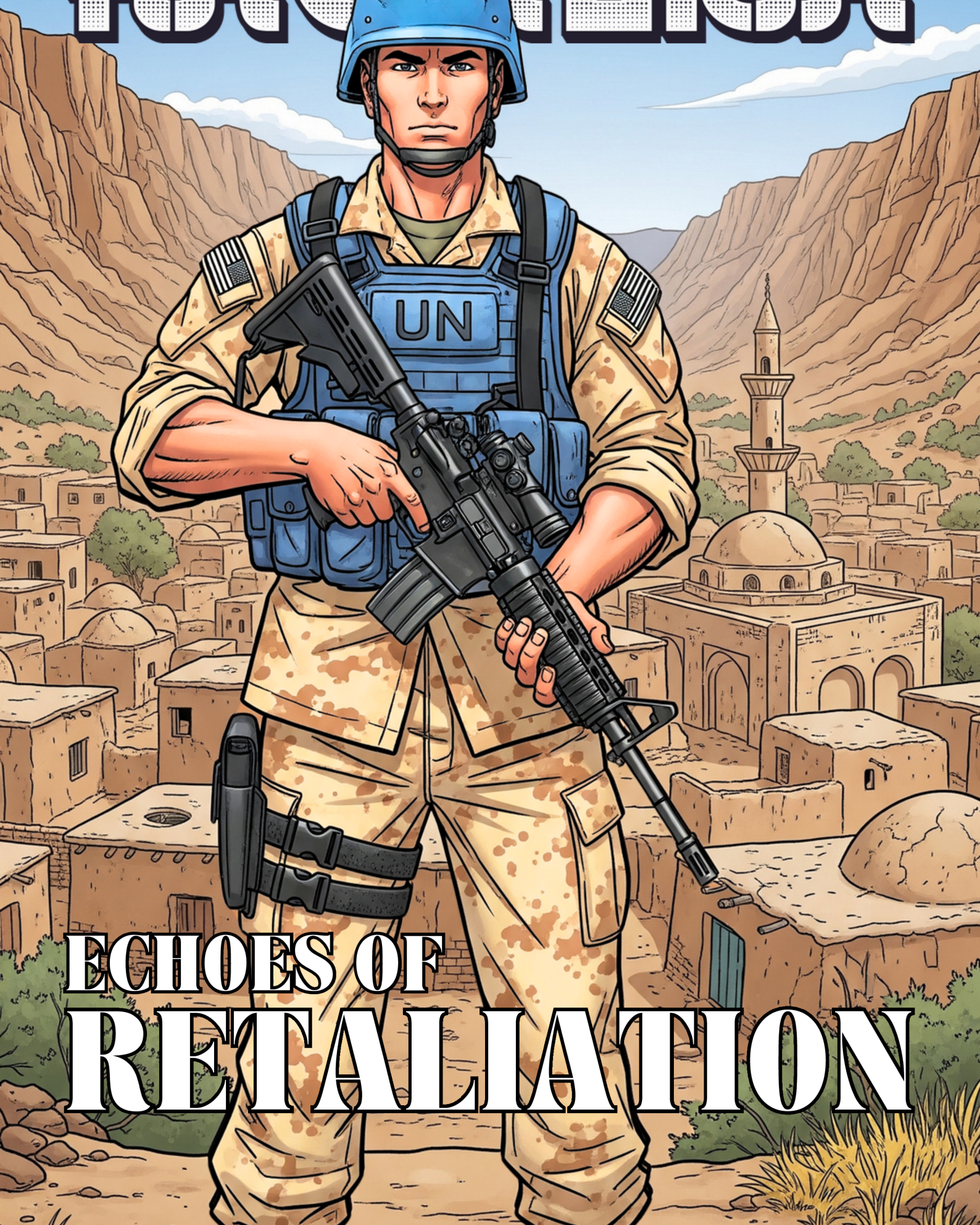


WARZONES



ECHOES OF RETTALIATION

Chapter 1: The Ceasefire Patrol

The morning sun cast long shadows across the Lebanese hills as Lieutenant David Granger adjusted his tactical vest and checked his watch. 0630 hours. The ceasefire had held for exactly seventy-two days, but in this corner of the Middle East, peace was always a fragile thing.

"Cohen, how's our cargo looking?" David called to his sergeant, a compact woman with sharp eyes and graying temples who'd seen more combat than most colonels.

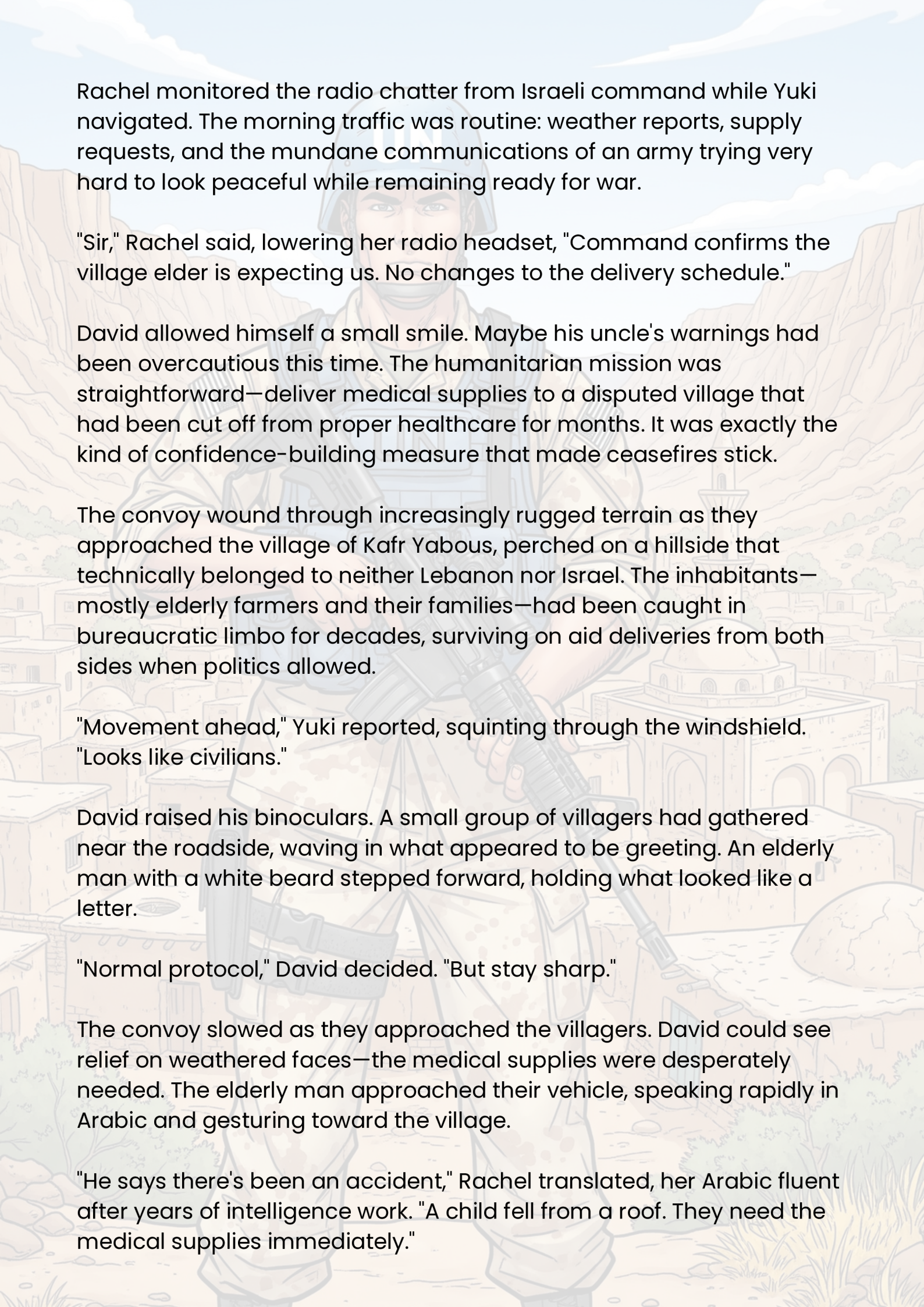
Sergeant Rachel Cohen patted the secured medical supplies in the back of their armored Humvee. "Antibiotics, surgical equipment, and enough morphine to stock a field hospital," she replied, her Hebrew-accented English crisp with military precision. "The village clinic will be grateful—if we can get it there in one piece."

Corporal Yuki Nakamura, barely twenty-three but already a veteran of two border conflicts, emerged from beneath the vehicle's hood. Oil stained his hands as he wiped them on a rag. "Engine's running smooth, sir. GPS shows the route clear, and intelligence reports no hostile movement in the sector."

David nodded, though something nagged at him. His uncle Arthur had called him just two days ago from Geneva, warning him to be extra careful during patrol rotations. Arthur never called without reason—twenty years in diplomatic intelligence had given him an almost supernatural sense for when tensions were about to spike.

"Mount up," David ordered. "We'll take the northern route through Wadi Al-Khansa. It's longer, but it keeps us in the buffer zone."

The three-vehicle convoy pulled out of Forward Operating Base Sentinel as the sun climbed higher. David's Humvee led, followed by a supply truck and a rear guard vehicle. The landscape rolled past in familiar patterns—terraced olive groves, scattered villages, and ancient stone walls that had witnessed countless conflicts over millennia.

