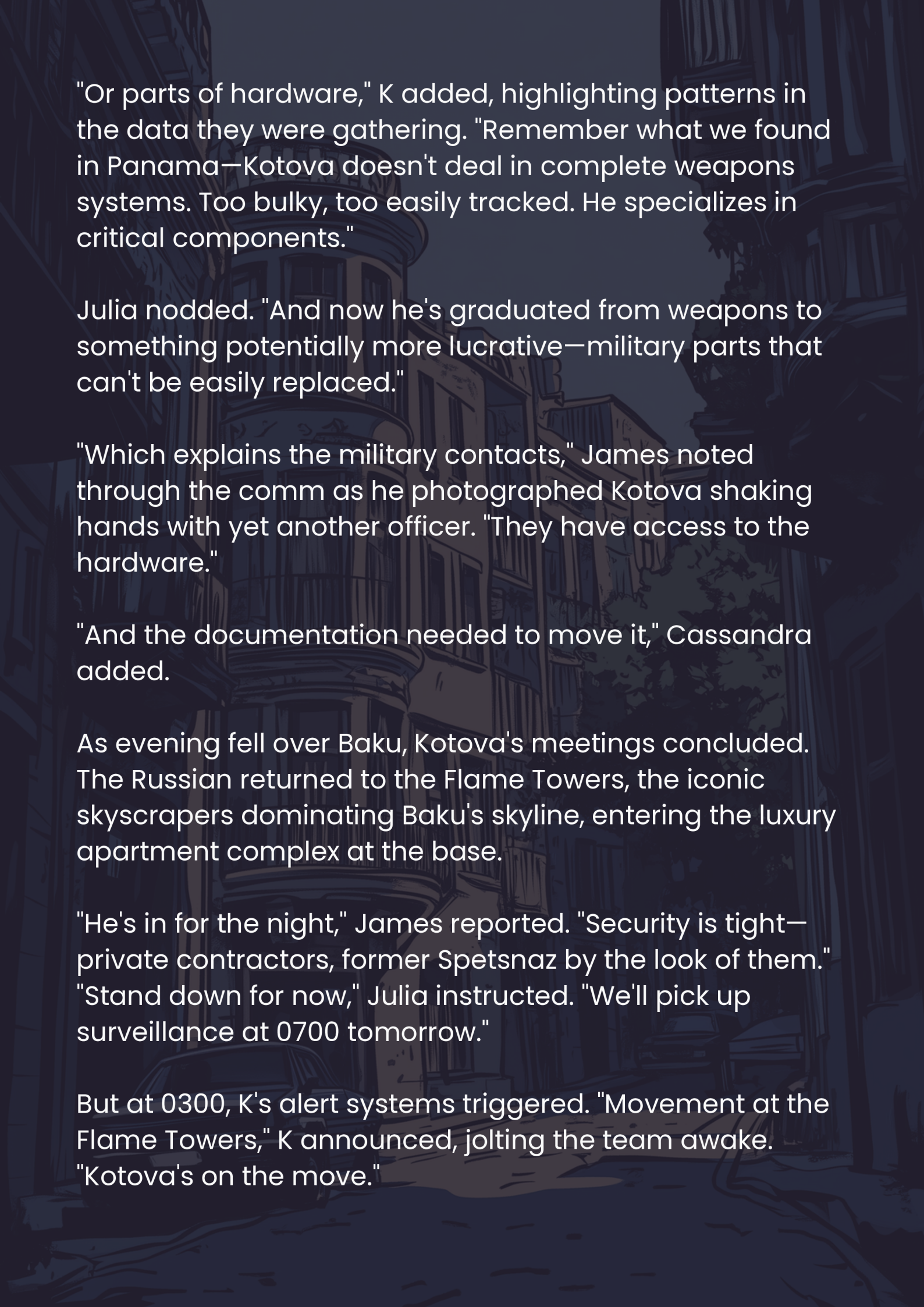
Mikhail Leonov, former Soviet Air Force colonel, now ostensibly retired. The younger two are active Russian military—Captain Yuri Petrov and Major Ivan Kuznetsov.

Both assigned to logistics battalions at different air bases." "Not anymore," Mei observed. "Body language suggests they're very comfortable with Kotova. These aren't chance meetings—they're collaborators."

As the afternoon progressed, James and Cassandra maintained their surveillance, documenting a parade of contacts meeting with Kotova—military officers, freight company executives, customs officials. Each interaction was brief, professional, and involved the exchange of documents or small packages.

"He's building something," Isabella concluded, correlating the profiles of Kotova's contacts. "These are all people who could facilitate the movement of military hardware through official channels without raising alarms."





"Or parts of hardware," K added, highlighting patterns in the data they were gathering. "Remember what we found in Panama—Kotova doesn't deal in complete weapons systems. Too bulky, too easily tracked. He specializes in critical components."

Julia nodded. "And now he's graduated from weapons to something potentially more lucrative—military parts that can't be easily replaced."

"Which explains the military contacts," James noted through the comm as he photographed Kotova shaking hands with yet another officer. "They have access to the hardware."

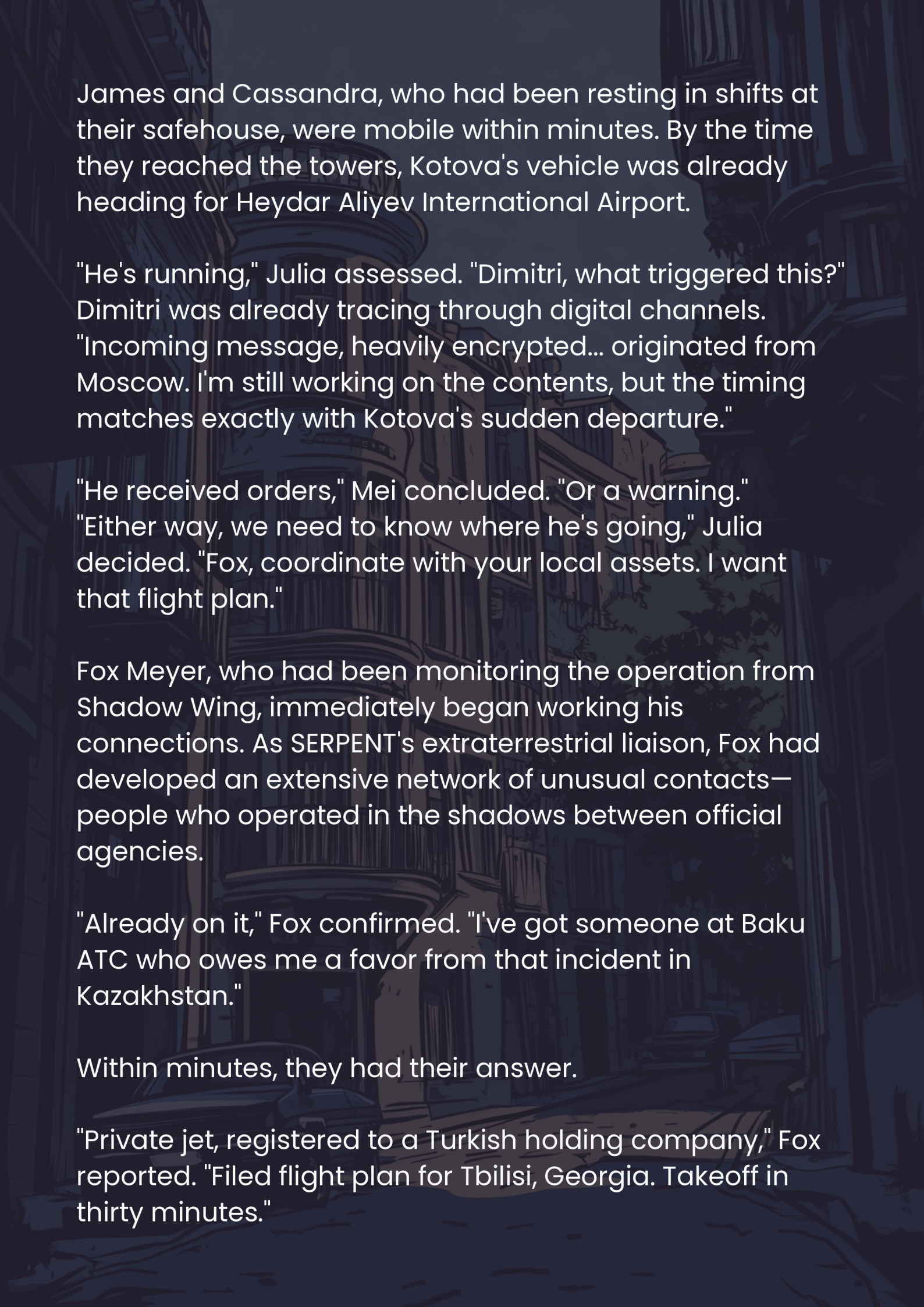
"And the documentation needed to move it," Cassandra added.

As evening fell over Baku, Kotova's meetings concluded. The Russian returned to the Flame Towers, the iconic skyscrapers dominating Baku's skyline, entering the luxury apartment complex at the base.

"He's in for the night," James reported. "Security is tight—private contractors, former Spetsnaz by the look of them." "Stand down for now," Julia instructed. "We'll pick up surveillance at 0700 tomorrow."

But at 0300, K's alert systems triggered. "Movement at the Flame Towers," K announced, jolting the team awake. "Kotova's on the move."





James and Cassandra, who had been resting in shifts at their safehouse, were mobile within minutes. By the time they reached the towers, Kotova's vehicle was already heading for Heydar Aliyev International Airport.

"He's running," Julia assessed. "Dimitri, what triggered this?" Dimitri was already tracing through digital channels. "Incoming message, heavily encrypted... originated from Moscow. I'm still working on the contents, but the timing matches exactly with Kotova's sudden departure."

"He received orders," Mei concluded. "Or a warning." "Either way, we need to know where he's going," Julia decided. "Fox, coordinate with your local assets. I want that flight plan."

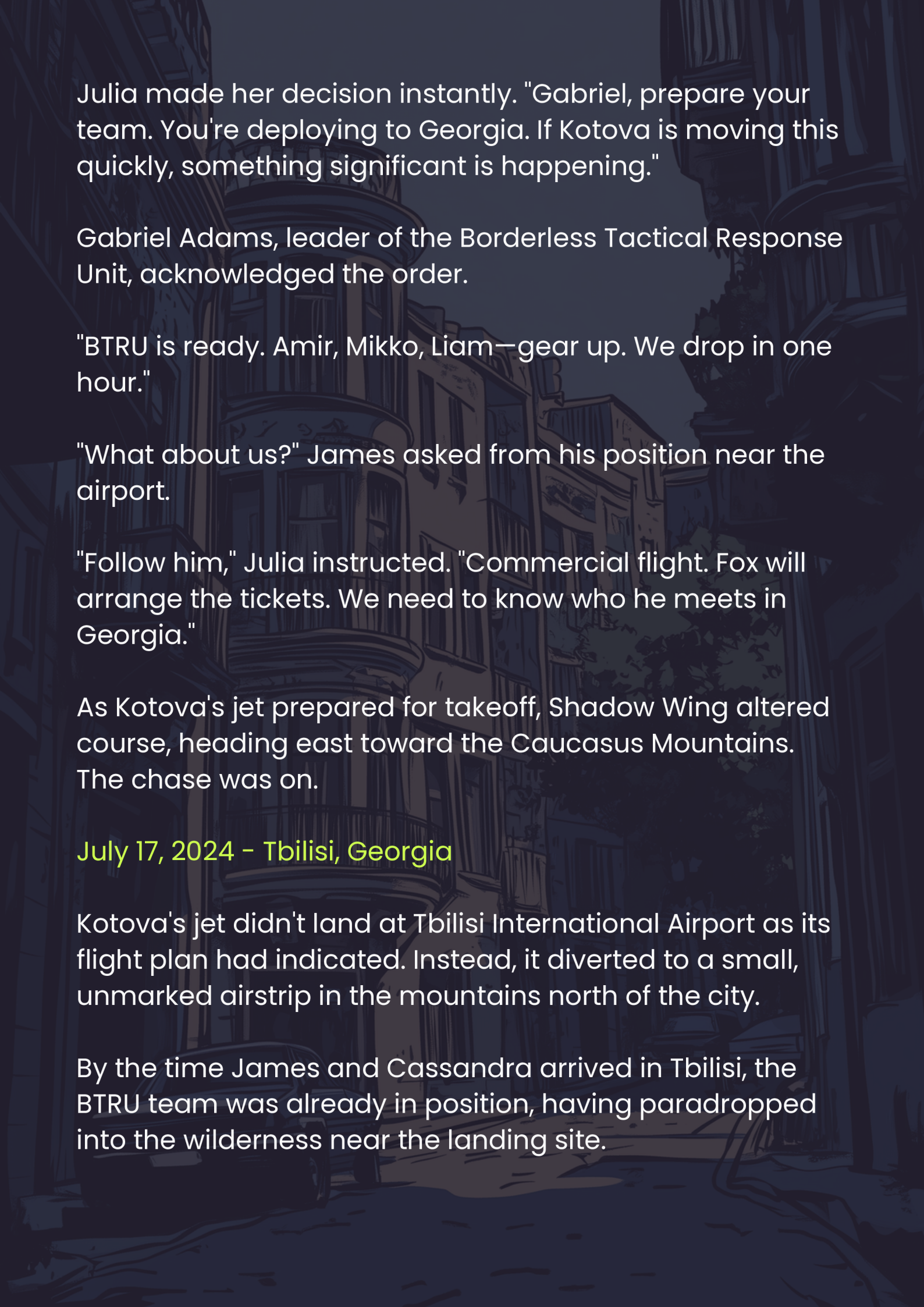
Fox Meyer, who had been monitoring the operation from Shadow Wing, immediately began working his connections. As SERPENT's extraterrestrial liaison, Fox had developed an extensive network of unusual contacts—people who operated in the shadows between official agencies.

