

The background of the entire image is a stylized, comic-book-like illustration of a city. In the foreground, a large, dark cannon is mounted on a wooden carriage, pointing towards the right. The city behind it features numerous buildings with red-tiled roofs and stone walls. A large, light-colored stone wall or tower is visible on the left side of the city. The sky is a pale blue with some white clouds.

FACTORIA

KANONNIERS

LOCATE AN OLD CANNON THAT CONCEALS
A HIDDEN MESSAGE

Chapter 1: The Amsterdam Incident

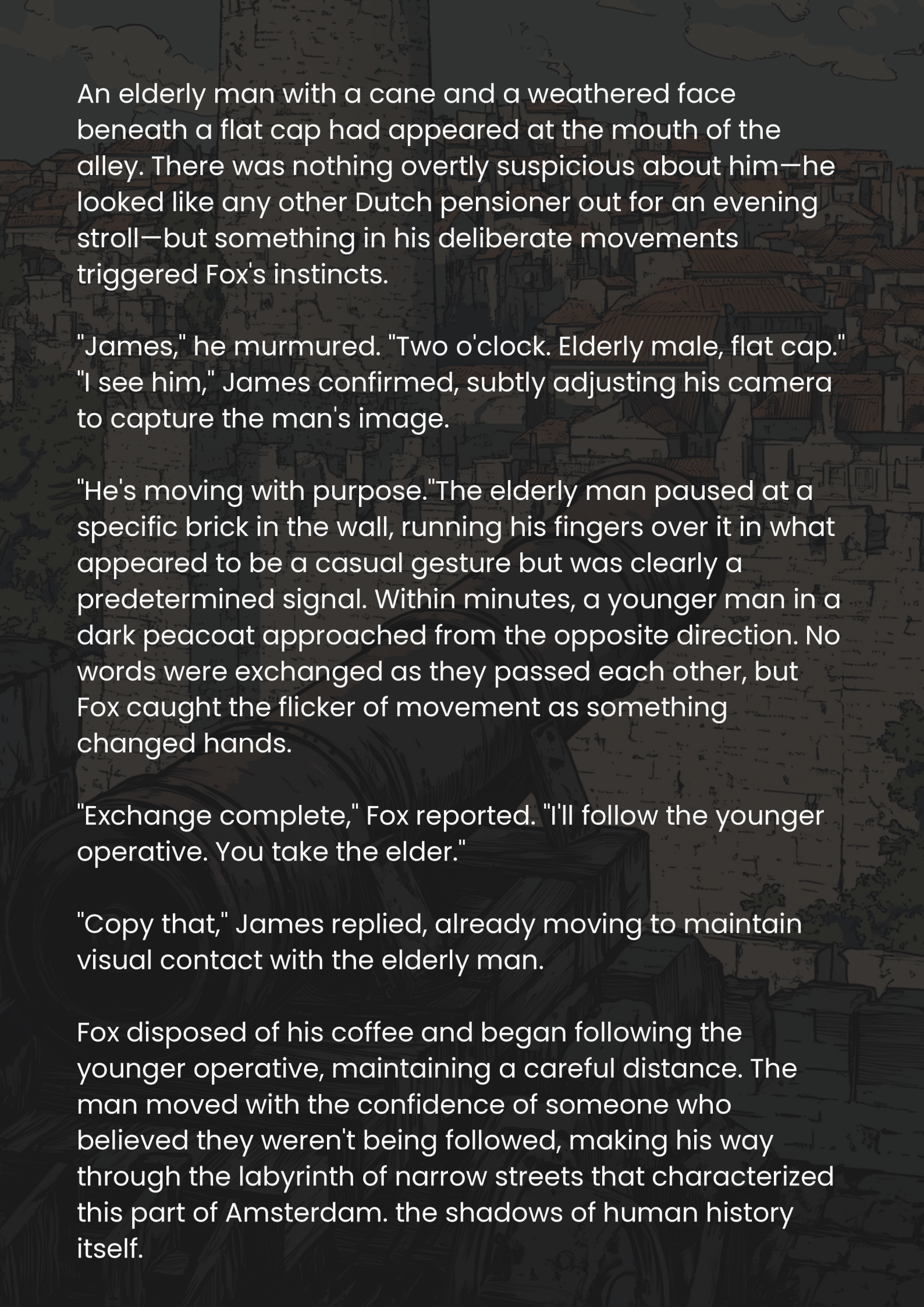
The rain slid down the ancient brick buildings of Amsterdam's Jordaan district, creating slick, mirror-like surfaces that reflected the amber glow of street lamps. Fox Meyer pulled his collar higher against the chill as he glanced across the canal toward James Brown, who was pretending to photograph the picturesque houseboats while actually monitoring the entrance to a narrow alleyway.