A faint, stylized illustration of a soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a tactical vest, holding a rifle. In the background, there are rocky hills and a small village with a domed building. The overall tone is muted and artistic.

Rachel monitored the radio chatter from Israeli command while Yuki navigated. The morning traffic was routine: weather reports, supply requests, and the mundane communications of an army trying very hard to look peaceful while remaining ready for war.

"Sir," Rachel said, lowering her radio headset, "Command confirms the village elder is expecting us. No changes to the delivery schedule."

David allowed himself a small smile. Maybe his uncle's warnings had been overcautious this time. The humanitarian mission was straightforward—deliver medical supplies to a disputed village that had been cut off from proper healthcare for months. It was exactly the kind of confidence-building measure that made ceasefires stick.

The convoy wound through increasingly rugged terrain as they approached the village of Kafr Yabous, perched on a hillside that technically belonged to neither Lebanon nor Israel. The inhabitants—mostly elderly farmers and their families—had been caught in bureaucratic limbo for decades, surviving on aid deliveries from both sides when politics allowed.


"Movement ahead," Yuki reported, squinting through the windshield. "Looks like civilians."

David raised his binoculars. A small group of villagers had gathered near the roadside, waving in what appeared to be greeting. An elderly man with a white beard stepped forward, holding what looked like a letter.

"Normal protocol," David decided. "But stay sharp."

The convoy slowed as they approached the villagers. David could see relief on weathered faces—the medical supplies were desperately needed. The elderly man approached their vehicle, speaking rapidly in Arabic and gesturing toward the village.

"He says there's been an accident," Rachel translated, her Arabic fluent after years of intelligence work. "A child fell from a roof. They need the medical supplies immediately."



David weighed the situation. Standard procedure called for the supplies to be delivered to the clinic, not distributed in the field. But a seriously injured child changed the calculus.

"All right, we'll—"

The words died in his throat as he noticed something wrong. The elderly villager's hands were steady—too steady for someone reporting a child's accident. His eyes kept flicking toward the rocky outcroppings on either side of the road. And there, barely visible among the stones, David caught the dull gleam of metal.

"Contact left!" he shouted, even as the first muzzle flashes erupted from the hillside.


The ambush was perfectly coordinated. Automatic weapons fire raked the convoy from three sides, while rocket-propelled grenades streaked toward their vehicles. The lead Humvee's armor held against the initial barrage, but David could hear the distinctive crack of sniper fire mixing with the chatter of assault rifles.

"Base, this is Patrol Seven!" Rachel screamed into her radio as David floored the accelerator. "We are under attack at grid reference 33-S-MK-4157-8932! Immediate support required!"

The radio crackled with static, then nothing. David's blood chilled—their communications were being jammed.

Behind them, the supply truck lurched to a halt as its tires were shredded by concentrated fire. The rear guard vehicle tried to maneuver for a better position but struck a hidden IED that sent it spinning off the road in a cloud of smoke and debris.

"Sir, we're cut off!" Yuki reported, struggling to control their vehicle as bullets starred the windshield. "They've got us in a classic kill box!"

A faint, stylized illustration of a soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a helmet, a tactical vest, and a uniform. He is holding a rifle. The background shows a desert landscape with mountains and a small town with a mosque. The overall tone is serious and military.

David's tactical training kicked in. The attackers were using professional military tactics—coordinated fields of fire, communications jamming, and positioned blocking forces. This wasn't a random terrorist attack; it was a carefully planned military operation.

More troubling still, their equipment looked wrong. Through the chaos, David caught glimpses of their assailants: combat uniforms that weren't quite Hezbollah standard, weapons that looked suspiciously like Iranian Revolutionary Guard issue, and coordination that spoke of formal military training.

"We need to break contact," David decided. "There's a wadi to our right—if we can reach it, we might have cover long enough to—"

An RPG detonated against a boulder just ahead of them, showering their windshield with rock fragments. The Humvee's engine coughed, then died completely.


"Vehicle's disabled!" Yuki reported. "We're on foot from here!"

David grabbed his rifle and assault pack, checking that his emergency beacon was still functioning. The device would transmit their location to Israeli satellites, but it would take time for rescue forces to arrive—time they might not have.

"Cohen, take point toward the wadi! Yuki, grab the medical supplies and follow her!"

They bailed out of the vehicle into withering fire. Rachel laid down covering shots with practiced precision while David and Yuki retrieved what medical supplies they could carry. The attackers were closing in, but their movement was methodical rather than rushed—they wanted prisoners, not bodies.

The realization hit David like a physical blow. This wasn't a random ambush or even a tactical strike. Someone wanted to capture Israeli soldiers during the ceasefire, and they'd chosen his patrol specifically.



"This way!" Rachel shouted, leading them toward a cluster of rocks that offered partial cover.

They made it perhaps fifty meters before the flanking forces revealed themselves. David watched in grim fascination as perfectly coordinated squads emerged from concealed positions, cutting off every escape route with textbook precision. These weren't militia fighters or even Hezbollah regulars—they moved like elite special forces.

"Lieutenant!" Yuki called out, his young voice cracking with stress. "I count at least twenty hostiles, all sides! Professional kit, professional movement!"

David's finger found the activation switch on his emergency beacon. Whatever happened next, at least Israeli intelligence would know approximately where they'd been taken. He pressed the button and felt the device's subtle vibration confirming transmission.

"Drop your weapons!" The command came in accented English from multiple directions. "You are surrounded! Drop your weapons and you will not be harmed!"


David met Rachel's eyes, seeing his own grim understanding reflected there. They could fight and die here, or surrender and hope for eventual rescue. With the beacon activated, there was at least a chance their fate wouldn't remain unknown.

"On my mark, we comply," David said quietly. "But remember—name, rank, serial number. Nothing else."

The firefight had lasted perhaps ten minutes, but it felt like hours. Now, in the sudden silence, David could hear his own heartbeat and the distant sound of helicopter rotors—too distant to offer immediate help.

"Mark," he said.

Three Israeli weapons clattered onto the rocky ground.



Within moments, they were surrounded by masked figures in combat gear that bore no identifying insignia. Their captors moved with military efficiency, zip-tying their hands and conducting professional searches that removed all communication devices, weapons, and identification except for their basic military tags.

One of the captors—apparently the leader—approached David directly. Through his balaclava, intelligent eyes studied the young lieutenant with calculating interest.

"You are Lieutenant David Granger," the man said in excellent English. "Nephew of Arthur Granger, United Nations liaison officer. Son of Professor Sarah Granger, Hebrew University. Graduate of the Israeli Defense Force Academy, class of 2019."

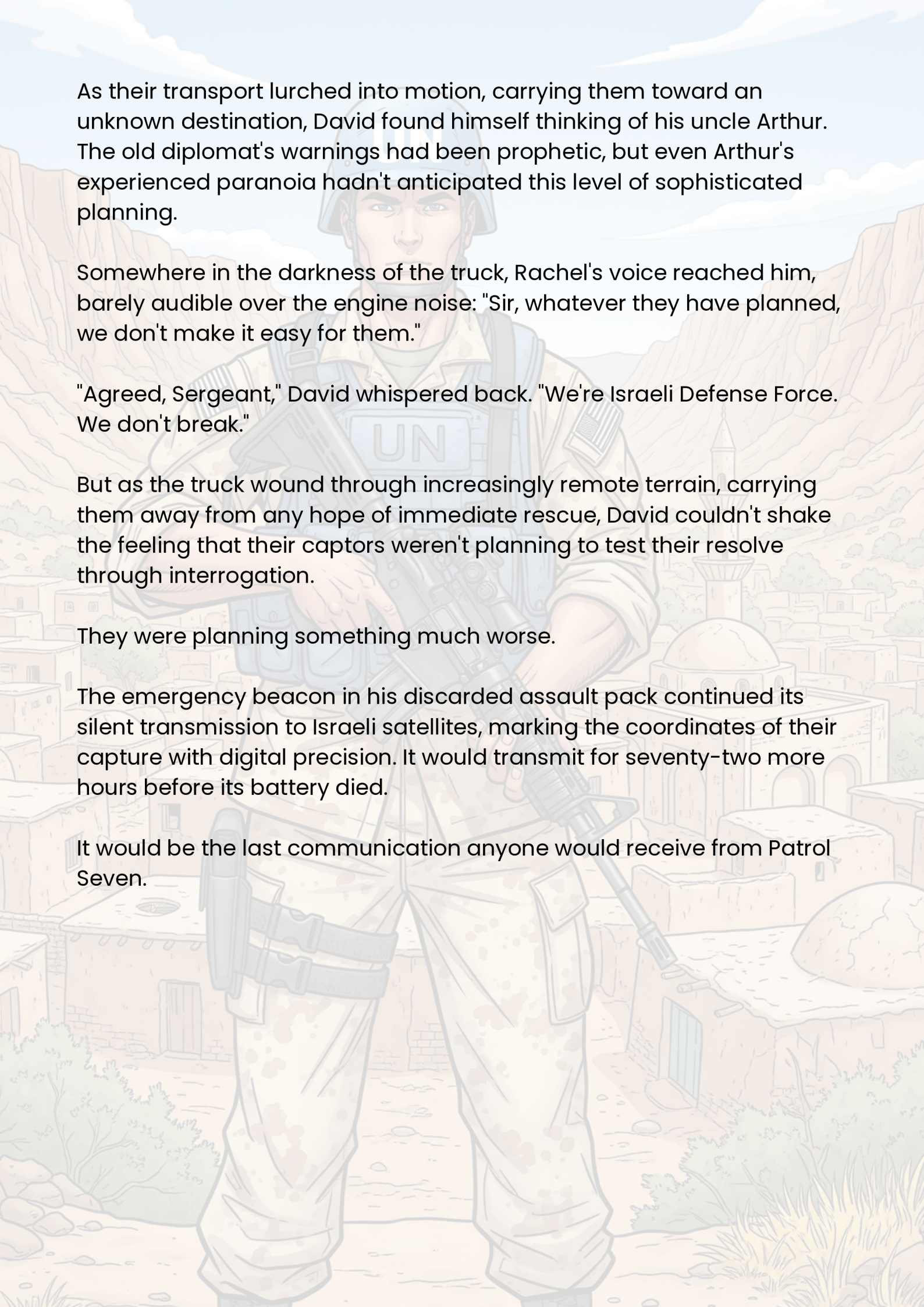
David's blood turned to ice. This wasn't a random capture—they'd been specifically targeted, and their captors knew far more about him than any casual intelligence gathering would reveal.