"Already on it," Fox confirmed. "I've got someone at Baku ATC who owes me a favor from that incident in Kazakhstan."

Within minutes, they had their answer.

"Private jet, registered to a Turkish holding company," Fox reported. "Filed flight plan for Tbilisi, Georgia. Takeoff in thirty minutes."





Julia made her decision instantly. "Gabriel, prepare your team. You're deploying to Georgia. If Kotova is moving this quickly, something significant is happening."

Gabriel Adams, leader of the Borderless Tactical Response Unit, acknowledged the order.

"BTRU is ready. Amir, Mikko, Liam—gear up. We drop in one hour."

"What about us?" James asked from his position near the airport.

"Follow him," Julia instructed. "Commercial flight. Fox will arrange the tickets. We need to know who he meets in Georgia."

As Kotova's jet prepared for takeoff, Shadow Wing altered course, heading east toward the Caucasus Mountains. The chase was on.

**July 17, 2024 – Tbilisi, Georgia**

Kotova's jet didn't land at Tbilisi International Airport as its flight plan had indicated. Instead, it diverted to a small, unmarked airstrip in the mountains north of the city.

By the time James and Cassandra arrived in Tbilisi, the BTRU team was already in position, having paradropped into the wilderness near the landing site.





"No sign of Kotova," Gabriel reported, observing the airstrip through high-powered binoculars. "But the jet is still here, being refueled."

"Multiple vehicles arrived approximately twenty minutes after landing," Mikko Häyhä added, the Finnish sniper maintaining overwatch from a ridge position. "Four SUVs, military-style convoy. They departed with what appeared to be a passenger matching Kotova's description."

"Direction?" Julia asked.

"North," Gabriel replied. "Toward the Russian border."

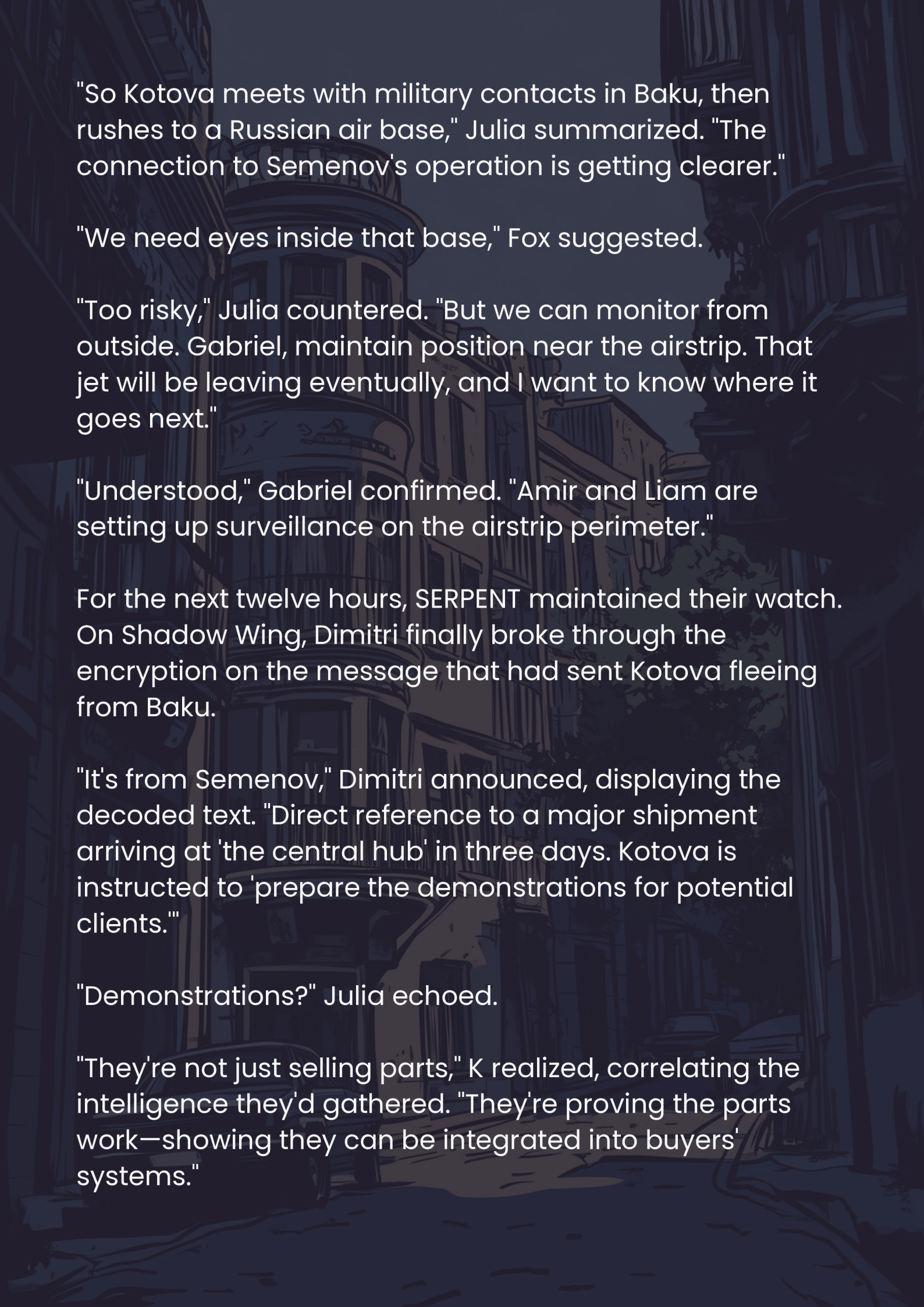
"That complicates things," Julia noted. "Special Agent K, what are we looking at across that border?"

K brought up satellite imagery of the region. "Russian military presence is significant in North Ossetia. Multiple bases, including... wait." K zoomed in on a particular installation. "There's an air base thirty kilometers from the border, Mozdok Air Base. Historical significance dating back to the Soviet era, but officially listed as operating at reduced capacity since 2010."

Isabella's eyes widened with recognition. "Mozdok was a key hub during the Cold War—a storage and distribution center for the entire southern Soviet military district. If Semenov is reviving old networks..."

"It would be the perfect waypoint," K finished. "Satellite imagery from the past six months shows increased activity—aircraft movements that don't match official Russian reports."





"So Kotova meets with military contacts in Baku, then rushes to a Russian air base," Julia summarized. "The connection to Semenov's operation is getting clearer."

"We need eyes inside that base," Fox suggested.

"Too risky," Julia countered. "But we can monitor from outside. Gabriel, maintain position near the airstrip. That jet will be leaving eventually, and I want to know where it goes next."

"Understood," Gabriel confirmed. "Amir and Liam are setting up surveillance on the airstrip perimeter."


For the next twelve hours, SERPENT maintained their watch. On Shadow Wing, Dimitri finally broke through the encryption on the message that had sent Kotova fleeing from Baku.

"It's from Semenov," Dimitri announced, displaying the decoded text. "Direct reference to a major shipment arriving at 'the central hub' in three days. Kotova is instructed to 'prepare the demonstrations for potential clients.'"

"Demonstrations?" Julia echoed.

"They're not just selling parts," K realized, correlating the intelligence they'd gathered. "They're proving the parts work—showing they can be integrated into buyers' systems."





"Which means they need a facility for testing and verification," Mei added.

"Like an air base," Isabella concluded.

The pieces were starting to come together, but the central question remained: which air base served as Semenov's hub for his international black market operation?

As dawn broke over the Georgian mountains, Mikko reported movement at the airstrip. "Convoy returning. Four vehicles, same configuration."

Within the hour, Kotova's jet was airborne again, this time without filing any flight plan.

"Shadow Wing can track it," Julia decided. "Pablo, Peter—intercept course, maximum stealth protocols."

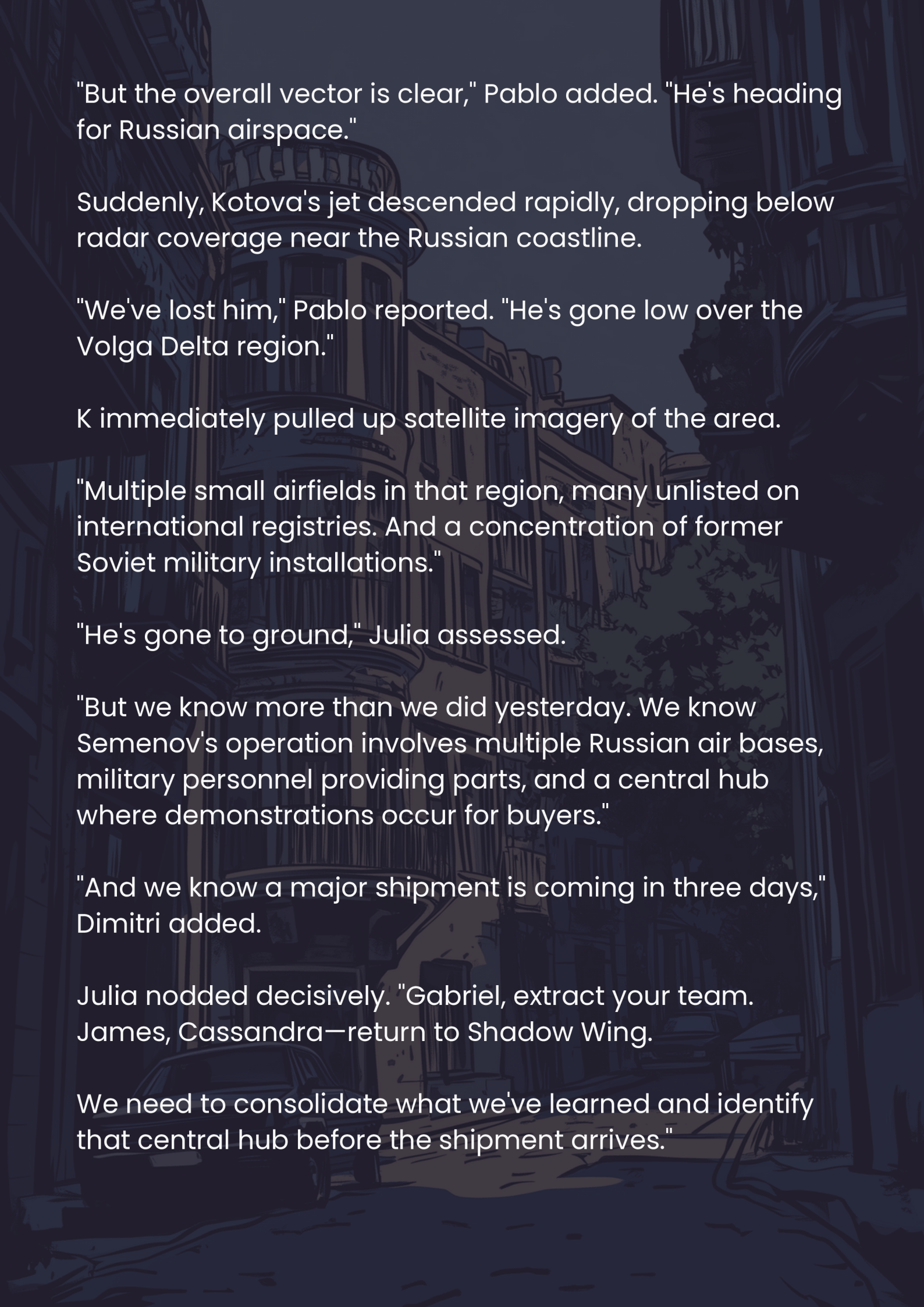
The pilots acknowledged the order, guiding Shadow Wing into position high above the departing jet.

"Got him on radar," Pablo Iglesias confirmed. "Heading east-southeast."

For the next three hours, they tracked Kotova's aircraft as it made an erratic course across the Caspian Sea, eventually turning north toward Russia.

"He's employing counter-surveillance measures," Peter Jansen noted. "Multiple course changes, altitude variations."





"But the overall vector is clear," Pablo added. "He's heading for Russian airspace."

Suddenly, Kotova's jet descended rapidly, dropping below radar coverage near the Russian coastline.

"We've lost him," Pablo reported. "He's gone low over the Volga Delta region."

K immediately pulled up satellite imagery of the area.

"Multiple small airfields in that region, many unlisted on international registries. And a concentration of former Soviet military installations."

"He's gone to ground," Julia assessed.

"But we know more than we did yesterday. We know Semenov's operation involves multiple Russian air bases, military personnel providing parts, and a central hub where demonstrations occur for buyers."

"And we know a major shipment is coming in three days," Dimitri added.

Julia nodded decisively. "Gabriel, extract your team. James, Cassandra—return to Shadow Wing.

We need to consolidate what we've learned and identify that central hub before the shipment arrives."



The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a city street. It features tall, multi-story buildings with many windows, some of which have balconies. The street is paved and has several cars parked along the sides. The overall tone is dark and moody, with a blueish-grey color palette. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

As SERPENT regrouped, the puzzle was taking shape.