"Anything?" Fox whispered into his comms device, disguised as an ordinary wireless earbud.

"Nothing yet," James replied, his British accent crisp in Fox's ear. "Though our intelligence on this drop point is solid. If The Golden Creed is operating in Amsterdam, this is one of their known exchange locations."

Fox nodded to himself, taking a sip from a paper cup of coffee he'd purchased solely as a prop. As SERPENT's Extraterrestrial Liaison, he was more accustomed to dealing with otherworldly threats than hunting human targets, but Julia had specifically requested his involvement.

"There's something not quite right about this group," she had said during their briefing on Shadow Wing. "Your intuition for the unusual might prove valuable." A movement at the corner of his eye caught Fox's attention.



An elderly man with a cane and a weathered face beneath a flat cap had appeared at the mouth of the alley. There was nothing overtly suspicious about him—he looked like any other Dutch pensioner out for an evening stroll—but something in his deliberate movements triggered Fox's instincts.

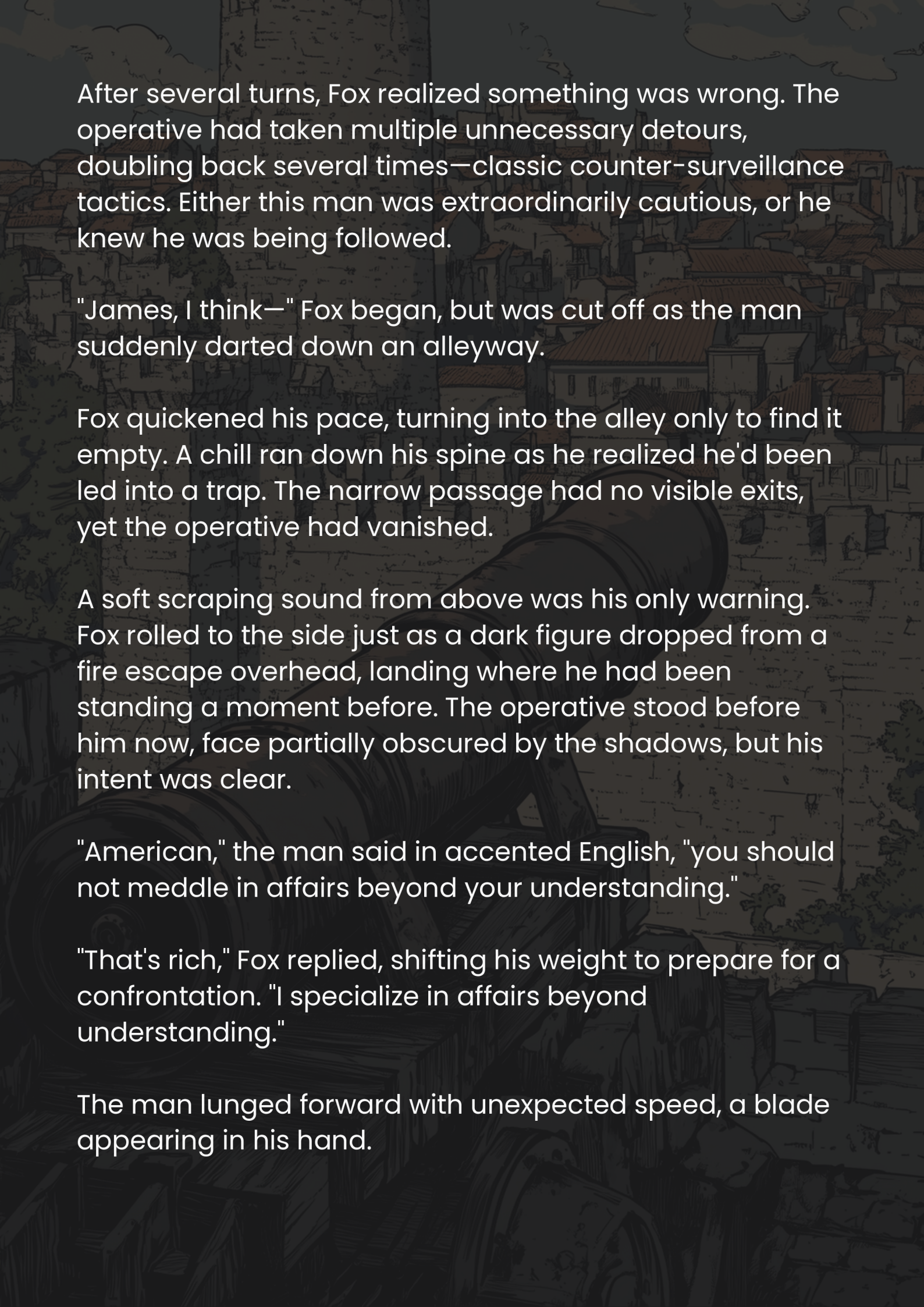
"James," he murmured. "Two o'clock. Elderly male, flat cap."
"I see him," James confirmed, subtly adjusting his camera to capture the man's image.