"Name, rank, serial number," David responded steadily.

The leader nodded approvingly. "Yes, you will maintain that position. For now." He gestured to his men. "Load them in the trucks. We have a long journey ahead."

As David was pushed toward a waiting vehicle, he caught a glimpse of the "villagers" who had helped spring the trap. They were stripping the fake beards and civilian clothes, revealing military fatigues underneath. The operation had been planned down to the smallest detail.

The last thing David saw before a hood was pulled over his head was the smoke rising from their destroyed convoy and the medical supplies scattered across the roadside—antibiotics and morphine that would never reach the children who needed them.



As their transport lurched into motion, carrying them toward an unknown destination, David found himself thinking of his uncle Arthur. The old diplomat's warnings had been prophetic, but even Arthur's experienced paranoia hadn't anticipated this level of sophisticated planning.

Somewhere in the darkness of the truck, Rachel's voice reached him, barely audible over the engine noise: "Sir, whatever they have planned, we don't make it easy for them."

"Agreed, Sergeant," David whispered back. "We're Israeli Defense Force. We don't break."

But as the truck wound through increasingly remote terrain, carrying them away from any hope of immediate rescue, David couldn't shake the feeling that their captors weren't planning to test their resolve through interrogation.

They were planning something much worse.

The emergency beacon in his discarded assault pack continued its silent transmission to Israeli satellites, marking the coordinates of their capture with digital precision. It would transmit for seventy-two more hours before its battery died.

It would be the last communication anyone would receive from Patrol Seven.

Chapter 2: The Valley Judgment

Colonel Reza Mohammadi stood at the edge of the ancient valley, watching the sunrise paint the Iranian mountains in shades of gold and crimson. The landscape was beautiful in its desolation—a fitting place for what Tehran had ordered him to do.

At fifty-two, Mohammadi had spent three decades in the Revolutionary Guard, rising through the ranks during the Iran-Iraq War and countless proxy conflicts that followed. His weathered face bore the scars of shrapnel from an Israeli airstrike in Syria, and his left hand moved stiffly where surgeons had rebuilt shattered bones. But it was the deeper wounds—invisible ones—that had brought him to this moment.

"Colonel," Sergeant Navid Hosseini approached cautiously, his young face troubled. "The prisoners have been brought to the staging area. They... they're requesting water."

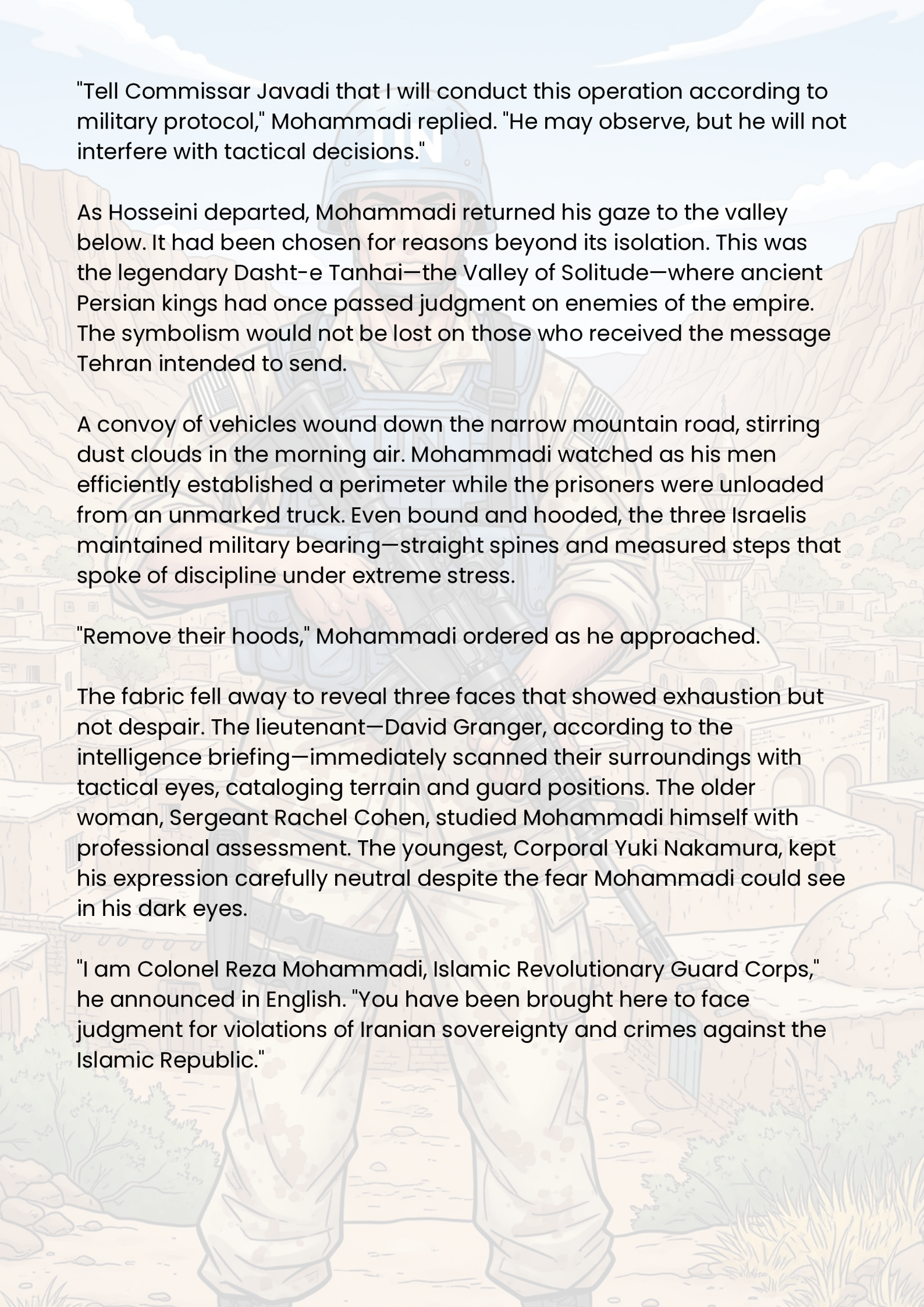
Mohammadi turned from his contemplation of the valley. Hosseini was twenty-six, barely older than Mohammadi's son had been when the Israeli bomb found his apartment in Damascus. The sergeant had joined the Guard full of revolutionary fervor, but two years of operations had begun wearing down his idealism.

"Give them water," Mohammadi said quietly. "We are soldiers, not animals."

"Yes, sir." Hosseini hesitated. "Colonel, the political commissar from Tehran has been asking when you plan to... begin the proceedings."

Mohammadi's jaw tightened. Commissar Javadi had arrived with sealed orders from the highest levels of the Revolutionary Guard command. The message was clear: make an example that would shatter Israeli confidence and demonstrate the price of violating Iranian sovereignty, even during a ceasefire.

For now.



"Tell Commissar Javadi that I will conduct this operation according to military protocol," Mohammadi replied. "He may observe, but he will not interfere with tactical decisions."