Somewhere in Russia, Vasili Semenov was operating a massive black market for military components, with tentacles reaching into the highest levels of the Russian military.

And in three days, a major demonstration would bring together sellers and buyers at a location they still needed to discover.

The clock was ticking.



# Chapter 3: The Network Unravels

July 18, 2024 – Shadow Wing, cruising above the Black Sea

The BTRU team had returned from Georgia, their gear still coated with the dust of the Caucasus mountains.

Gabriel Adams stood before the holographic table in Shadow Wing's command center, his weathered face illuminated by the display as he delivered his report.

"We found this at the airstrip after Kotova's departure," he said, placing a small, damaged external hard drive on the table. "Hidden in a maintenance shed. Signs indicate it was deliberately concealed rather than discarded."

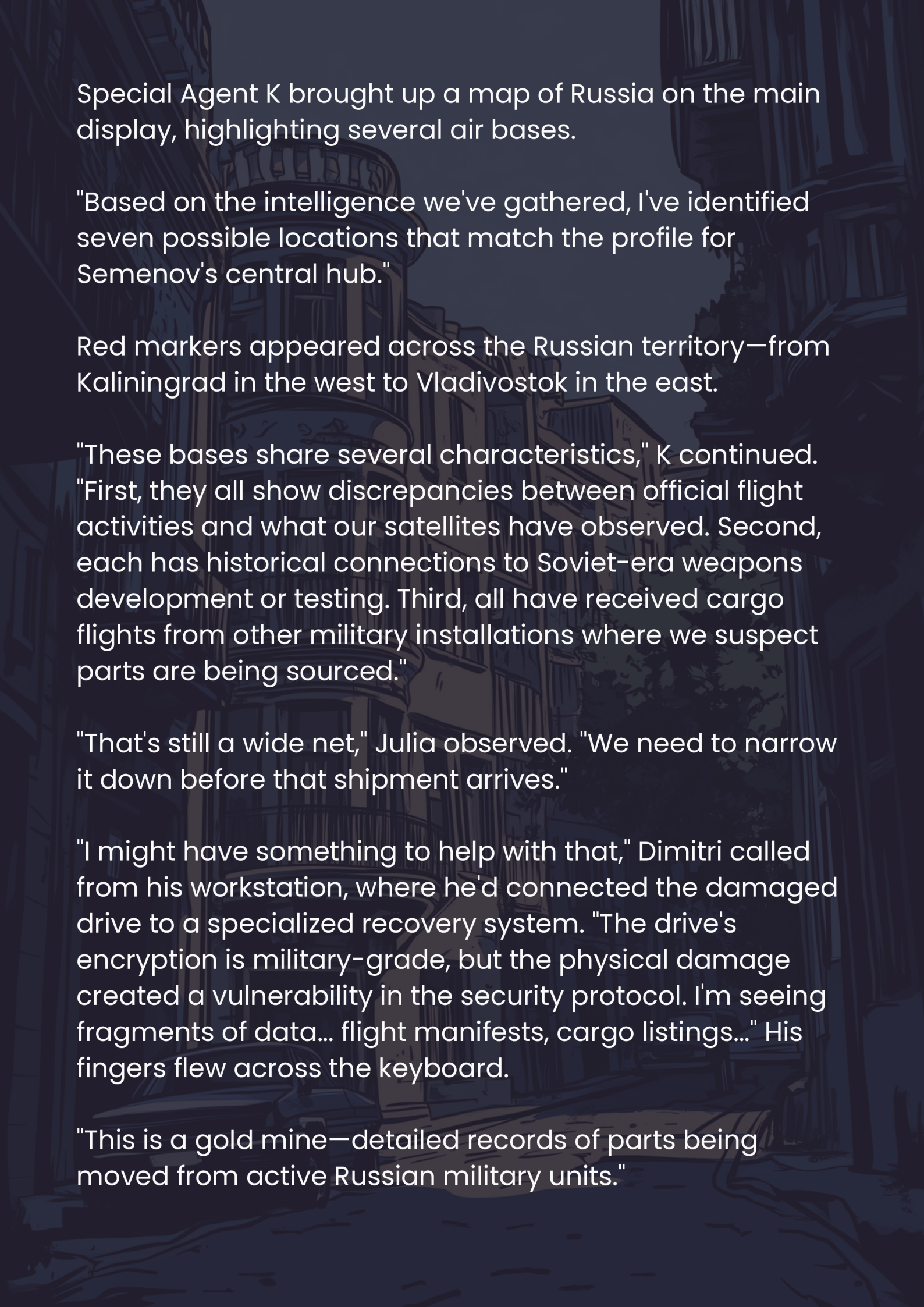
Dimitri Zechev's eyes lit up at the sight of the device. "Interesting. Someone wanted to keep this separate from their main systems."

He picked up the drive, examining the damage. "Impact fracture on the casing, possibly water damage too. But the core might be intact."

"Get whatever you can from it," Julia instructed, then turned to the team.

"Meanwhile, we need to pool everything we've gathered. Kotova's gone underground, but we know Semenov's operation is preparing for a major demonstration in two days."





Special Agent K brought up a map of Russia on the main display, highlighting several air bases.

"Based on the intelligence we've gathered, I've identified seven possible locations that match the profile for Semenov's central hub."

Red markers appeared across the Russian territory—from Kaliningrad in the west to Vladivostok in the east.

"These bases share several characteristics," K continued. "First, they all show discrepancies between official flight activities and what our satellites have observed. Second, each has historical connections to Soviet-era weapons development or testing. Third, all have received cargo flights from other military installations where we suspect parts are being sourced."

"That's still a wide net," Julia observed. "We need to narrow it down before that shipment arrives."

"I might have something to help with that," Dimitri called from his workstation, where he'd connected the damaged drive to a specialized recovery system. "The drive's encryption is military-grade, but the physical damage created a vulnerability in the security protocol. I'm seeing fragments of data... flight manifests, cargo listings..." His fingers flew across the keyboard.

"This is a gold mine—detailed records of parts being moved from active Russian military units."





"Can you trace destinations?" Julia asked.

"Working on it," Dimitri replied, his focus intense. "The records are fragmented, but there's a pattern. Multiple shipments converging... I need more time to reconstruct the data pathways."

"You've got twelve hours," Julia decided. "The rest of us will work with what we have. Fox, contact your assets in the region. I want ground-level intelligence on any unusual activity at these seven bases."

Fox Meyer nodded, already reaching for his secure communications device. "I've got people who can get close enough without triggering alarms. Not all of them are, strictly speaking, human," he added with a characteristic half-smile.

"Whatever works," Julia affirmed. "Isabella, what historical context might we be missing?"

The historian pulled up archival images of Soviet military operations. "Semenov's KGB background is significant. During the Cold War, the KGB often operated parallel supply chains for sensitive materials—completely separate from regular military logistics. If he's reviving that methodology, he'd choose a facility with historical KGB connections."

"Filter for that," Julia instructed K.





The map adjusted, three of the seven markers fading to grey while four remained bright red.

"Still too many options," Julia noted. "Mei, from a psychological perspective, how would Semenov think about this operation?"

Mei Huang considered for a moment, her analytical mind processing everything they knew about the former KGB officer.

"Semenov would prioritize deniability and compartmentalization—KGB tradecraft embedded in his operational planning. But he'd also need to balance security with accessibility for buyers."

She pointed to the map. "These international buyers won't have Russian military clearance. The location would need to allow for discreet entry and exit of foreign nationals." K adjusted the parameters again, and two more markers faded.

"We're down to two possibilities," K announced. "Lipetsk Air Base in western Russia and Engels Air Base near Saratov."

"Both significant strategic bomber bases," Isabella noted. "Engels houses Tu-160 and Tu-95 strategic bombers, while Lipetsk serves as a training center for advanced aircraft."

"Perfect targets for parts theft," Gabriel observed. "High-value components, regular maintenance cycles."

"But which one is Semenov's hub?" Julia pressed.



July 19, 2024 – Above the Volga River, Russia

Pablo Iglesias and Peter Jansen piloted Shadow Wing in a high-altitude surveillance pattern, carefully maintaining their position outside Russian air defense identification zones while their instruments gathered electronic intelligence.

"I'm picking up increased communications activity from Engels," Peter reported, monitoring the signals intelligence display. "Much higher than normal protocols would dictate for regular operations."

"And I've got multiple heat signatures consistent with aircraft engines being tested on the ground," Pablo added. "More activity than the official flight schedule would account for."

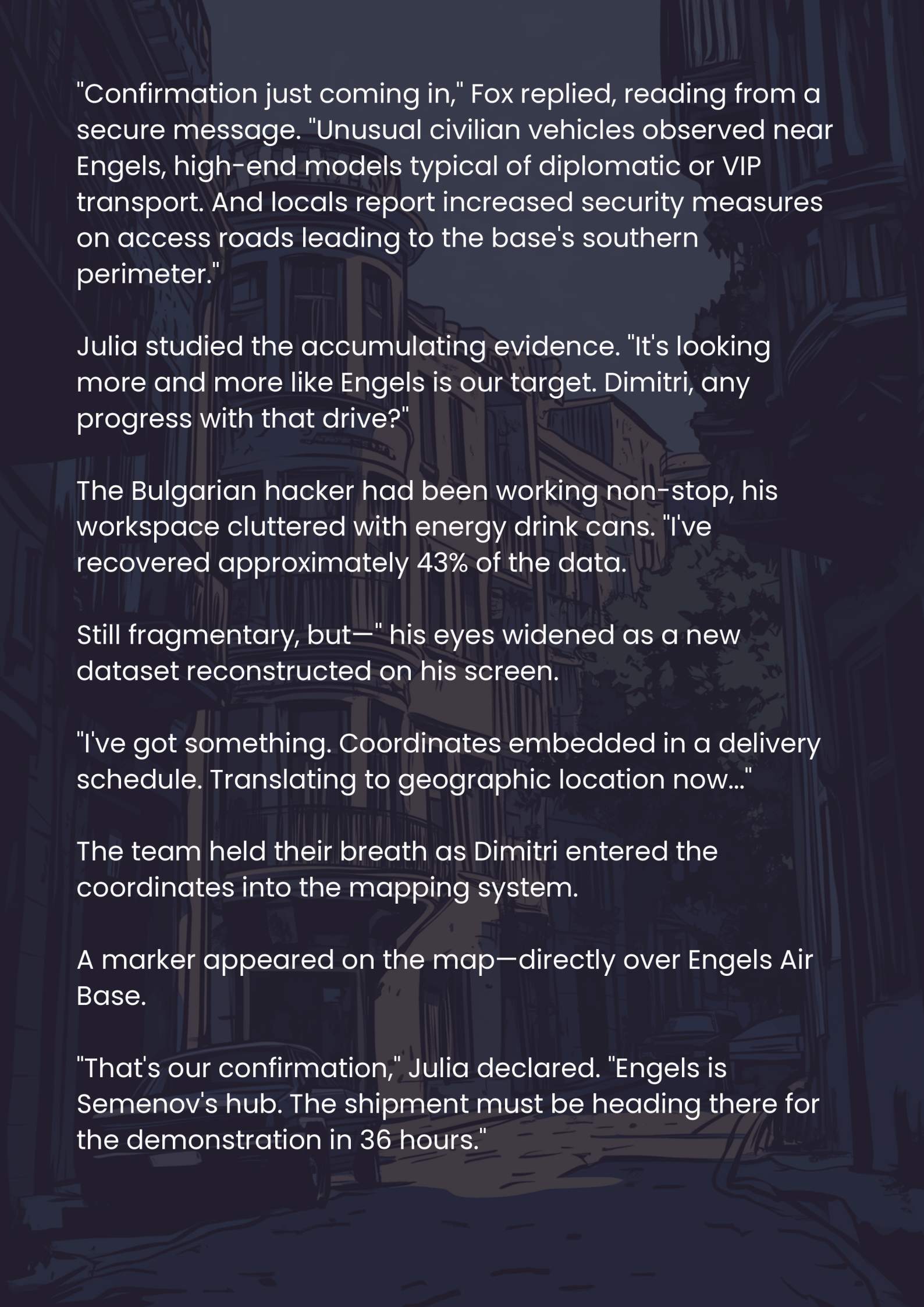
In the command center, K correlated this new data with satellite imagery. "There's definitely something happening at Engels."

Unusual vehicle movements around the southeastern section of the base—an area that, according to historical records, was once used for visiting foreign military delegations during the Soviet era."

"That fits Semenov's needs perfectly," Isabella commented. "A section designed to host foreigners, likely with separate access points from the main base."

"Fox, any word from your assets?" Julia asked.





"Confirmation just coming in," Fox replied, reading from a secure message. "Unusual civilian vehicles observed near Engels, high-end models typical of diplomatic or VIP transport. And locals report increased security measures on access roads leading to the base's southern perimeter."

Julia studied the accumulating evidence. "It's looking more and more like Engels is our target. Dimitri, any progress with that drive?"

The Bulgarian hacker had been working non-stop, his workspace cluttered with energy drink cans. "I've recovered approximately 43% of the data.

Still fragmentary, but—" his eyes widened as a new dataset reconstructed on his screen.