"He's moving with purpose." The elderly man paused at a specific brick in the wall, running his fingers over it in what appeared to be a casual gesture but was clearly a predetermined signal. Within minutes, a younger man in a dark peacoat approached from the opposite direction. No words were exchanged as they passed each other, but Fox caught the flicker of movement as something changed hands.

"Exchange complete," Fox reported. "I'll follow the younger operative. You take the elder."

"Copy that," James replied, already moving to maintain visual contact with the elderly man.

Fox disposed of his coffee and began following the younger operative, maintaining a careful distance. The man moved with the confidence of someone who believed they weren't being followed, making his way through the labyrinth of narrow streets that characterized this part of Amsterdam. The shadows of human history itself.

The background is a dark, textured illustration of a city street. In the foreground, a large, dark barrel or drum is partially visible. The street is lined with buildings, and the overall tone is gritty and suspenseful.

After several turns, Fox realized something was wrong. The operative had taken multiple unnecessary detours, doubling back several times—classic counter-surveillance tactics. Either this man was extraordinarily cautious, or he knew he was being followed.

"James, I think—" Fox began, but was cut off as the man suddenly darted down an alleyway.

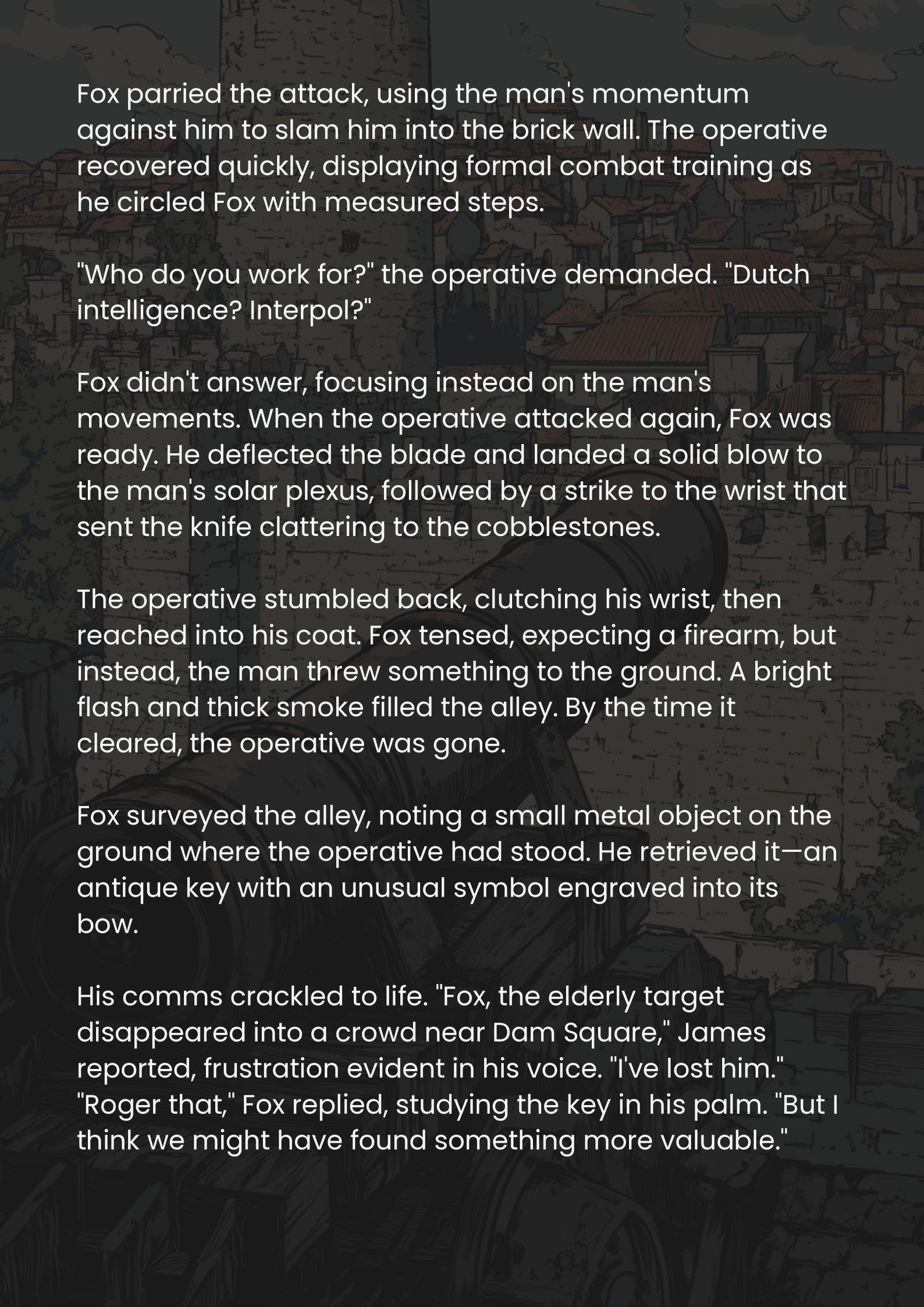
Fox quickened his pace, turning into the alley only to find it empty. A chill ran down his spine as he realized he'd been led into a trap. The narrow passage had no visible exits, yet the operative had vanished.