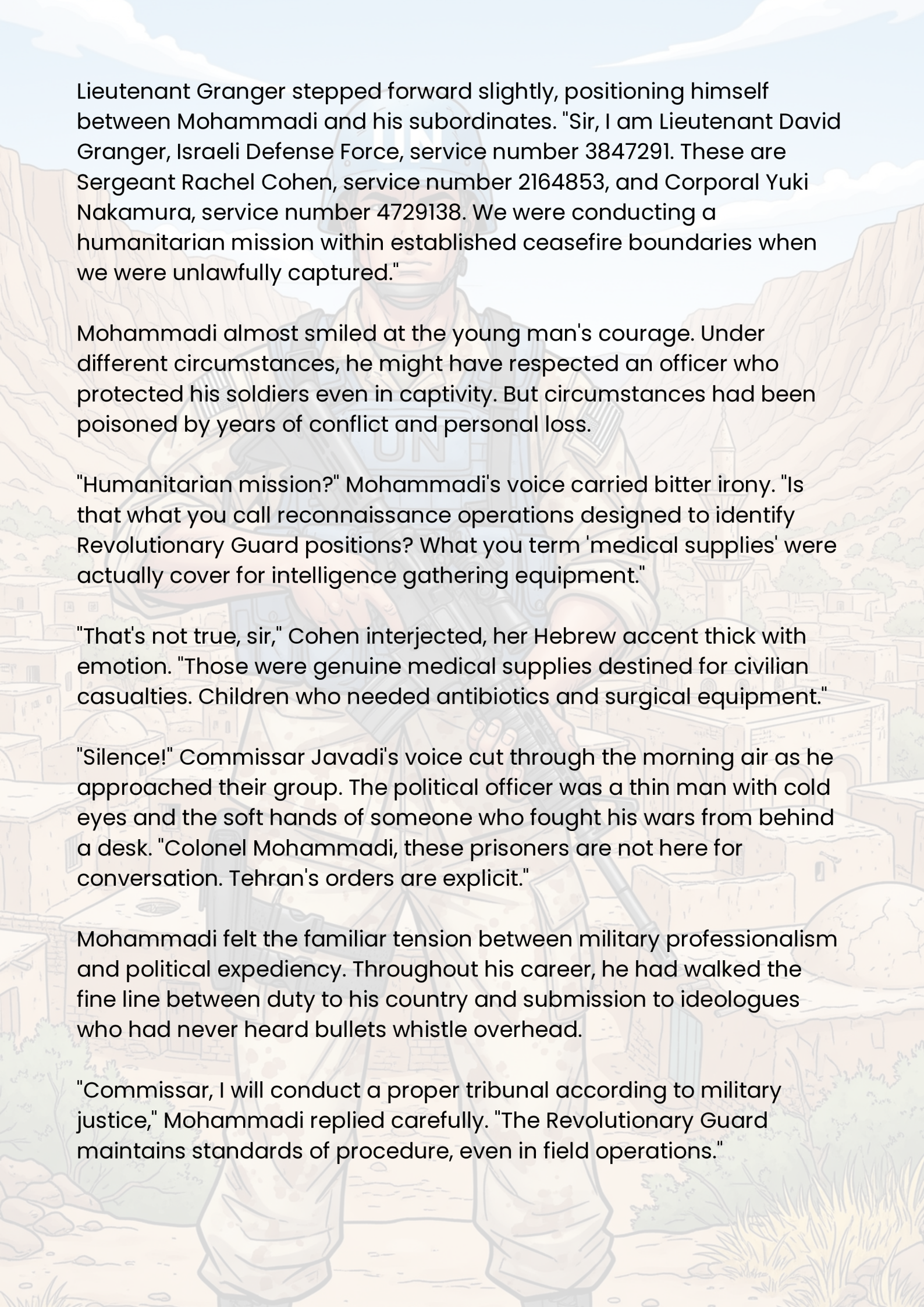
As Hosseini departed, Mohammadi returned his gaze to the valley below. It had been chosen for reasons beyond its isolation. This was the legendary Dasht-e Tanhai—the Valley of Solitude—where ancient Persian kings had once passed judgment on enemies of the empire. The symbolism would not be lost on those who received the message Tehran intended to send.

A convoy of vehicles wound down the narrow mountain road, stirring dust clouds in the morning air. Mohammadi watched as his men efficiently established a perimeter while the prisoners were unloaded from an unmarked truck. Even bound and hooded, the three Israelis maintained military bearing—straight spines and measured steps that spoke of discipline under extreme stress.

"Remove their hoods," Mohammadi ordered as he approached.

The fabric fell away to reveal three faces that showed exhaustion but not despair. The lieutenant—David Granger, according to the intelligence briefing—immediately scanned their surroundings with tactical eyes, cataloging terrain and guard positions. The older woman, Sergeant Rachel Cohen, studied Mohammadi himself with professional assessment. The youngest, Corporal Yuki Nakamura, kept his expression carefully neutral despite the fear Mohammadi could see in his dark eyes.

"I am Colonel Reza Mohammadi, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," he announced in English. "You have been brought here to face judgment for violations of Iranian sovereignty and crimes against the Islamic Republic."

The background features a faint, stylized illustration. In the center, a soldier in a blue UN uniform with a beret and a face mask is depicted. Behind the soldier, a cityscape with various buildings, including a mosque with a dome and minaret, is visible. The scene is set against a backdrop of mountains and a blue sky with clouds.

Lieutenant Granger stepped forward slightly, positioning himself between Mohammadi and his subordinates. "Sir, I am Lieutenant David Granger, Israeli Defense Force, service number 3847291. These are Sergeant Rachel Cohen, service number 2164853, and Corporal Yuki Nakamura, service number 4729138. We were conducting a humanitarian mission within established ceasefire boundaries when we were unlawfully captured."

Mohammadi almost smiled at the young man's courage. Under different circumstances, he might have respected an officer who protected his soldiers even in captivity. But circumstances had been poisoned by years of conflict and personal loss.

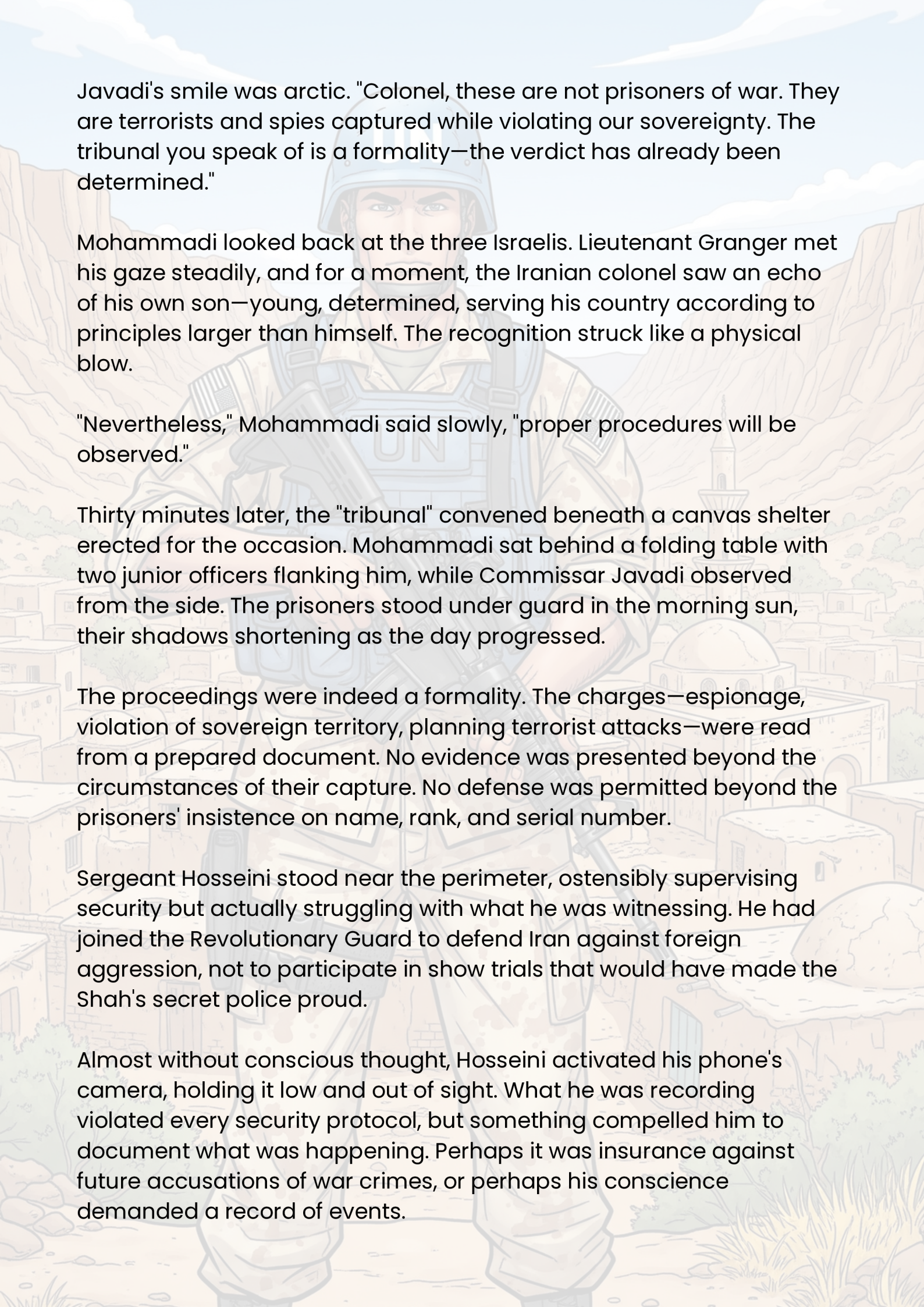
"Humanitarian mission?" Mohammadi's voice carried bitter irony. "Is that what you call reconnaissance operations designed to identify Revolutionary Guard positions? What you term 'medical supplies' were actually cover for intelligence gathering equipment."

"That's not true, sir," Cohen interjected, her Hebrew accent thick with emotion. "Those were genuine medical supplies destined for civilian casualties. Children who needed antibiotics and surgical equipment."

"Silence!" Commissar Javadi's voice cut through the morning air as he approached their group. The political officer was a thin man with cold eyes and the soft hands of someone who fought his wars from behind a desk. "Colonel Mohammadi, these prisoners are not here for conversation. Tehran's orders are explicit."