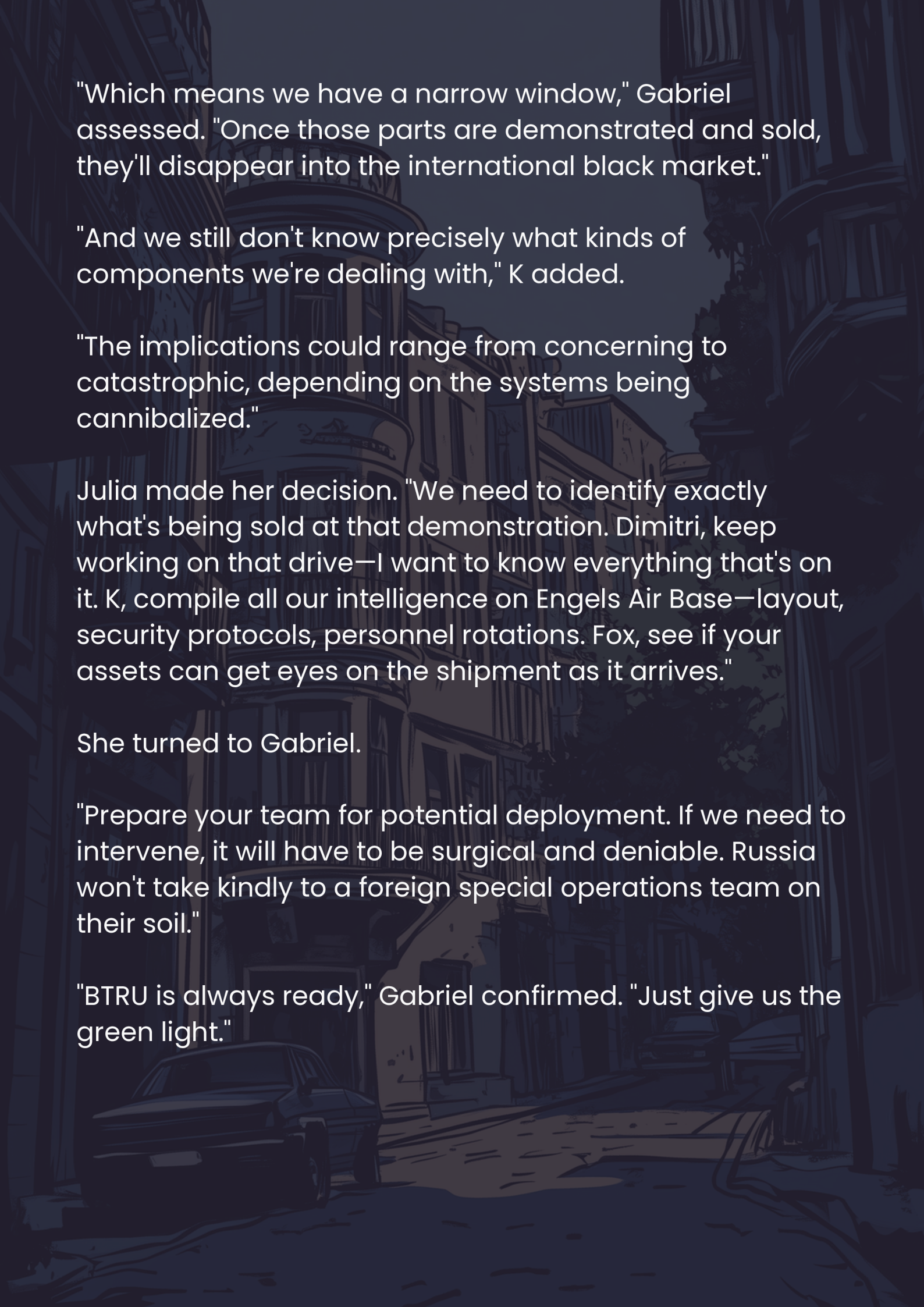
"I've got something. Coordinates embedded in a delivery schedule. Translating to geographic location now..."

The team held their breath as Dimitri entered the coordinates into the mapping system.

A marker appeared on the map—directly over Engels Air Base.

"That's our confirmation," Julia declared. "Engels is Semenov's hub. The shipment must be heading there for the demonstration in 36 hours."





"Which means we have a narrow window," Gabriel assessed. "Once those parts are demonstrated and sold, they'll disappear into the international black market."

"And we still don't know precisely what kinds of components we're dealing with," K added.

"The implications could range from concerning to catastrophic, depending on the systems being cannibalized."

Julia made her decision. "We need to identify exactly what's being sold at that demonstration. Dimitri, keep working on that drive—I want to know everything that's on it. K, compile all our intelligence on Engels Air Base—layout, security protocols, personnel rotations. Fox, see if your assets can get eyes on the shipment as it arrives."

She turned to Gabriel.

"Prepare your team for potential deployment. If we need to intervene, it will have to be surgical and deniable. Russia won't take kindly to a foreign special operations team on their soil."

"BTRU is always ready," Gabriel confirmed. "Just give us the green light."



July 20, 2024 – Engels Air Base perimeter, Russia

Mikko Häyhä lay perfectly still in his camouflaged hide, the Finnish sniper's patience legendary even among the elite BTRU team.

For the past six hours, he had maintained his position overlooking the southern access road to Engels Air Base, his high-powered optics recording every vehicle that passed.

"Convoy approaching from the east," he reported softly into his secure comm. "Four trucks with military markings, two escort vehicles. Matches the profile of the shipment we're looking for."

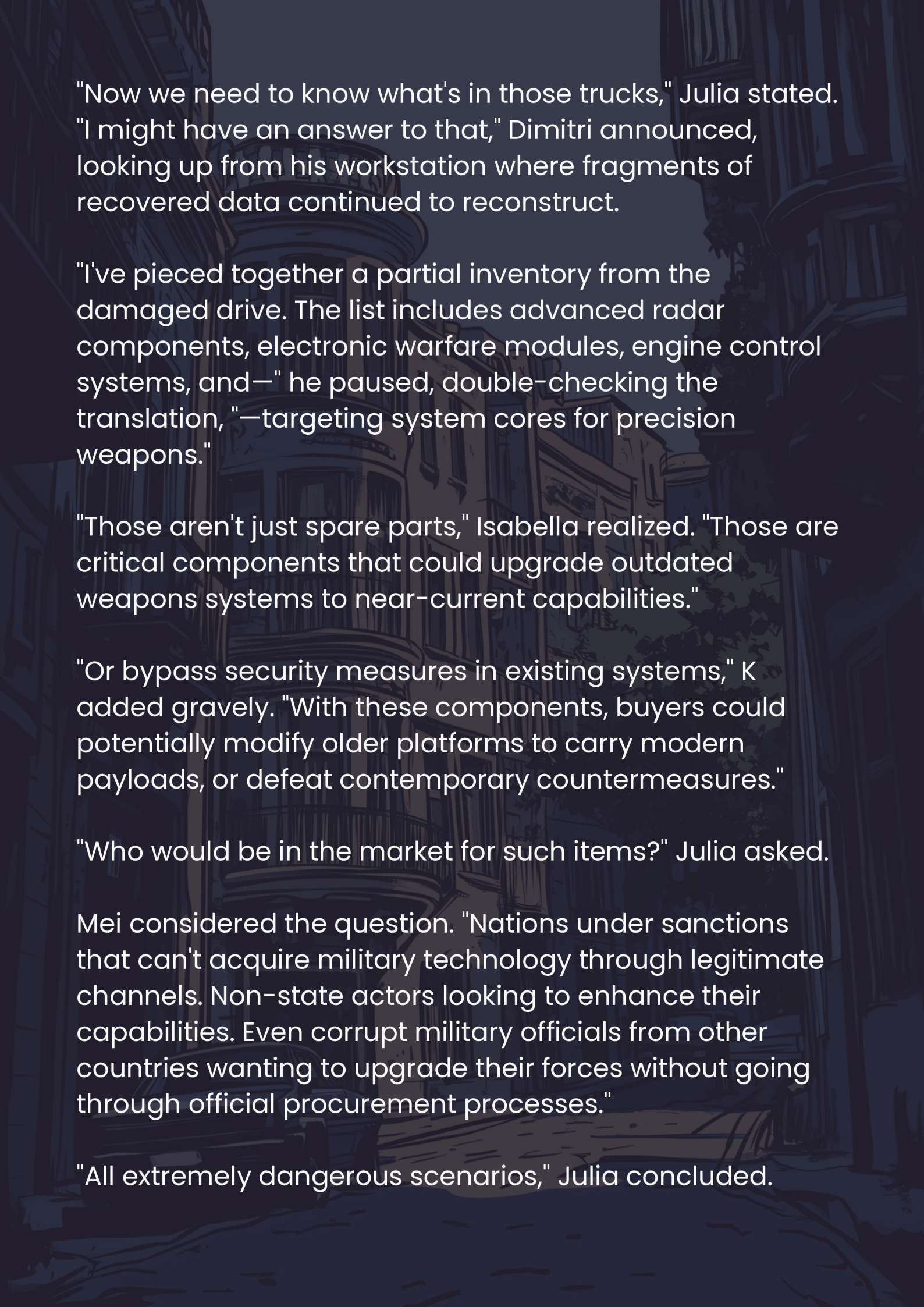
"Visual confirmation on contents?" Gabriel asked from his command position two kilometers away.

"Negative. Covered cargo. But dimensions match aircraft components. Estimated arrival at the base in seven minutes."

On Shadow Wing, hovering at maximum stealth altitude far from Russian airspace, the team watched the feed from Mikko's optics.

"This has to be the shipment mentioned in Semenov's message to Kotova," K assessed. "Timing aligns perfectly with the scheduled demonstration."





"Now we need to know what's in those trucks," Julia stated. "I might have an answer to that," Dimitri announced, looking up from his workstation where fragments of recovered data continued to reconstruct.

"I've pieced together a partial inventory from the damaged drive. The list includes advanced radar components, electronic warfare modules, engine control systems, and—" he paused, double-checking the translation, "—targeting system cores for precision weapons."

"Those aren't just spare parts," Isabella realized. "Those are critical components that could upgrade outdated weapons systems to near-current capabilities."

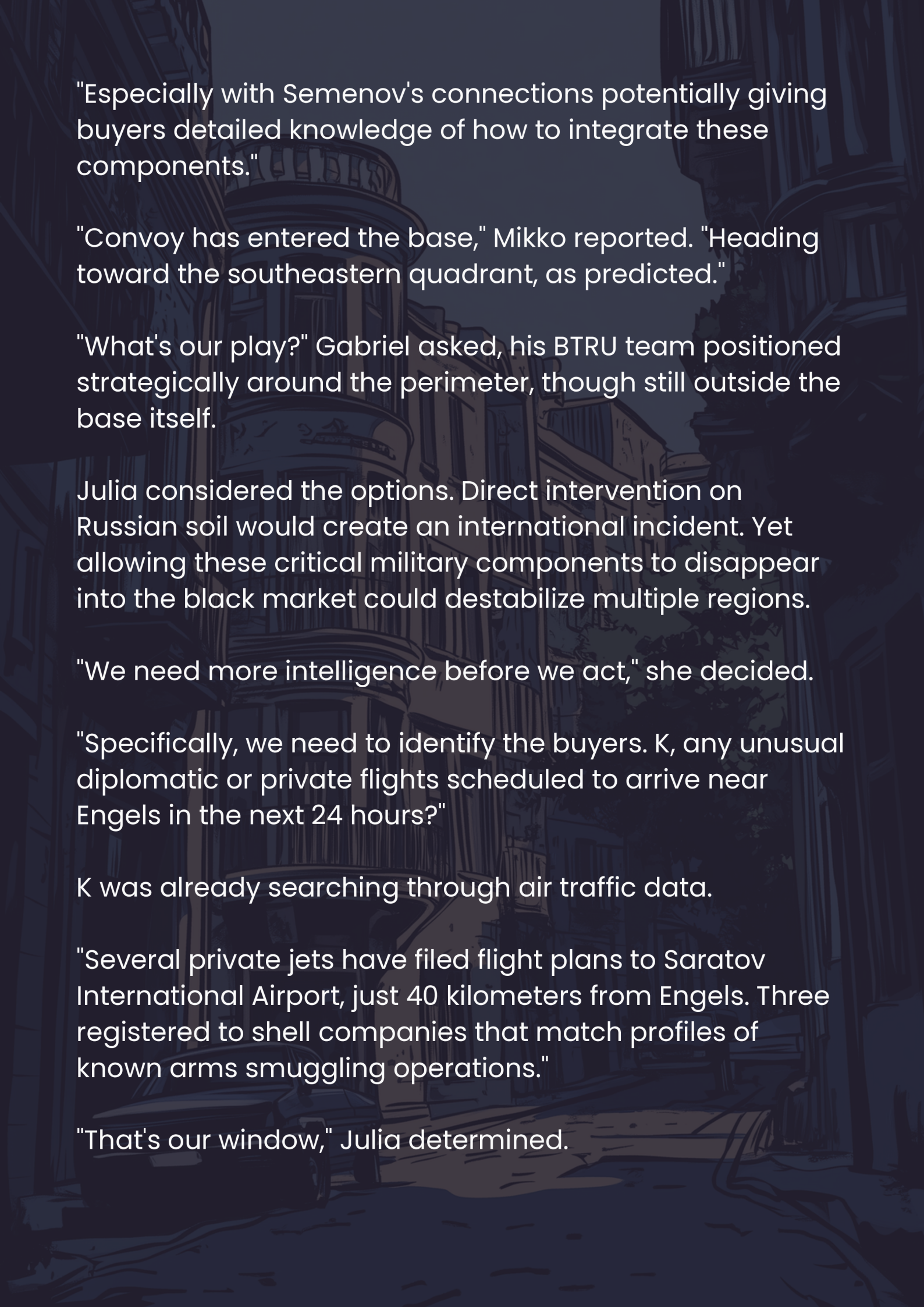
"Or bypass security measures in existing systems," K added gravely. "With these components, buyers could potentially modify older platforms to carry modern payloads, or defeat contemporary countermeasures."