A soft scraping sound from above was his only warning. Fox rolled to the side just as a dark figure dropped from a fire escape overhead, landing where he had been standing a moment before. The operative stood before him now, face partially obscured by the shadows, but his intent was clear.

"American," the man said in accented English, "you should not meddle in affairs beyond your understanding."

"That's rich," Fox replied, shifting his weight to prepare for a confrontation. "I specialize in affairs beyond understanding."

The man lunged forward with unexpected speed, a blade appearing in his hand.



Fox parried the attack, using the man's momentum against him to slam him into the brick wall. The operative recovered quickly, displaying formal combat training as he circled Fox with measured steps.

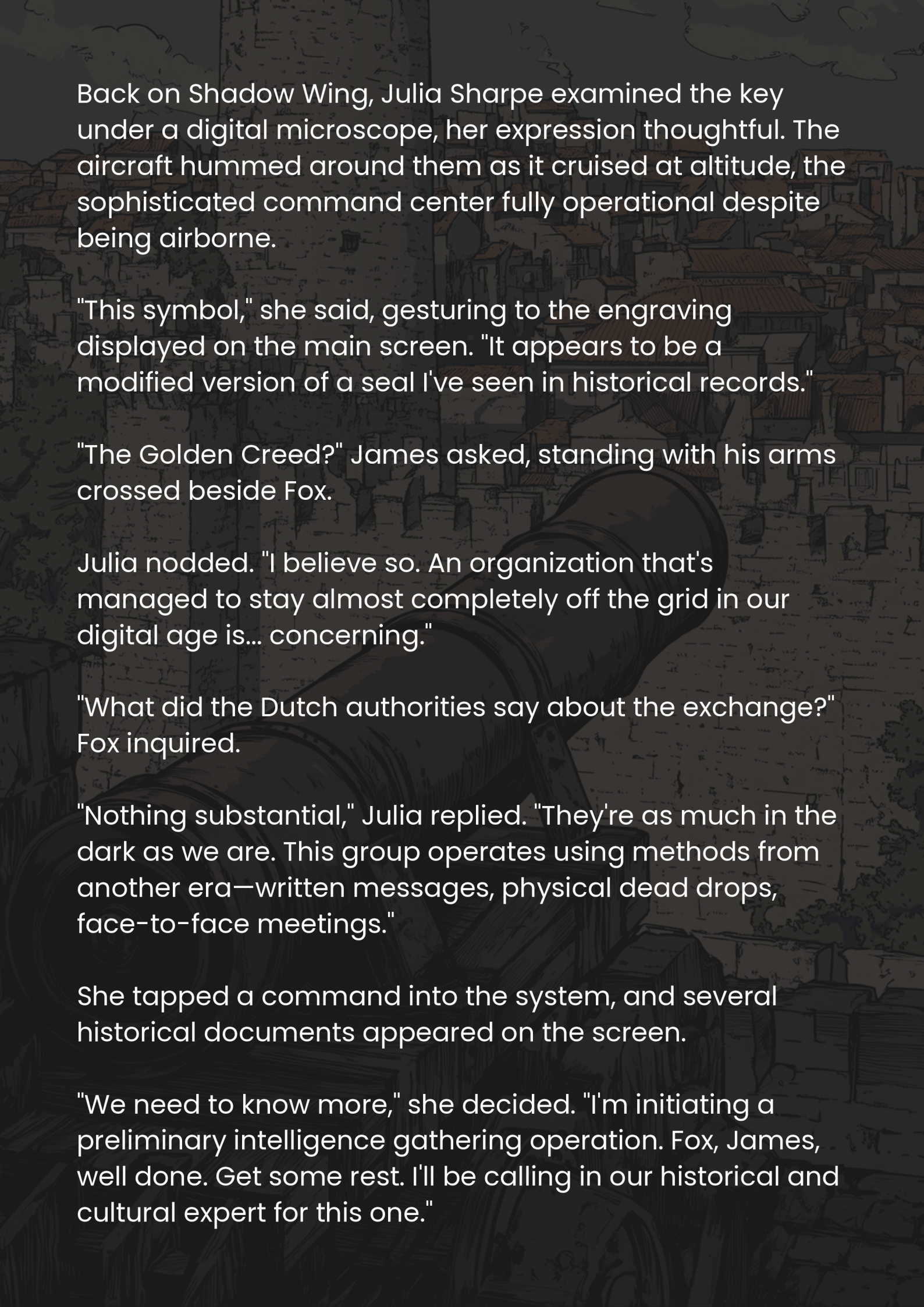
"Who do you work for?" the operative demanded. "Dutch intelligence? Interpol?"