Mohammadi felt the familiar tension between military professionalism and political expediency. Throughout his career, he had walked the fine line between duty to his country and submission to ideologues who had never heard bullets whistle overhead.

"Commissar, I will conduct a proper tribunal according to military justice," Mohammadi replied carefully. "The Revolutionary Guard maintains standards of procedure, even in field operations."

A faint, stylized illustration of a soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a vest with "UN" on it, and is holding a rifle. The background shows a desert landscape with mountains and a small town with a mosque.

Javadi's smile was arctic. "Colonel, these are not prisoners of war. They are terrorists and spies captured while violating our sovereignty. The tribunal you speak of is a formality—the verdict has already been determined."

Mohammadi looked back at the three Israelis. Lieutenant Granger met his gaze steadily, and for a moment, the Iranian colonel saw an echo of his own son—young, determined, serving his country according to principles larger than himself. The recognition struck like a physical blow.

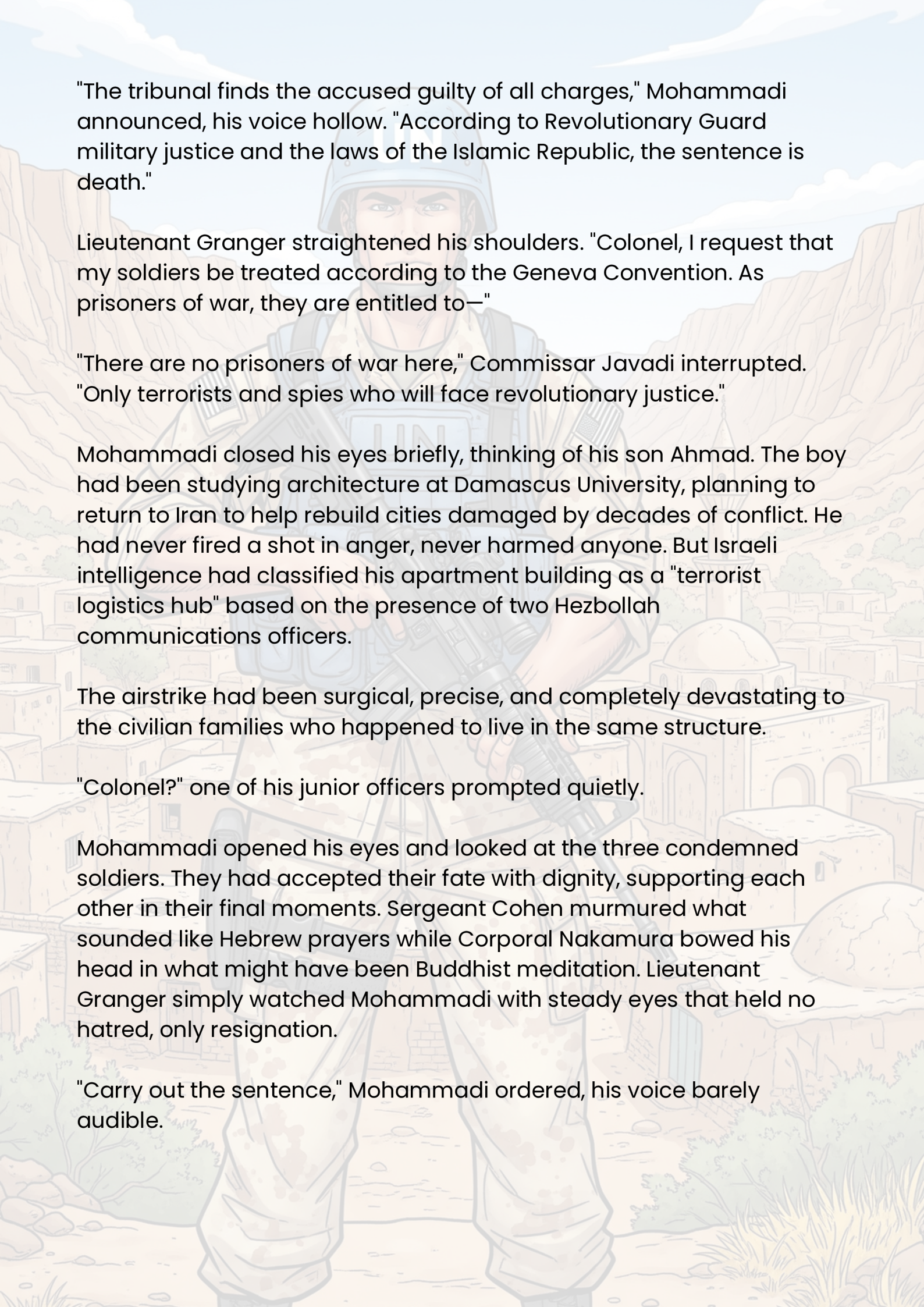
"Nevertheless," Mohammadi said slowly, "proper procedures will be observed."

Thirty minutes later, the "tribunal" convened beneath a canvas shelter erected for the occasion. Mohammadi sat behind a folding table with two junior officers flanking him, while Commissar Javadi observed from the side. The prisoners stood under guard in the morning sun, their shadows shortening as the day progressed.

The proceedings were indeed a formality. The charges—espionage, violation of sovereign territory, planning terrorist attacks—were read from a prepared document. No evidence was presented beyond the circumstances of their capture. No defense was permitted beyond the prisoners' insistence on name, rank, and serial number.

Sergeant Hosseini stood near the perimeter, ostensibly supervising security but actually struggling with what he was witnessing. He had joined the Revolutionary Guard to defend Iran against foreign aggression, not to participate in show trials that would have made the Shah's secret police proud.

Almost without conscious thought, Hosseini activated his phone's camera, holding it low and out of sight. What he was recording violated every security protocol, but something compelled him to document what was happening. Perhaps it was insurance against future accusations of war crimes, or perhaps his conscience demanded a record of events.



"The tribunal finds the accused guilty of all charges," Mohammadi announced, his voice hollow. "According to Revolutionary Guard military justice and the laws of the Islamic Republic, the sentence is death."

Lieutenant Granger straightened his shoulders. "Colonel, I request that my soldiers be treated according to the Geneva Convention. As prisoners of war, they are entitled to—"

"There are no prisoners of war here," Commissar Javadi interrupted. "Only terrorists and spies who will face revolutionary justice."

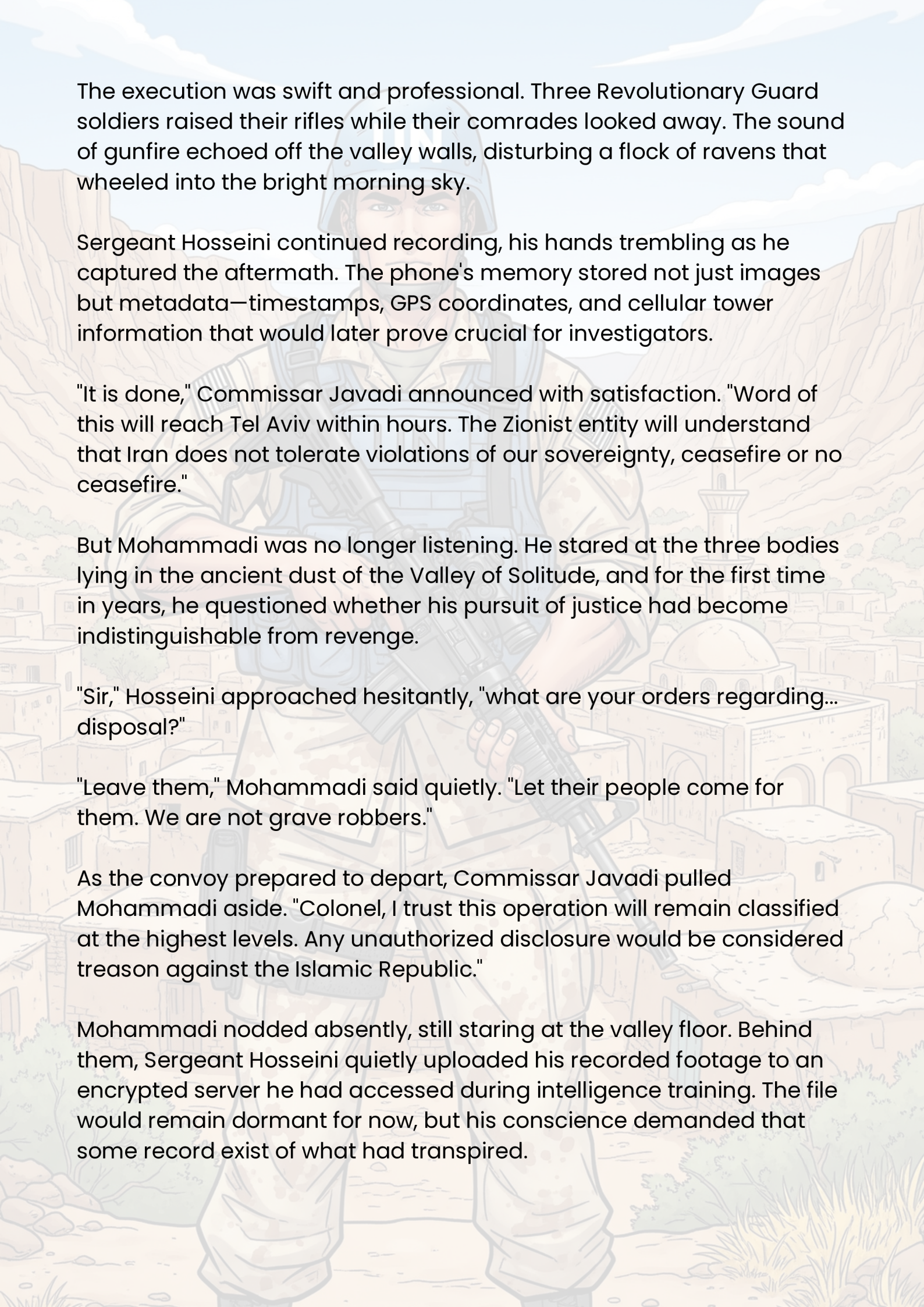
Mohammadi closed his eyes briefly, thinking of his son Ahmad. The boy had been studying architecture at Damascus University, planning to return to Iran to help rebuild cities damaged by decades of conflict. He had never fired a shot in anger, never harmed anyone. But Israeli intelligence had classified his apartment building as a "terrorist logistics hub" based on the presence of two Hezbollah communications officers.