"Who would be in the market for such items?" Julia asked.

Mei considered the question. "Nations under sanctions that can't acquire military technology through legitimate channels. Non-state actors looking to enhance their capabilities. Even corrupt military officials from other countries wanting to upgrade their forces without going through official procurement processes."

"All extremely dangerous scenarios," Julia concluded.





"Especially with Semenov's connections potentially giving buyers detailed knowledge of how to integrate these components."

"Convoy has entered the base," Mikko reported. "Heading toward the southeastern quadrant, as predicted."

"What's our play?" Gabriel asked, his BTRU team positioned strategically around the perimeter, though still outside the base itself.

Julia considered the options. Direct intervention on Russian soil would create an international incident. Yet allowing these critical military components to disappear into the black market could destabilize multiple regions.

"We need more intelligence before we act," she decided.

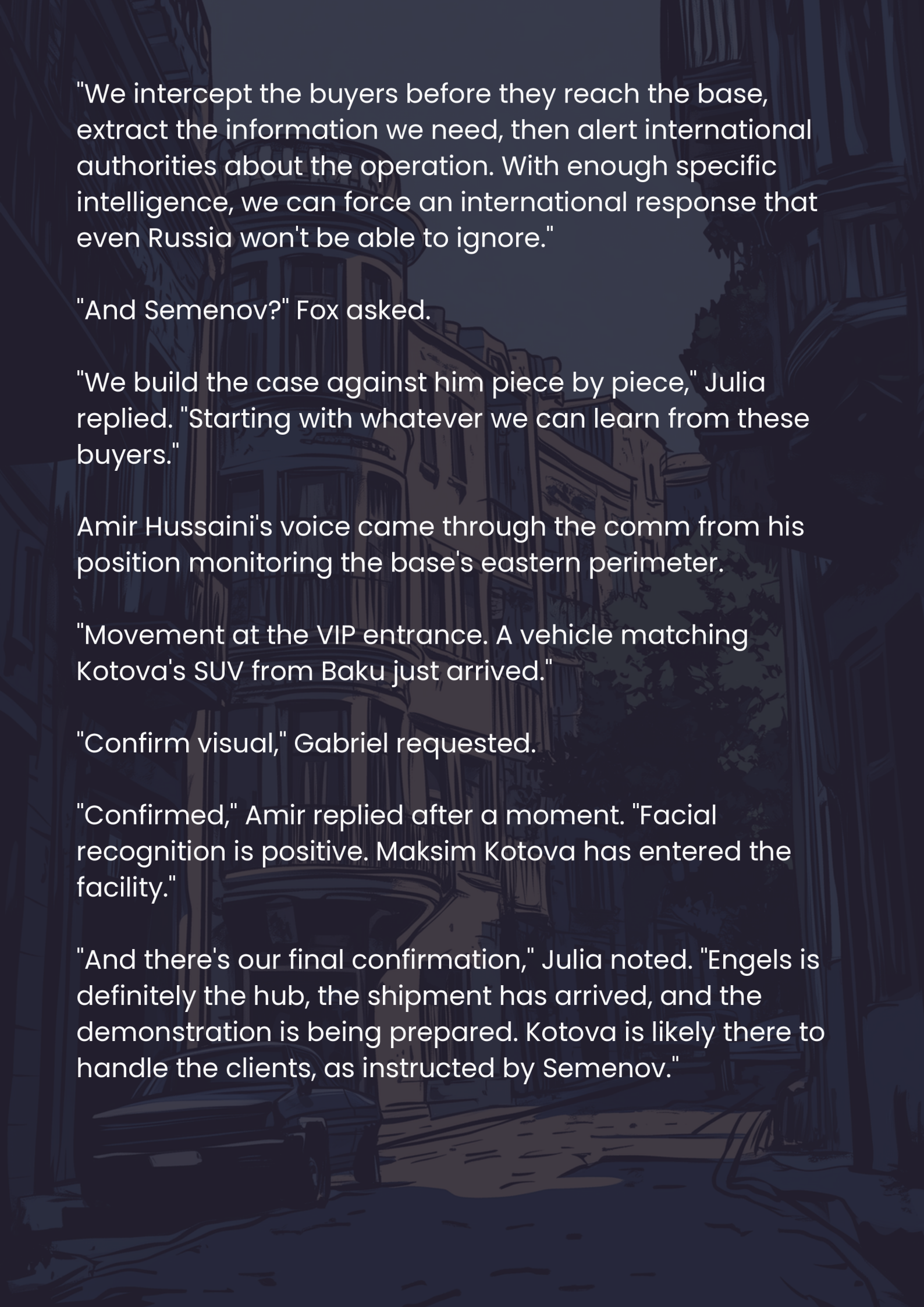
"Specifically, we need to identify the buyers. K, any unusual diplomatic or private flights scheduled to arrive near Engels in the next 24 hours?"

K was already searching through air traffic data.

"Several private jets have filed flight plans to Saratov International Airport, just 40 kilometers from Engels. Three registered to shell companies that match profiles of known arms smuggling operations."

"That's our window," Julia determined.





"We intercept the buyers before they reach the base, extract the information we need, then alert international authorities about the operation. With enough specific intelligence, we can force an international response that even Russia won't be able to ignore."

"And Semenov?" Fox asked.

"We build the case against him piece by piece," Julia replied. "Starting with whatever we can learn from these buyers."

Amir Hussaini's voice came through the comm from his position monitoring the base's eastern perimeter.

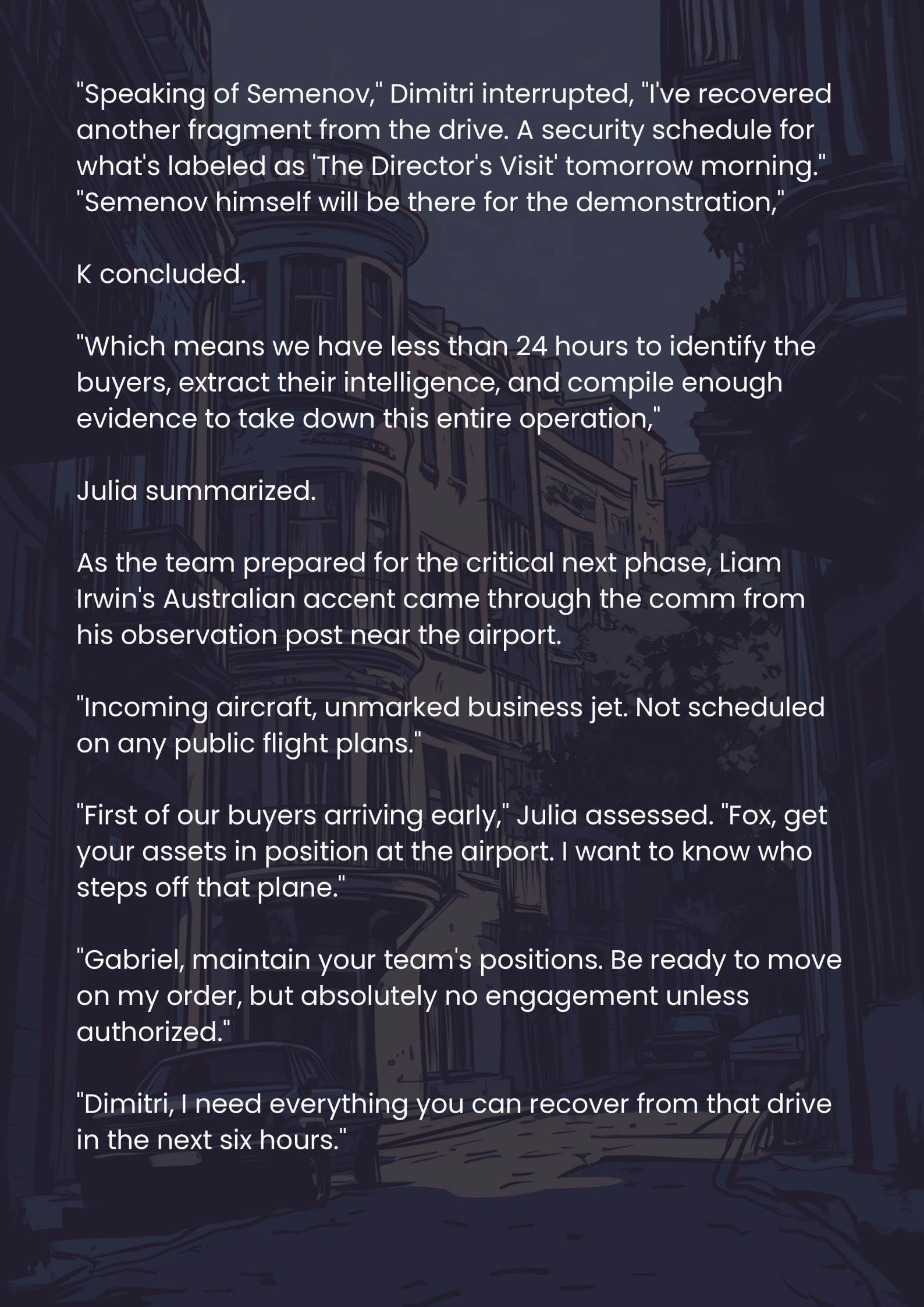
"Movement at the VIP entrance. A vehicle matching Kotova's SUV from Baku just arrived."

"Confirm visual," Gabriel requested.

"Confirmed," Amir replied after a moment. "Facial recognition is positive. Maksim Kotova has entered the facility."

"And there's our final confirmation," Julia noted. "Engels is definitely the hub, the shipment has arrived, and the demonstration is being prepared. Kotova is likely there to handle the clients, as instructed by Semenov."





"Speaking of Semenov," Dimitri interrupted, "I've recovered another fragment from the drive. A security schedule for what's labeled as 'The Director's Visit' tomorrow morning. "Semenov himself will be there for the demonstration,"

K concluded.

"Which means we have less than 24 hours to identify the buyers, extract their intelligence, and compile enough evidence to take down this entire operation,"

Julia summarized.

As the team prepared for the critical next phase, Liam Irwin's Australian accent came through the comm from his observation post near the airport.

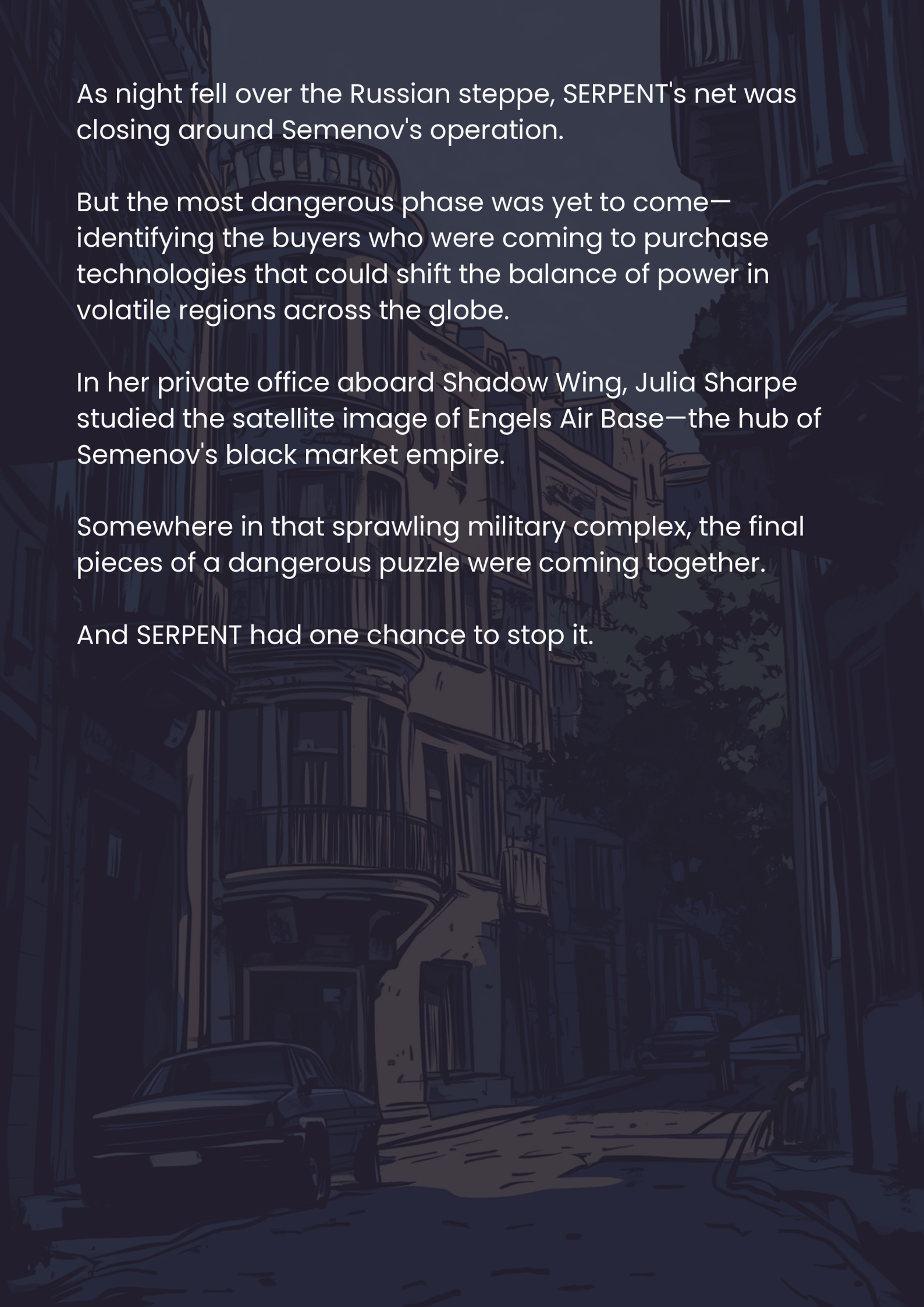
"Incoming aircraft, unmarked business jet. Not scheduled on any public flight plans."