Fox didn't answer, focusing instead on the man's movements. When the operative attacked again, Fox was ready. He deflected the blade and landed a solid blow to the man's solar plexus, followed by a strike to the wrist that sent the knife clattering to the cobblestones.

The operative stumbled back, clutching his wrist, then reached into his coat. Fox tensed, expecting a firearm, but instead, the man threw something to the ground. A bright flash and thick smoke filled the alley. By the time it cleared, the operative was gone.

Fox surveyed the alley, noting a small metal object on the ground where the operative had stood. He retrieved it—an antique key with an unusual symbol engraved into its bow.

His comms crackled to life. "Fox, the elderly target disappeared into a crowd near Dam Square," James reported, frustration evident in his voice. "I've lost him." "Roger that," Fox replied, studying the key in his palm. "But I think we might have found something more valuable."



Back on Shadow Wing, Julia Sharpe examined the key under a digital microscope, her expression thoughtful. The aircraft hummed around them as it cruised at altitude, the sophisticated command center fully operational despite being airborne.

"This symbol," she said, gesturing to the engraving displayed on the main screen. "It appears to be a modified version of a seal I've seen in historical records."

"The Golden Creed?" James asked, standing with his arms crossed beside Fox.

Julia nodded. "I believe so. An organization that's managed to stay almost completely off the grid in our digital age is... concerning."

"What did the Dutch authorities say about the exchange?" Fox inquired.

"Nothing substantial," Julia replied. "They're as much in the dark as we are. This group operates using methods from another era—written messages, physical dead drops, face-to-face meetings."

She tapped a command into the system, and several historical documents appeared on the screen.

"We need to know more," she decided. "I'm initiating a preliminary intelligence gathering operation. Fox, James, well done. Get some rest. I'll be calling in our historical and cultural expert for this one."