The airstrike had been surgical, precise, and completely devastating to the civilian families who happened to live in the same structure.

"Colonel?" one of his junior officers prompted quietly.

Mohammadi opened his eyes and looked at the three condemned soldiers. They had accepted their fate with dignity, supporting each other in their final moments. Sergeant Cohen murmured what sounded like Hebrew prayers while Corporal Nakamura bowed his head in what might have been Buddhist meditation. Lieutenant Granger simply watched Mohammadi with steady eyes that held no hatred, only resignation.

"Carry out the sentence," Mohammadi ordered, his voice barely audible.



The execution was swift and professional. Three Revolutionary Guard soldiers raised their rifles while their comrades looked away. The sound of gunfire echoed off the valley walls, disturbing a flock of ravens that wheeled into the bright morning sky.

Sergeant Hosseini continued recording, his hands trembling as he captured the aftermath. The phone's memory stored not just images but metadata—timestamps, GPS coordinates, and cellular tower information that would later prove crucial for investigators.

"It is done," Commissar Javadi announced with satisfaction. "Word of this will reach Tel Aviv within hours. The Zionist entity will understand that Iran does not tolerate violations of our sovereignty, ceasefire or no ceasefire."

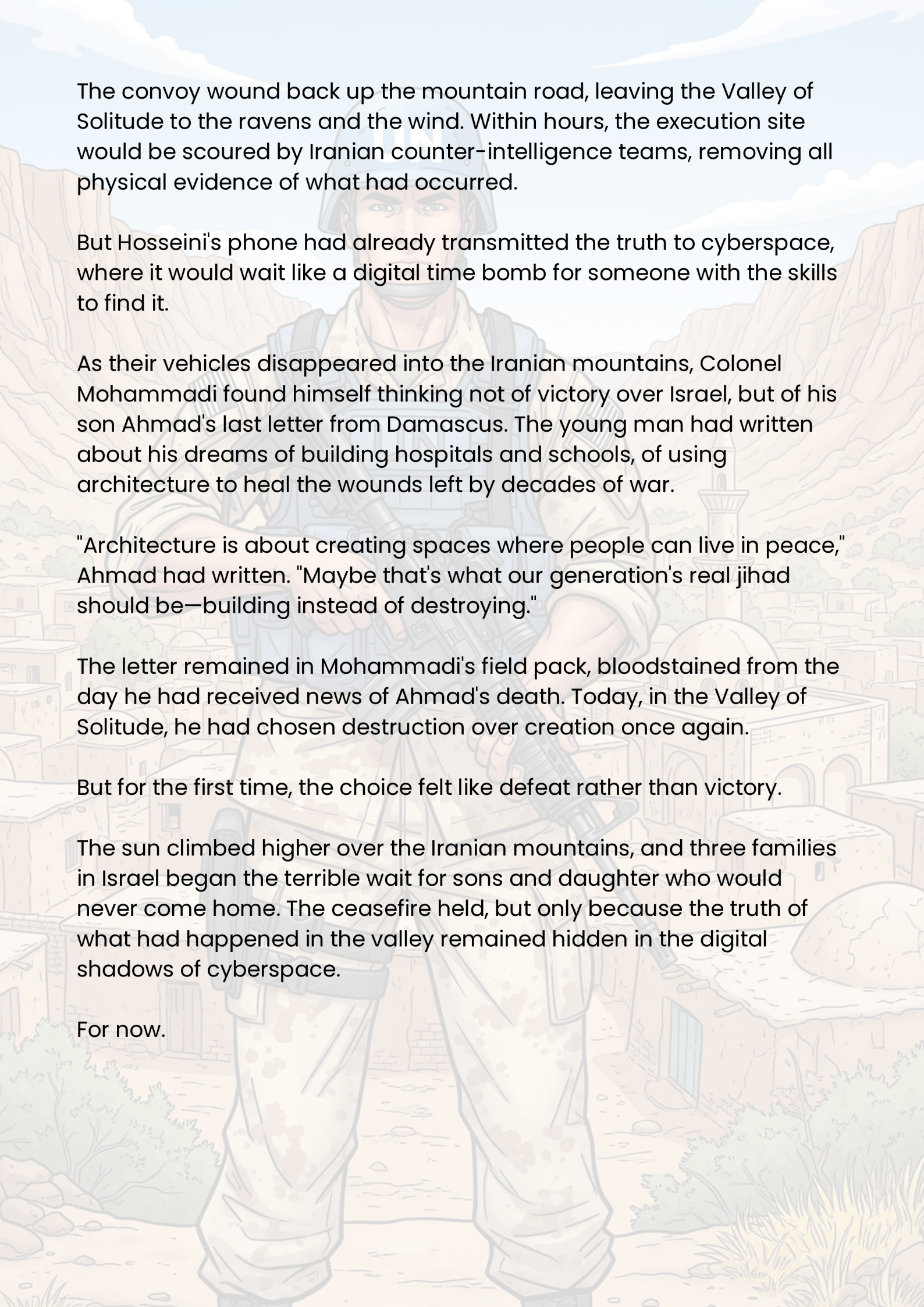
But Mohammadi was no longer listening. He stared at the three bodies lying in the ancient dust of the Valley of Solitude, and for the first time in years, he questioned whether his pursuit of justice had become indistinguishable from revenge.

"Sir," Hosseini approached hesitantly, "what are your orders regarding... disposal?"

"Leave them," Mohammadi said quietly. "Let their people come for them. We are not grave robbers."

As the convoy prepared to depart, Commissar Javadi pulled Mohammadi aside. "Colonel, I trust this operation will remain classified at the highest levels. Any unauthorized disclosure would be considered treason against the Islamic Republic."

Mohammadi nodded absently, still staring at the valley floor. Behind them, Sergeant Hosseini quietly uploaded his recorded footage to an encrypted server he had accessed during intelligence training. The file would remain dormant for now, but his conscience demanded that some record exist of what had transpired.



The convoy wound back up the mountain road, leaving the Valley of Solitude to the ravens and the wind. Within hours, the execution site would be scoured by Iranian counter-intelligence teams, removing all physical evidence of what had occurred.

But Hosseini's phone had already transmitted the truth to cyberspace, where it would wait like a digital time bomb for someone with the skills to find it.

As their vehicles disappeared into the Iranian mountains, Colonel Mohammadi found himself thinking not of victory over Israel, but of his son Ahmad's last letter from Damascus. The young man had written about his dreams of building hospitals and schools, of using architecture to heal the wounds left by decades of war.

"Architecture is about creating spaces where people can live in peace," Ahmad had written. "Maybe that's what our generation's real jihad should be—building instead of destroying."

The letter remained in Mohammadi's field pack, bloodstained from the day he had received news of Ahmad's death. Today, in the Valley of Solitude, he had chosen destruction over creation once again.

But for the first time, the choice felt like defeat rather than victory.

The sun climbed higher over the Iranian mountains, and three families in Israel began the terrible wait for sons and daughter who would never come home. The ceasefire held, but only because the truth of what had happened in the valley remained hidden in the digital shadows of cyberspace.

For now.

Chapter 3: Diplomatic Severance

The secure phone rang at 0347 hours Geneva time, jolting Arthur Granger from restless sleep in his cramped hotel room overlooking Lake Geneva. Twenty-three years in diplomatic intelligence had trained him to wake instantly alert, but the number displayed on his encrypted device made his blood run cold.

"Granger," he answered, already reaching for his glasses and the notebook he kept beside every bed.

"Arthur, it's Daniel." The voice belonged to Colonel Daniel Reyes, Arthur's former colleague from his early days in British intelligence who had emigrated to Israel and risen through the ranks of military intelligence. "I'm calling as a friend, not through official channels."


Arthur's pen hovered over blank paper, but his hand was already trembling. Daniel never called as a friend unless the news was personal—and catastrophic.

"What's happened?" Arthur asked, though part of him already knew.

"Your nephew David..." Daniel's voice carried the weight of someone delivering news he wished he didn't have to share. "His patrol went missing yesterday during a routine humanitarian mission. Three soldiers total. We've had no contact for eighteen hours."

The notebook slipped from Arthur's fingers and scattered across the hotel room's thin carpet. David—his sister Sarah's boy, the brilliant young man who had chosen military service over academia despite his mother's protests. The lieutenant who called every few weeks to check on his uncle's "boring diplomatic adventures."