"First of our buyers arriving early," Julia assessed. "Fox, get your assets in position at the airport. I want to know who steps off that plane."

"Gabriel, maintain your team's positions. Be ready to move on my order, but absolutely no engagement unless authorized."

"Dimitri, I need everything you can recover from that drive in the next six hours."





As night fell over the Russian steppe, SERPENT's net was closing around Semenov's operation.

But the most dangerous phase was yet to come—identifying the buyers who were coming to purchase technologies that could shift the balance of power in volatile regions across the globe.

In her private office aboard Shadow Wing, Julia Sharpe studied the satellite image of Engels Air Base—the hub of Semenov's black market empire.

Somewhere in that sprawling military complex, the final pieces of a dangerous puzzle were coming together.

And SERPENT had one chance to stop it.



# Chapter 4: Pieces of the Puzzle

July 20, 2024 – Shadow Wing, operations center

"We've identified the first three buyers," Fox announced, entering the command center with a tablet displaying surveillance photos.

"My contact at Saratov International Airport captured these as they cleared customs under diplomatic cover."

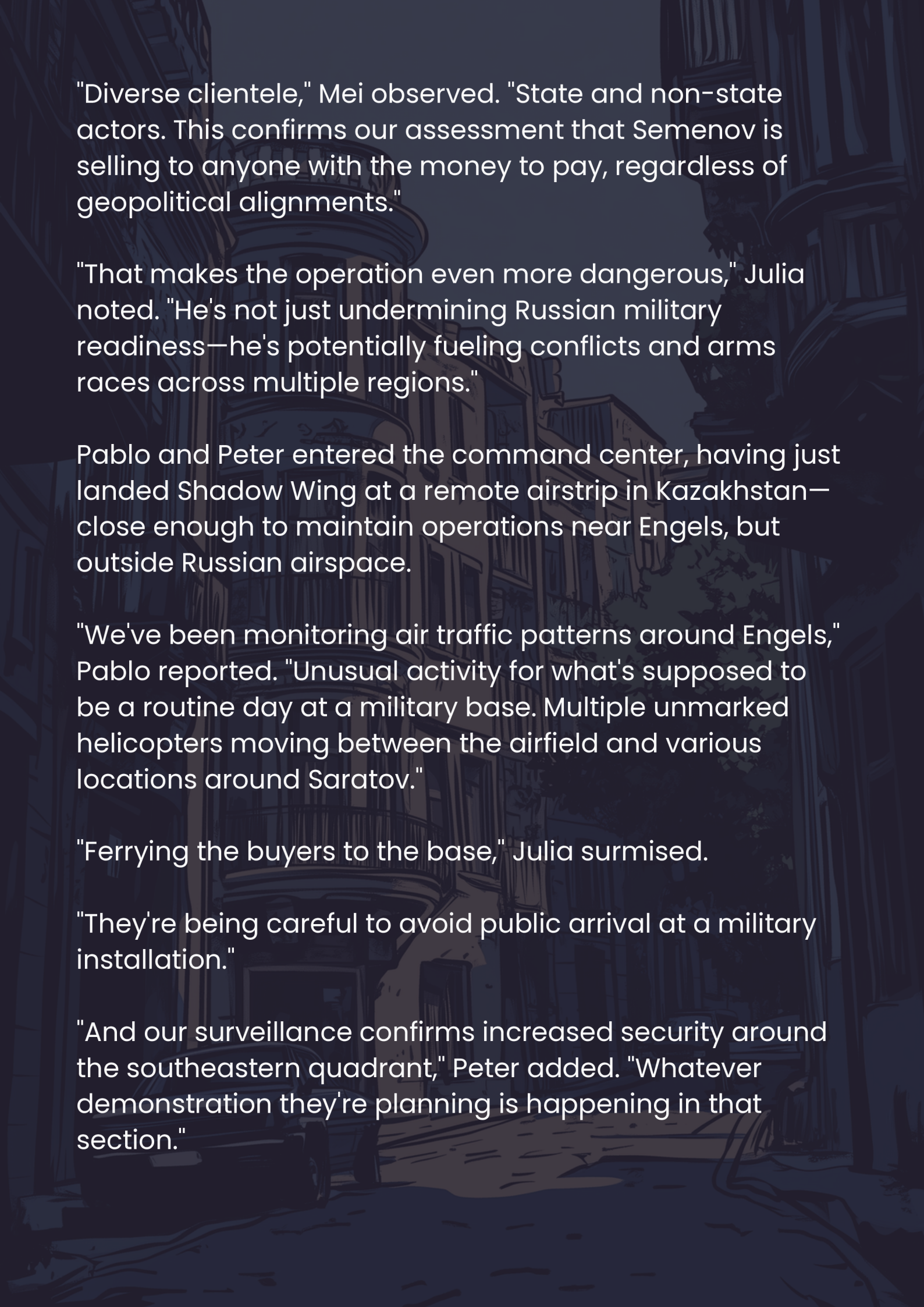
K immediately transferred the images to the main display, running facial recognition software against SERPENT's extensive database.

"First match," K reported as the system highlighted one of the faces. "General Farooq Maleki, Iranian Revolutionary Guard aerospace commander. Second match: Colonel Chan Wei, officially attached to the Chinese Ministry of State Security, but with known connections to their military procurement division."

The third face took longer to identify, the system cross-referencing against multiple databases before finding a partial match.

"Viktor Renner," K announced. "Austrian national, ostensibly an executive with a European defense contractor, but suspected of diverting military technology to embargoed nations."





"Diverse clientele," Mei observed. "State and non-state actors. This confirms our assessment that Semenov is selling to anyone with the money to pay, regardless of geopolitical alignments."

"That makes the operation even more dangerous," Julia noted. "He's not just undermining Russian military readiness—he's potentially fueling conflicts and arms races across multiple regions."

Pablo and Peter entered the command center, having just landed Shadow Wing at a remote airstrip in Kazakhstan—close enough to maintain operations near Engels, but outside Russian airspace.

"We've been monitoring air traffic patterns around Engels," Pablo reported. "Unusual activity for what's supposed to be a routine day at a military base. Multiple unmarked helicopters moving between the airfield and various locations around Saratov."

"Ferrying the buyers to the base," Julia surmised.

"They're being careful to avoid public arrival at a military installation."

"And our surveillance confirms increased security around the southeastern quadrant," Peter added. "Whatever demonstration they're planning is happening in that section."





Dimitri looked up from his workstation, where he'd been working tirelessly on the damaged hard drive.

"I've recovered approximately 78% of the data now," he announced. "And I've found something interesting—detailed schematics for the southeastern section of Engels Air Base, including what appears to be a retrofitted hangar complex."

He transferred the schematics to the main display, revealing a series of connected structures isolated from the main operational areas of the base.


"That has to be where the demonstration will take place," Gabriel assessed, studying the layout with a tactical eye. "Separate access points, compartmentalized sections, minimal overlap with regular base operations. Classic setup for deniable activities."

"I've also recovered a partial manifest of what's being demonstrated," Dimitri continued. "The components alone are concerning enough—advanced avionics, weapons guidance systems, electronic countermeasures. But there's something else..."

He frowned, piecing together fragmentary data.

"References to what translates roughly as 'integration protocols'—detailed instructions for how to incorporate these Russian components into non-Russian weapons systems."





"That's the real danger," Isabella realized. "Not just the hardware, but the knowledge of how to make it work with existing arsenals around the world."

"Potentially bypassing safeguards and limitations built into those systems," K added.

"A nation under sanctions could suddenly upgrade their military capabilities without going through official channels that would trigger international monitoring."

Julia's expression hardened as she processed the implications. "This goes beyond simple parts smuggling. Semenov is essentially selling the keys to Russian military technology, enabling others to either replicate it or integrate it into their own weapons."

"Which explains why Kotova fled Baku so suddenly," Mei noted. "This level of technology transfer would be considered treason by the Russian government, regardless of Kremlin connections. The stakes are extraordinarily high."

"And it's happening tomorrow morning," Fox reminded them, checking the recovered security schedule.

"The 'Executive Demonstration' is set for 0900 local time."

"That gives us less than 12 hours to develop a plan,"

Julia stated. "Options?"





Gabriel outlined the BTRU's capabilities.

"My team is in position around the perimeter, but direct intervention on a Russian military base is extremely high-risk. Even with our stealth capabilities, the chances of detection are significant."

"And diplomatic intervention is out of the question," Cassandra added. "With multiple nations' representatives involved, any official approach would be blocked or delayed until after the demonstration."

"We need leverage," Julia decided. "Something concrete enough to force international action." She turned to K. "What if we could obtain definitive proof of exactly what's being sold and to whom?"

"That would trigger mandatory responses under several international arms control treaties," K confirmed. "Even nations with close ties to Russia would be compelled to act, if only to protect their own security interests."

"Especially if the evidence showed Russia's own military readiness was being compromised," Isabella added. "So we need eyes and ears inside that demonstration," Julia summarized. "Without physically being there."

The team fell silent, considering the seemingly impossible challenge. Then Dimitri looked up from the damaged drive, a glint of possibility in his eyes.





"There might be a way," he said slowly.

"The schematics show an extensive electronic security system throughout the demonstration area—cameras, microphones, access controls. All networked together."

"Can you access it remotely?" Julia asked.

Dimitri shook his head.

"It's almost certainly isolated from external networks. But..." he pulled up a section of the schematics, zooming in on a particular junction box. "The system appears to use Russian military communications protocols similar to ones I've encountered before. If we could place a receiver close enough to the facility, I might be able to intercept and decrypt their internal video feeds."

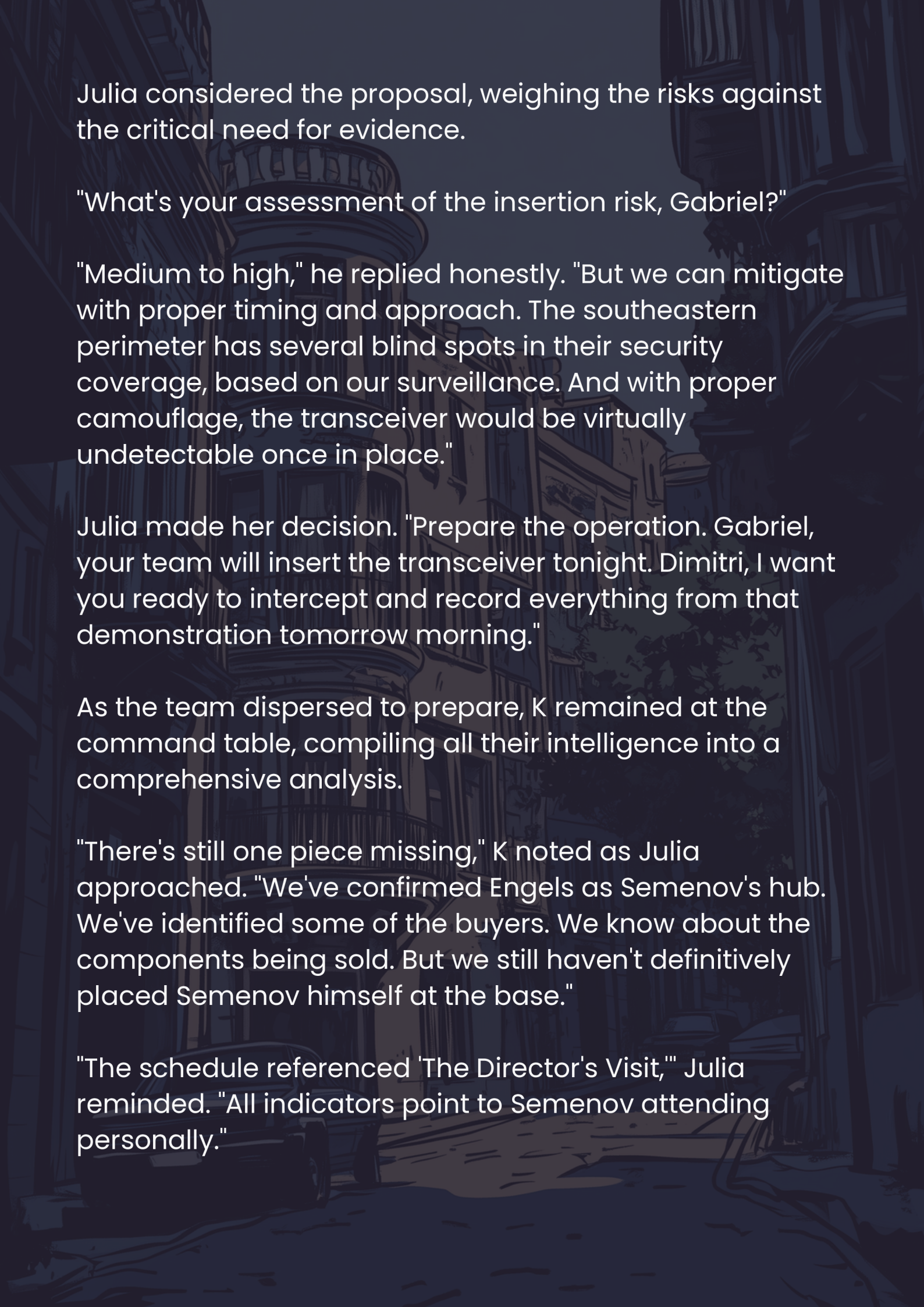
"How close would you need to be?" Gabriel asked.