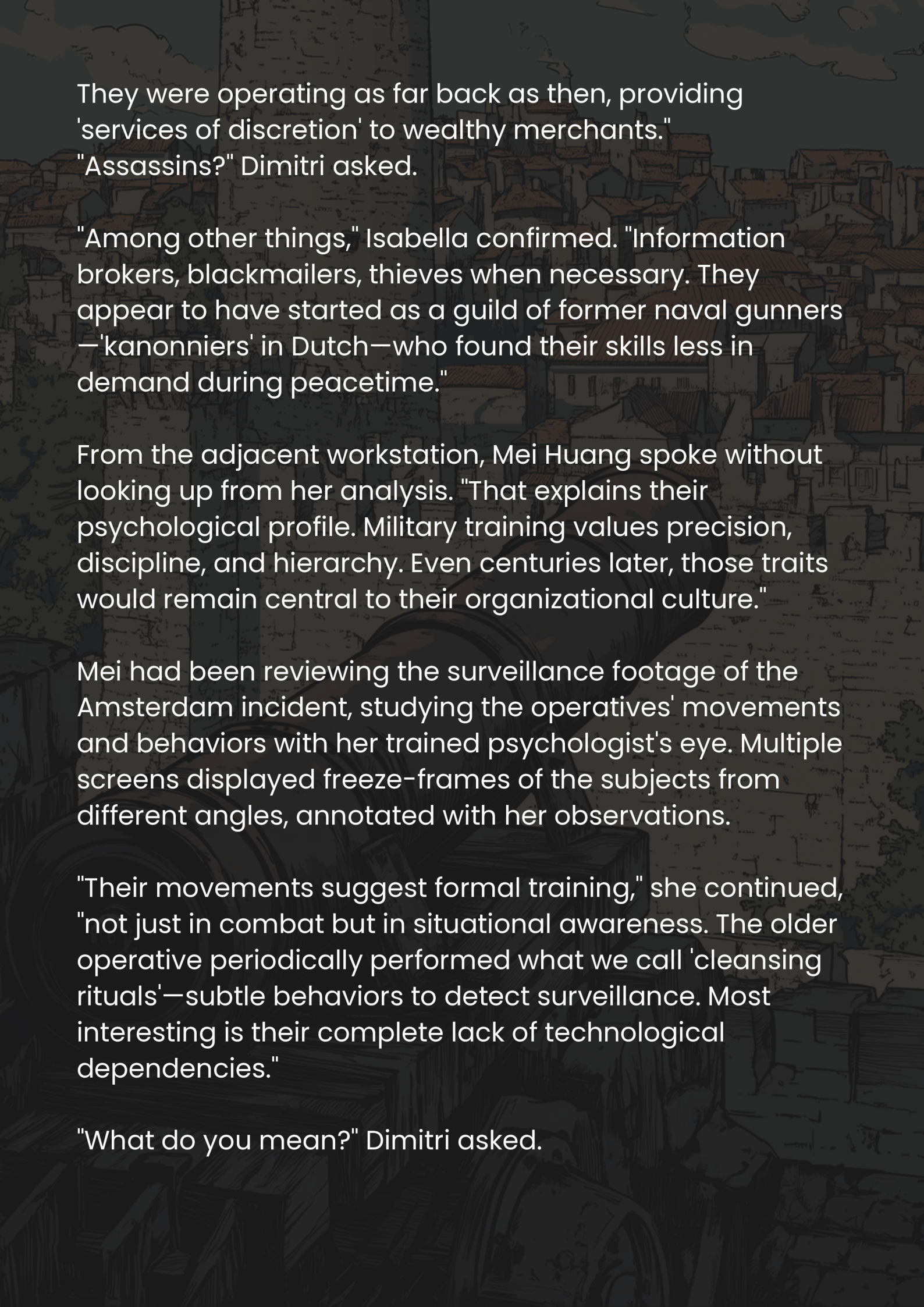
Chapter 2: Shadows of History

Isabella Moreno's workstation aboard Shadow Wing resembled an academic's office more than a spy's command center. Digital displays showed ancient manuscripts alongside modern surveillance footage, while physical books—a rarity in their high-tech environment—lay open on her desk. Her fingers moved rapidly across a touch-sensitive keyboard as she compiled information on The Golden Creed.

"Fascinating," she murmured, more to herself than to Dimitri Zechev, who was hunched over his own workstation nearby. "They've existed since at least the late 17th century, originating during the Dutch Golden Age." Dimitri glanced up from his screens, frustration evident in his posture. The Bulgarian tech expert had spent the last twelve hours attempting to find digital traces of The Golden Creed and had little to show for it.

"It's like they don't exist," he said, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. "No social media, no email communications, no digital financial transactions I can trace. In 2025, that's not just unusual—it's almost impossible."

"Perhaps that's precisely why they've remained hidden for so long," Isabella replied, enlarging an image of a centuries-old document. "While the rest of the world moved online, they remained analog. Look at this—a mention in a Dutch East India Company ledger from 1691.



They were operating as far back as then, providing 'services of discretion' to wealthy merchants."

"Assassins?" Dimitri asked.

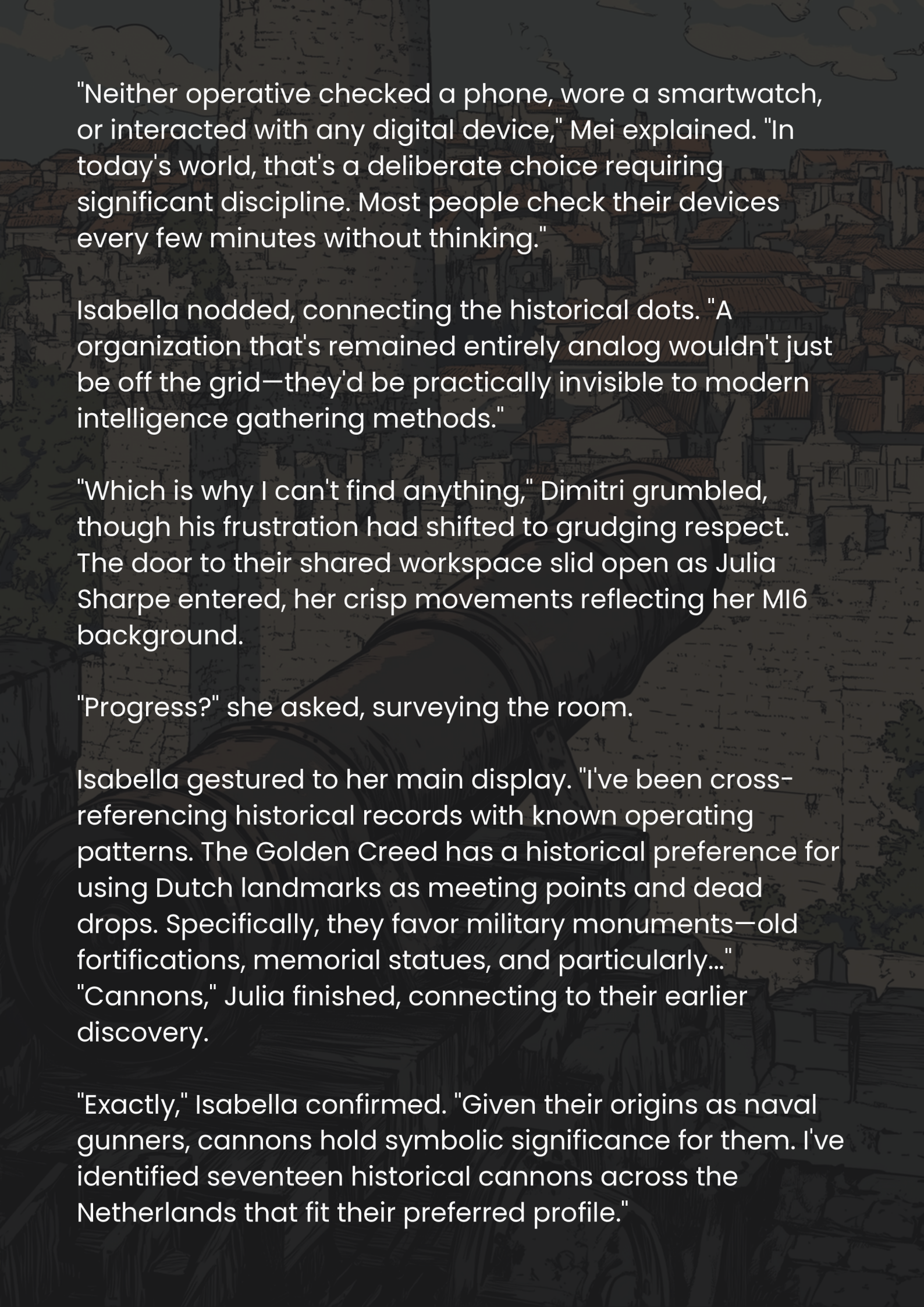
"Among other things," Isabella confirmed. "Information brokers, blackmailers, thieves when necessary. They appear to have started as a guild of former naval gunners — 'kanonniers' in Dutch—who found their skills less in demand during peacetime."