"Missing how?" Arthur's diplomatic training kicked in, demanding facts despite his emotional turmoil. "Equipment failure? Accident? Or..."



"Hostile action," Daniel confirmed grimly. "Their emergency beacon transmitted for about six hours from the capture site, then went dark. Arthur, the pattern suggests this wasn't random. Professional military operation, coordinated ambush, specific targeting."

Arthur sank into the room's single chair, feeling every one of his fifty-eight years. Through the window, Geneva's diplomatic quarter sparkled with the lights of organizations dedicated to maintaining world peace. The irony felt like mockery.

"Specific targeting," Arthur repeated slowly. "Meaning what, exactly?"


"Meaning someone knew David's background. His family connections. The intelligence briefing I've seen suggests his patrol was selected deliberately, not just because they were convenient targets."

The implications hit Arthur like physical blows. His position as UN liaison officer had made him enemies over the years—arms dealers blocked by sanctions, war criminals exposed by investigations, corrupt officials whose schemes he had unraveled. But using his family as leverage crossed lines that even the most ruthless operators usually respected.

"Daniel, I need everything you can share without compromising sources. Routes, timing, probable enemy capabilities. And I need to know the moment—the very moment—you receive any intelligence about their fate."

"Arthur..." Daniel's hesitation spoke volumes. "There are protocols. Official channels. If this becomes known, if it's discovered that I'm sharing classified intelligence with a UN officer who happens to be related to one of the missing soldiers..."

"Fuck the protocols," Arthur said quietly, his cultured diplomatic accent making the profanity sound almost elegant. "That boy is my blood. Sarah entrusted him to my guidance when he was choosing his career path. I'm not sitting in Geneva filing reports while my nephew disappears into some intelligence black hole."

A faint, stylized background illustration of a UN soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a blue helmet with 'UN' on it, a yellow tactical vest, and a blue uniform. He is holding a rifle. In the background, there are desert hills, a small town with a minaret, and a large, ancient-looking structure. The overall tone is light and illustrative.

Silence stretched across the encrypted connection. When Daniel spoke again, his voice had changed—less official, more human.

"The capture site was grid reference 33-S-MK-4157-8932, Lebanese border sector. Professional ambush using Iranian Revolutionary Guard tactics and equipment. No bodies recovered, which suggests they were taken alive. Arthur... given the current political climate, if they are alive, time is not on our side."

Arthur scribbled the coordinates, his diplomatic training automatically converting them to mental map references. The location fit patterns he recognized from decades of analyzing Middle Eastern flashpoints—remote enough for plausible deniability, accessible enough for quick extraction across borders.

"What else?" he pressed.


"Intelligence intercepts suggest Iranian involvement, but not their usual proxies. This has the signature of a direct Revolutionary Guard operation, possibly ordered from Tehran's highest levels. That makes it a state action, not terrorism."

Which meant diplomatic solutions were possible—but only if the right pressure was applied through the right channels before politics made compromise impossible. Arthur's mind was already working through contact lists, favors owed, and leverage points accumulated over decades of careful relationship-building.

"Daniel, I'm going to make some inquiries through back channels. Unofficial approaches to Iranian contacts who might be willing to discuss prisoner exchanges."

"Arthur, no." Daniel's voice sharpened with alarm. "If Tehran thinks you're operating as an Israeli asset, they'll cut off all communication. And if the UN discovers you're conducting unauthorized negotiations..."

"Then they'll fire me," Arthur finished. "Small price to pay for Sarah's son."



After ending the call, Arthur sat in darkness for several minutes, processing the magnitude of what he was contemplating. His career at the United Nations had been built on scrupulous neutrality, on maintaining the trust of all parties in conflicts where such trust was often the only thing preventing full-scale war. Using his position to conduct private negotiations would destroy that carefully cultivated reputation instantly.

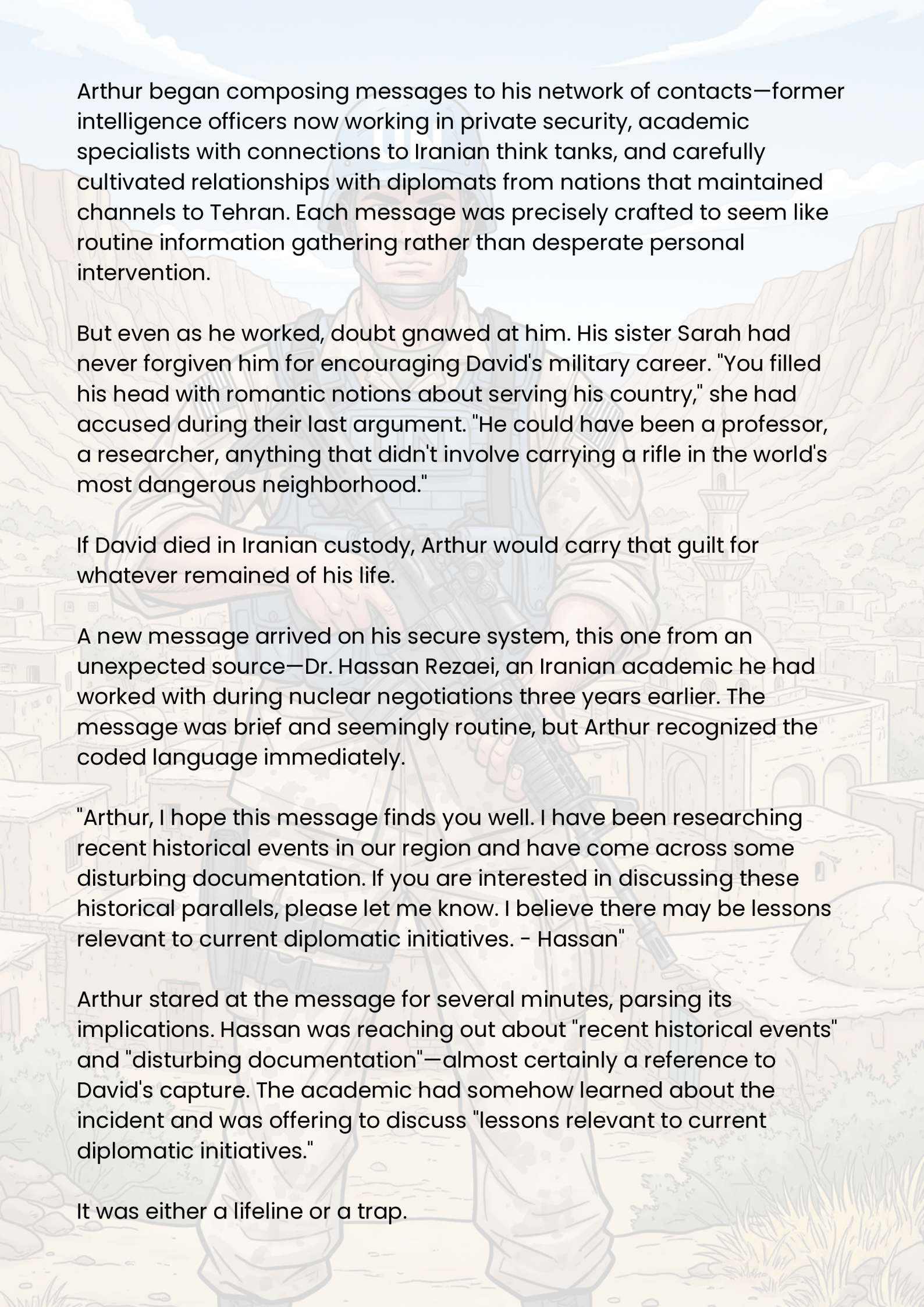
But David's face haunted his thoughts—the earnest young man who had sought his uncle's advice before joining the military, who had wanted to serve something larger than himself despite having the intellect for any civilian career he chose.

Arthur activated his secure computer and began accessing intelligence databases that his UN credentials allowed him to review. Most of the material was sanitized for diplomatic consumption, but years of experience had taught him to read between the lines.

Iranian Revolutionary Guard activities had increased dramatically over the past month, despite the ceasefire. Cross-border reconnaissance, equipment positioning, and communications intercepts all suggested preparation for significant operations. But the targeting of an Israeli humanitarian patrol suggested something more strategic than simple military posturing.

His secure phone buzzed with an encrypted message from Daniel: "Additional intelligence: Capture may be related to planned propaganda operation. High-level Iranian political involvement suspected. Time frame critical."

Propaganda operation. Arthur felt his heart sink further. If Tehran intended to use the captured soldiers for public political theater, their window for private negotiation was measured in hours, not days. Once the propaganda machinery engaged, positions would harden on all sides and diplomatic solutions would become impossible.

A faint, stylized background illustration of a soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a tactical vest, holding a rifle. In the background, there are desert hills and a small town with a mosque featuring a minaret.

Arthur began composing messages to his network of contacts—former intelligence officers now working in private security, academic specialists with connections to Iranian think tanks, and carefully cultivated relationships with diplomats from nations that maintained channels to Tehran. Each message was precisely crafted to seem like routine information gathering rather than desperate personal intervention.

But even as he worked, doubt gnawed at him. His sister Sarah had never forgiven him for encouraging David's military career. "You filled his head with romantic notions about serving his country," she had accused during their last argument. "He could have been a professor, a researcher, anything that didn't involve carrying a rifle in the world's most dangerous neighborhood."