"Within two kilometers, ideally," Dimitri replied. "And it would require a specialized transceiver calibrated to their frequency ranges."

"We have the equipment on Shadow Wing," K confirmed. "But placing it that close to a Russian air base without detection..."

"That's where my team comes in," Gabriel stated confidently. "Liam and Mikko can deploy the transceiver. Both have extensive experience operating in denied areas."





Julia considered the proposal, weighing the risks against the critical need for evidence.

"What's your assessment of the insertion risk, Gabriel?"

"Medium to high," he replied honestly. "But we can mitigate with proper timing and approach. The southeastern perimeter has several blind spots in their security coverage, based on our surveillance. And with proper camouflage, the transceiver would be virtually undetectable once in place."

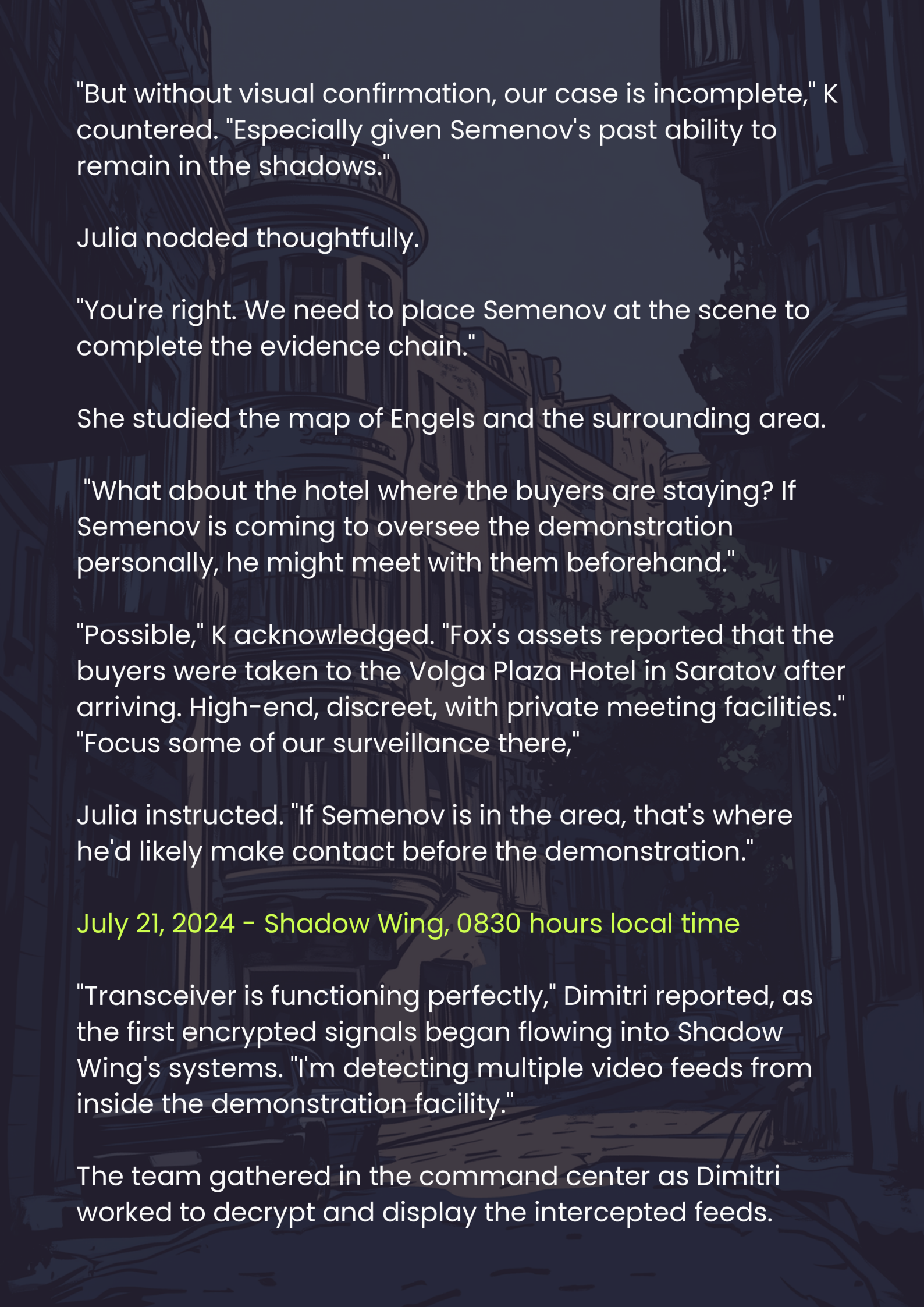
Julia made her decision. "Prepare the operation. Gabriel, your team will insert the transceiver tonight. Dimitri, I want you ready to intercept and record everything from that demonstration tomorrow morning."

As the team dispersed to prepare, K remained at the command table, compiling all their intelligence into a comprehensive analysis.

"There's still one piece missing," K noted as Julia approached. "We've confirmed Engels as Semenov's hub. We've identified some of the buyers. We know about the components being sold. But we still haven't definitively placed Semenov himself at the base."

"The schedule referenced 'The Director's Visit,'" Julia reminded. "All indicators point to Semenov attending personally."





"But without visual confirmation, our case is incomplete," K countered. "Especially given Semenov's past ability to remain in the shadows."

Julia nodded thoughtfully.

"You're right. We need to place Semenov at the scene to complete the evidence chain."

She studied the map of Engels and the surrounding area.

"What about the hotel where the buyers are staying? If Semenov is coming to oversee the demonstration personally, he might meet with them beforehand."

"Possible," K acknowledged. "Fox's assets reported that the buyers were taken to the Volga Plaza Hotel in Saratov after arriving. High-end, discreet, with private meeting facilities." "Focus some of our surveillance there,"

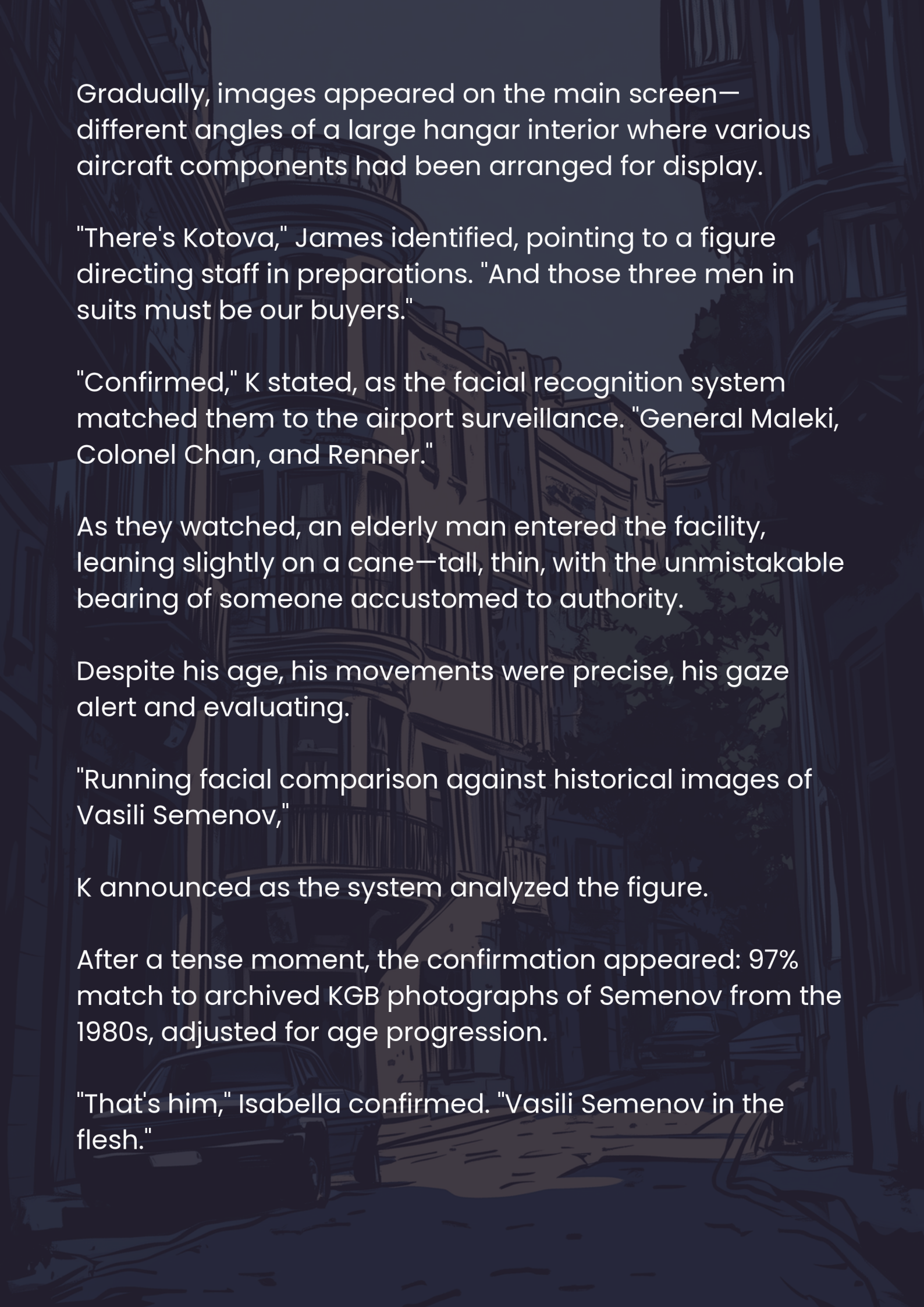
Julia instructed. "If Semenov is in the area, that's where he'd likely make contact before the demonstration."

**July 21, 2024 - Shadow Wing, 0830 hours local time**

"Transceiver is functioning perfectly," Dimitri reported, as the first encrypted signals began flowing into Shadow Wing's systems. "I'm detecting multiple video feeds from inside the demonstration facility."

The team gathered in the command center as Dimitri worked to decrypt and display the intercepted feeds.





Gradually, images appeared on the main screen—different angles of a large hangar interior where various aircraft components had been arranged for display.

"There's Kotova," James identified, pointing to a figure directing staff in preparations. "And those three men in suits must be our buyers."

"Confirmed," K stated, as the facial recognition system matched them to the airport surveillance. "General Maleki, Colonel Chan, and Renner."

As they watched, an elderly man entered the facility, leaning slightly on a cane—tall, thin, with the unmistakable bearing of someone accustomed to authority.

Despite his age, his movements were precise, his gaze alert and evaluating.

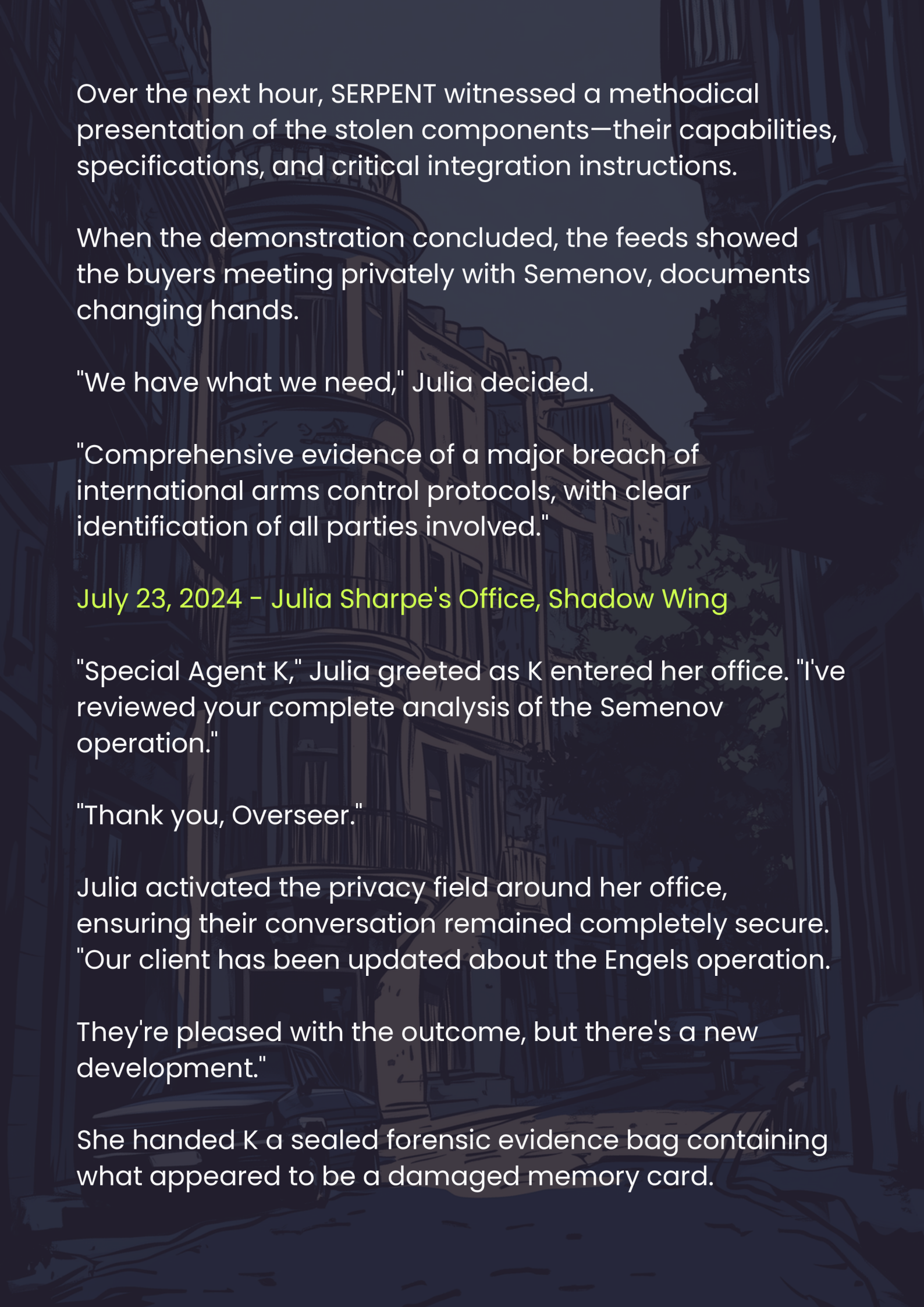
"Running facial comparison against historical images of Vasili Semenov,"

K announced as the system analyzed the figure.