From the adjacent workstation, Mei Huang spoke without looking up from her analysis. "That explains their psychological profile. Military training values precision, discipline, and hierarchy. Even centuries later, those traits would remain central to their organizational culture."

Mei had been reviewing the surveillance footage of the Amsterdam incident, studying the operatives' movements and behaviors with her trained psychologist's eye. Multiple screens displayed freeze-frames of the subjects from different angles, annotated with her observations.

"Their movements suggest formal training," she continued, "not just in combat but in situational awareness. The older operative periodically performed what we call 'cleansing rituals'—subtle behaviors to detect surveillance. Most interesting is their complete lack of technological dependencies."

"What do you mean?" Dimitri asked.



"Neither operative checked a phone, wore a smartwatch, or interacted with any digital device," Mei explained. "In today's world, that's a deliberate choice requiring significant discipline. Most people check their devices every few minutes without thinking."

Isabella nodded, connecting the historical dots. "A organization that's remained entirely analog wouldn't just be off the grid—they'd be practically invisible to modern intelligence gathering methods."

"Which is why I can't find anything," Dimitri grumbled, though his frustration had shifted to grudging respect. The door to their shared workspace slid open as Julia Sharpe entered, her crisp movements reflecting her MI6 background.

"Progress?" she asked, surveying the room.

Isabella gestured to her main display. "I've been cross-referencing historical records with known operating patterns. The Golden Creed has a historical preference for using Dutch landmarks as meeting points and dead drops. Specifically, they favor military monuments—old fortifications, memorial statues, and particularly..."

"Cannons," Julia finished, connecting to their earlier discovery.

"Exactly," Isabella confirmed. "Given their origins as naval gunners, cannons hold symbolic significance for them. I've identified seventeen historical cannons across the Netherlands that fit their preferred profile."