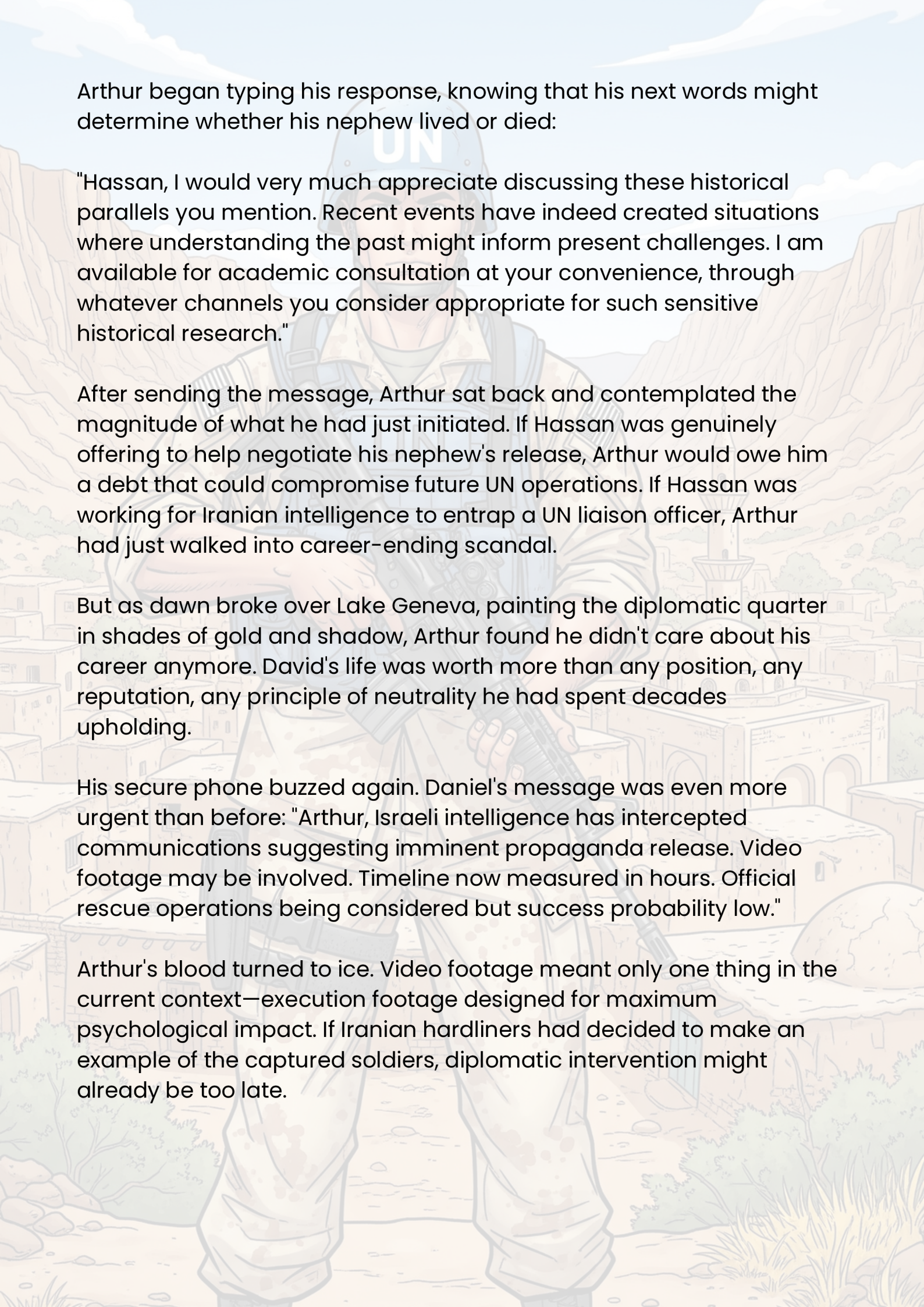
If David died in Iranian custody, Arthur would carry that guilt for whatever remained of his life.

A new message arrived on his secure system, this one from an unexpected source—Dr. Hassan Rezaei, an Iranian academic he had worked with during nuclear negotiations three years earlier. The message was brief and seemingly routine, but Arthur recognized the coded language immediately.

"Arthur, I hope this message finds you well. I have been researching recent historical events in our region and have come across some disturbing documentation. If you are interested in discussing these historical parallels, please let me know. I believe there may be lessons relevant to current diplomatic initiatives. - Hassan"

Arthur stared at the message for several minutes, parsing its implications. Hassan was reaching out about "recent historical events" and "disturbing documentation"—almost certainly a reference to David's capture. The academic had somehow learned about the incident and was offering to discuss "lessons relevant to current diplomatic initiatives."

It was either a lifeline or a trap.

A faint, stylized illustration of a UN soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a blue helmet with 'UN' on it, a yellow and blue uniform, and a tactical vest. He is holding a rifle. The background shows a desert landscape with mountains and some buildings.

Arthur began typing his response, knowing that his next words might determine whether his nephew lived or died:


"Hassan, I would very much appreciate discussing these historical parallels you mention. Recent events have indeed created situations where understanding the past might inform present challenges. I am available for academic consultation at your convenience, through whatever channels you consider appropriate for such sensitive historical research."

After sending the message, Arthur sat back and contemplated the magnitude of what he had just initiated. If Hassan was genuinely offering to help negotiate his nephew's release, Arthur would owe him a debt that could compromise future UN operations. If Hassan was working for Iranian intelligence to entrap a UN liaison officer, Arthur had just walked into career-ending scandal.

But as dawn broke over Lake Geneva, painting the diplomatic quarter in shades of gold and shadow, Arthur found he didn't care about his career anymore. David's life was worth more than any position, any reputation, any principle of neutrality he had spent decades upholding.

His secure phone buzzed again. Daniel's message was even more urgent than before: "Arthur, Israeli intelligence has intercepted communications suggesting imminent propaganda release. Video footage may be involved. Timeline now measured in hours. Official rescue operations being considered but success probability low."

Arthur's blood turned to ice. Video footage meant only one thing in the current context—execution footage designed for maximum psychological impact. If Iranian hardliners had decided to make an example of the captured soldiers, diplomatic intervention might already be too late.

A faint, stylized background illustration of a United Nations soldier in a desert environment. The soldier is wearing a helmet with a UN emblem and a uniform with a UN patch on the sleeve. He is holding a rifle. In the background, there are rocky hills and a small building with a dome, possibly a mosque or a traditional structure. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

He began typing a new message to Hassan, abandoning diplomatic subtlety: "Hassan, I need to speak with you immediately about recent events. Lives hang in the balance, and I believe we share an interest in preventing unnecessary tragedy. I am prepared to discuss whatever accommodation might be required to resolve this situation quickly and quietly."

After sending the message, Arthur walked to his window and stared out at the peaceful Swiss morning. Diplomats and international civil servants were beginning their commutes to organizations dedicated to preventing exactly the kind of tragedy that might already be unfolding in some remote corner of Iran.

His reflection in the window showed a man who had aged years in the span of hours—silver hair disheveled, eyes red with fatigue and worry, the careful composure of decades cracking under personal anguish.

If David was already dead, Arthur would find a way to make someone pay. His diplomatic immunity would protect him from prosecution, but it wouldn't shield him from the consequences of abandoning everything he had once believed about neutrality and professional detachment.

His nephew had chosen to serve something greater than himself. Now Arthur faced the same choice—and found that family loyalty burned brighter than any professional principle he had ever held.

The secure phone remained silent as Geneva awakened to another day of careful diplomacy and measured responses to global crises. But in a modest hotel room overlooking Lake Geneva, a man who had spent his life preventing wars began contemplating how he might start one if his nephew's captors pushed him too far.

Time was running out, and Arthur Granger—distinguished UN liaison officer and pillar of diplomatic neutrality—discovered that some things mattered more than peace.

Some things were worth fighting for.

Briefing

Greetings, Special Agent K.

A grave situation has unfolded, demanding immediate and decisive action. We have received an urgent communication from Arthur Granger, a key liaison within the United Nations, signaling a crisis that could shatter the fragile peace. Arthur has relayed intelligence of the highest priority: the reported execution of three Israeli soldiers in a valley within Iran.

This horrific incident, occurring precisely during a period of declared ceasefire, carries the immense potential to ignite a full-scale war, unraveling years of diplomatic efforts and leading to unimaginable human cost.

Our primary objective is to verify this intelligence with utmost urgency. To facilitate this, Arthur has requested immediate troop deployment. However, before any forces can be dispatched, we must pinpoint the exact location of this alleged execution.

The critical piece of information—the precise coordinates—is believed to be contained within a ciphered file. This file is directly linked to the current contract and was transmitted from a throwaway email address, meticulously traced to the IP address 188.214.181.38

Therefore, our immediate task is to decrypt this file and extract the geographical coordinates. This will enable our client to dispatch the necessary troops for physical verification of the incident, a crucial step in preventing further escalation and averting a devastating conflict.

The clock is ticking, and the geopolitical stability of the region hinges on our swift and accurate response.

Special Agent K. The Contract is yours, if you choose to accept.

Materials

ExecutionPosition.md

Answer Instruction

Find the location with what3words, make sure to use the English site.

<https://what3words.com/>

Answer format: word1.word2.word3

Answer example: pineapple.road.willow

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.

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