After a tense moment, the confirmation appeared: 97% match to archived KGB photographs of Semenov from the 1980s, adjusted for age progression.

"That's him," Isabella confirmed. "Vasili Semenov in the flesh."





Over the next hour, SERPENT witnessed a methodical presentation of the stolen components—their capabilities, specifications, and critical integration instructions.

When the demonstration concluded, the feeds showed the buyers meeting privately with Semenov, documents changing hands.

"We have what we need," Julia decided.

"Comprehensive evidence of a major breach of international arms control protocols, with clear identification of all parties involved."

**July 23, 2024 – Julia Sharpe's Office, Shadow Wing**

"Special Agent K," Julia greeted as K entered her office. "I've reviewed your complete analysis of the Semenov operation."

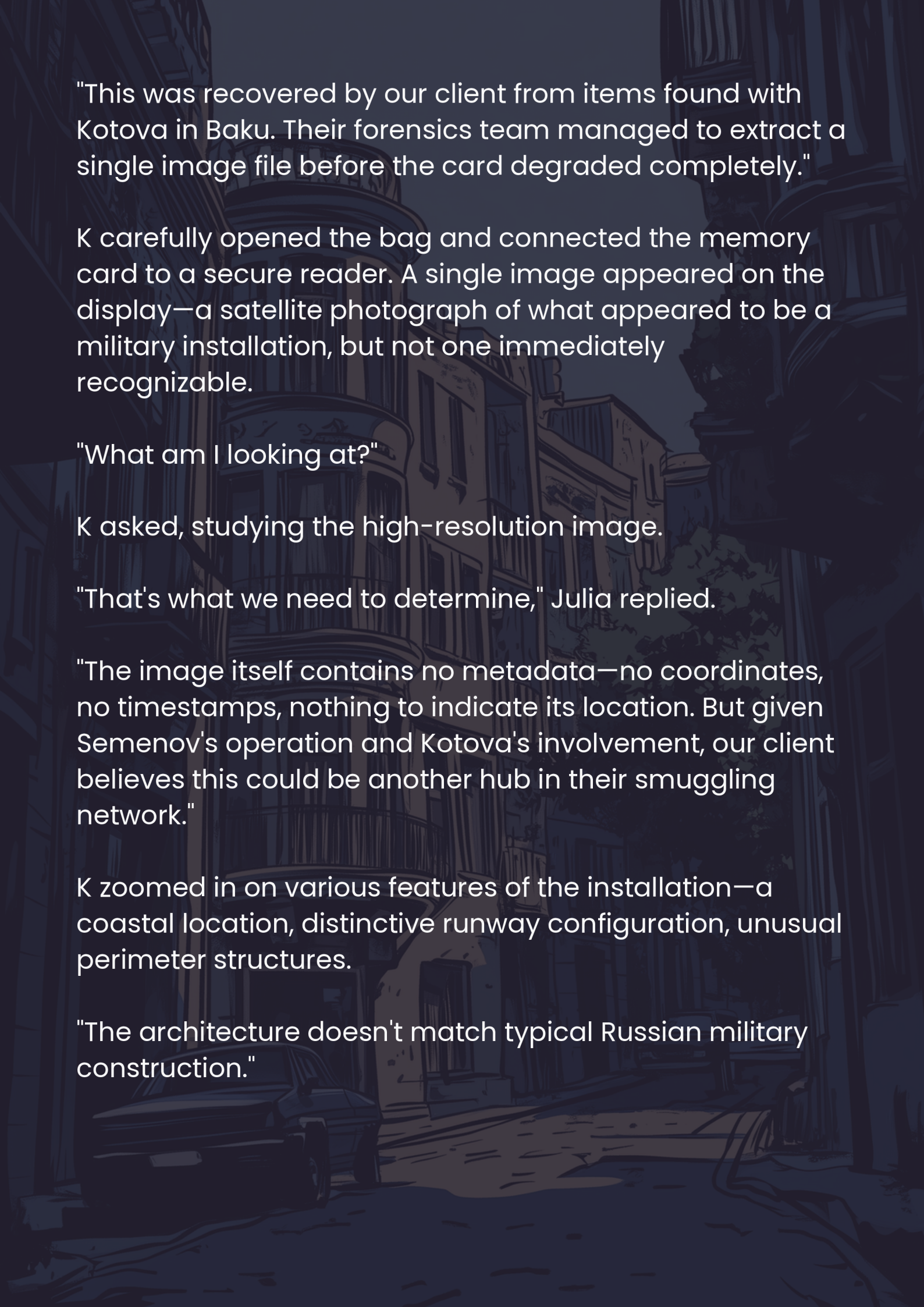
"Thank you, Overseer."

Julia activated the privacy field around her office, ensuring their conversation remained completely secure. "Our client has been updated about the Engels operation.

They're pleased with the outcome, but there's a new development."

She handed K a sealed forensic evidence bag containing what appeared to be a damaged memory card.





"This was recovered by our client from items found with Kotova in Baku. Their forensics team managed to extract a single image file before the card degraded completely."

K carefully opened the bag and connected the memory card to a secure reader. A single image appeared on the display—a satellite photograph of what appeared to be a military installation, but not one immediately recognizable.

"What am I looking at?"

K asked, studying the high-resolution image.

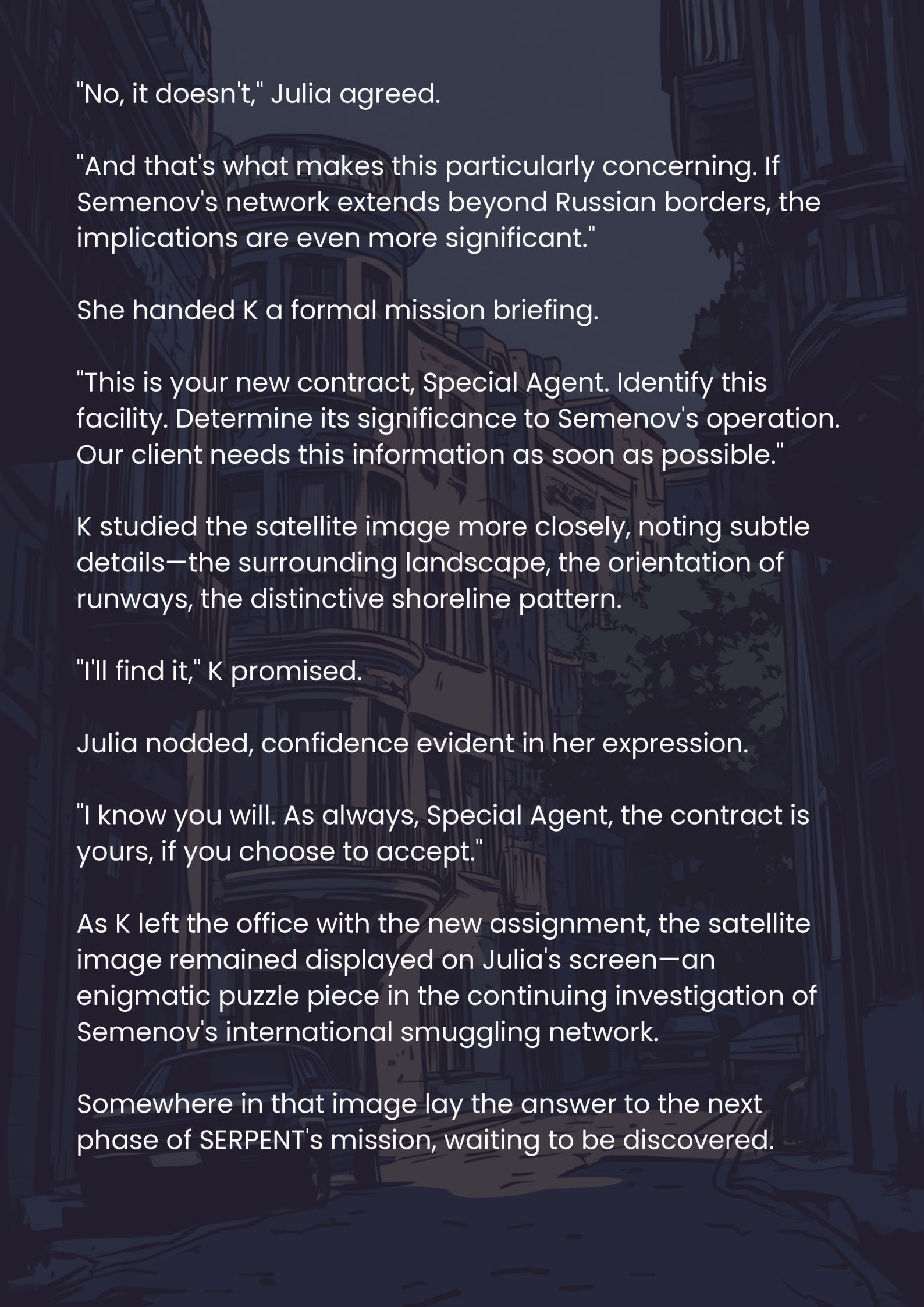
"That's what we need to determine," Julia replied.

"The image itself contains no metadata—no coordinates, no timestamps, nothing to indicate its location. But given Semenov's operation and Kotova's involvement, our client believes this could be another hub in their smuggling network."

K zoomed in on various features of the installation—a coastal location, distinctive runway configuration, unusual perimeter structures.

"The architecture doesn't match typical Russian military construction."





"No, it doesn't," Julia agreed.

"And that's what makes this particularly concerning. If Semenov's network extends beyond Russian borders, the implications are even more significant."

She handed K a formal mission briefing.

"This is your new contract, Special Agent. Identify this facility. Determine its significance to Semenov's operation. Our client needs this information as soon as possible."

K studied the satellite image more closely, noting subtle details—the surrounding landscape, the orientation of runways, the distinctive shoreline pattern.

"I'll find it," K promised.

Julia nodded, confidence evident in her expression.

"I know you will. As always, Special Agent, the contract is yours, if you choose to accept."

As K left the office with the new assignment, the satellite image remained displayed on Julia's screen—an enigmatic puzzle piece in the continuing investigation of Semenov's international smuggling network.

Somewhere in that image lay the answer to the next phase of SERPENT's mission, waiting to be discovered.



# Briefing

Greetings Special Agent K.

Perhaps you remember our old friend Maksim Kotova? After his capture in Panama he was more than willing to cooperate for reduced sentences.

Following up on the leads he's given us until this point has resulted in the arrest of several high ranking officials and members of various underground organizations. One of his more promising leads is a military parts smuggling operation organized by one of Maksim's former Cold War friends, Vasili Semenov.

Semenov is quietly making a fortune selling Russian military spare parts for scraps to the highest bidder. A lot of these parts aren't even spares in the literal sense of the word. These parts are all brought together through various air bases around Russia and the world, then routed to a central air base. Where they're exchanged for cash.

Given the current sticky situation around Russian activity. Not to mention the limited jurisdiction of our client. You are tasked with finding the air base where these sales take place. The old man wasn't very much into modern technology, so all we have for you is a satellite image of the air base. Other items found, are sent to a forensics lab by our client.

As always, Special Agent, the contract is yours, if you choose to accept.



# Materials

cold-war-enemies-target.jpg

## Answer Instruction

Use the answer to unlock the flagfile, this will reward you with your badge. Locate the airfield to complete.

Flag format:

country-governate-district-airbasename-air-base

## Flagfile

Be advised, the flagfile is an encrypted ZIP. Make sure your OS supports the ZIP format. Ensure the password contains no hidden characters or formatting.

PS: Don't forget to claim your Coins and XP, by posting your card in the #card-brag channel in Discord.

<https://discord.hacktoria.com>

## Write-Up

There is an attached file called a write-up, this will give you the answer in case you get stuck.

## Acknowledgements

This challenge was made by Frank Diepmaat.