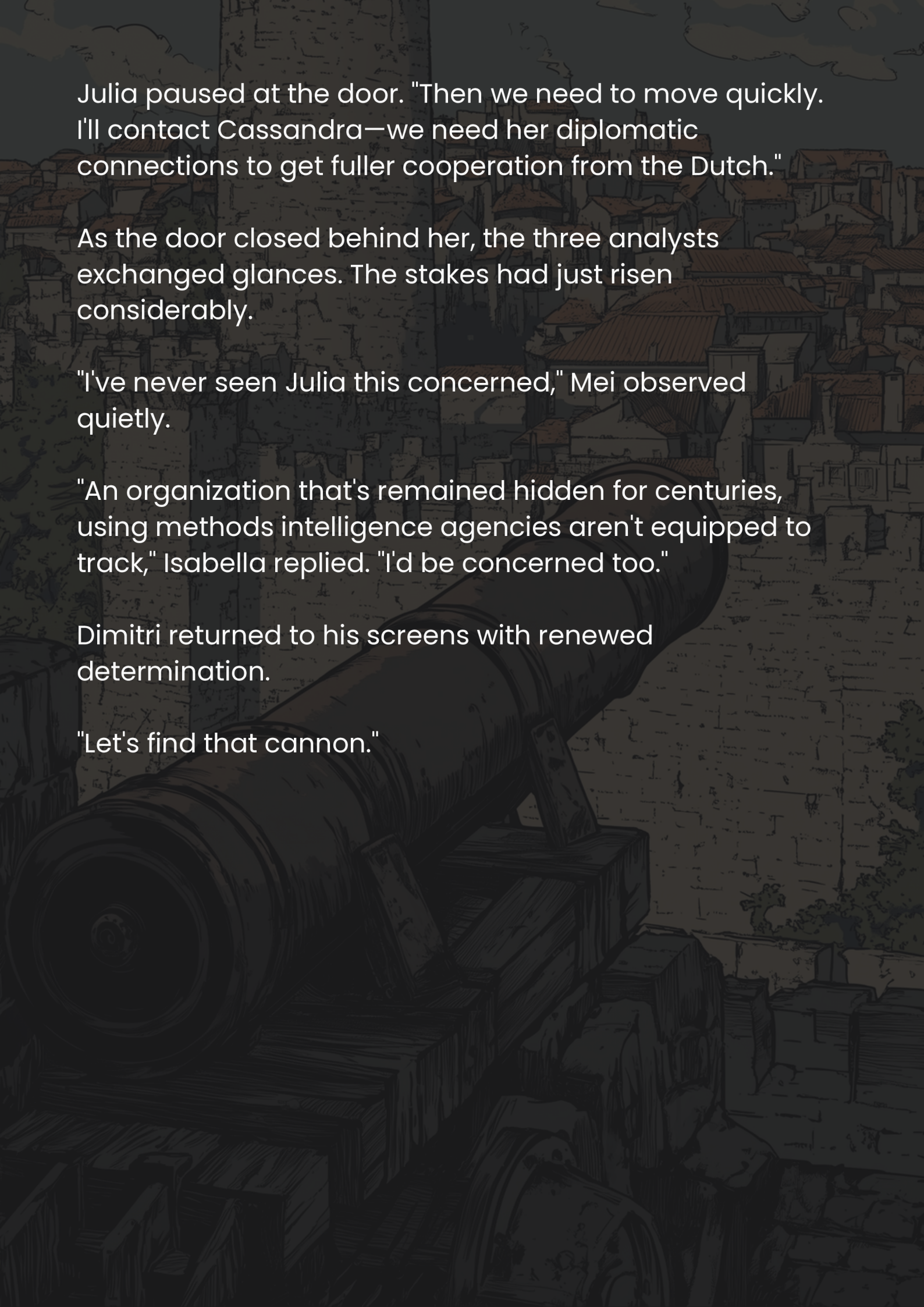
"Too many to monitor effectively," Julia noted.

Dimitri suddenly straightened in his chair. "I might have something after all." He brought up a Dutch police report on the main screen. "It was buried in the administrative system, not the intelligence database. Dutch police arrested a man last week for trespassing at a historical site after hours. They found nothing incriminating except a photograph." "A photograph of what?" Julia asked.

"An old cannon," Dimitri replied, enlarging the evidence file. "No digital copy was made—it's described as 'a printed photograph of an antique cannon, location unknown.'" Mei studied the report. "The suspect refused to speak during interrogation, and was released on a minor charge. The arresting officers noted his unusual calmness and formal demeanor."

Julia's expression grew serious. "This could be our breakthrough. Isabella, coordinate with Dimitri to identify possible locations matching any descriptions in that report. Mei, continue your behavioral analysis—I want to know how these people think."

As Julia turned to leave, Isabella called after her. "There's something else. The AIVD—Dutch intelligence—has been watching The Golden Creed longer than they initially told us. According to this secured communication I found, they once observed a member inserting a package into an opening in a monument. It contained instructions for an assassination."

The background is a dark, textured illustration. In the foreground, a large, dark cannon barrel points from the bottom left towards the center. The cannon is mounted on a wooden carriage. In the background, a dense city with many small, brown-roofed buildings is visible under a dark sky. The overall tone is mysterious and historical.

Julia paused at the door. "Then we need to move quickly. I'll contact Cassandra—we need her diplomatic connections to get fuller cooperation from the Dutch."

As the door closed behind her, the three analysts exchanged glances. The stakes had just risen considerably.

"I've never seen Julia this concerned," Mei observed quietly.

"An organization that's remained hidden for centuries, using methods intelligence agencies aren't equipped to track," Isabella replied. "I'd be concerned too."

Dimitri returned to his screens with renewed determination.

"Let's find that cannon."

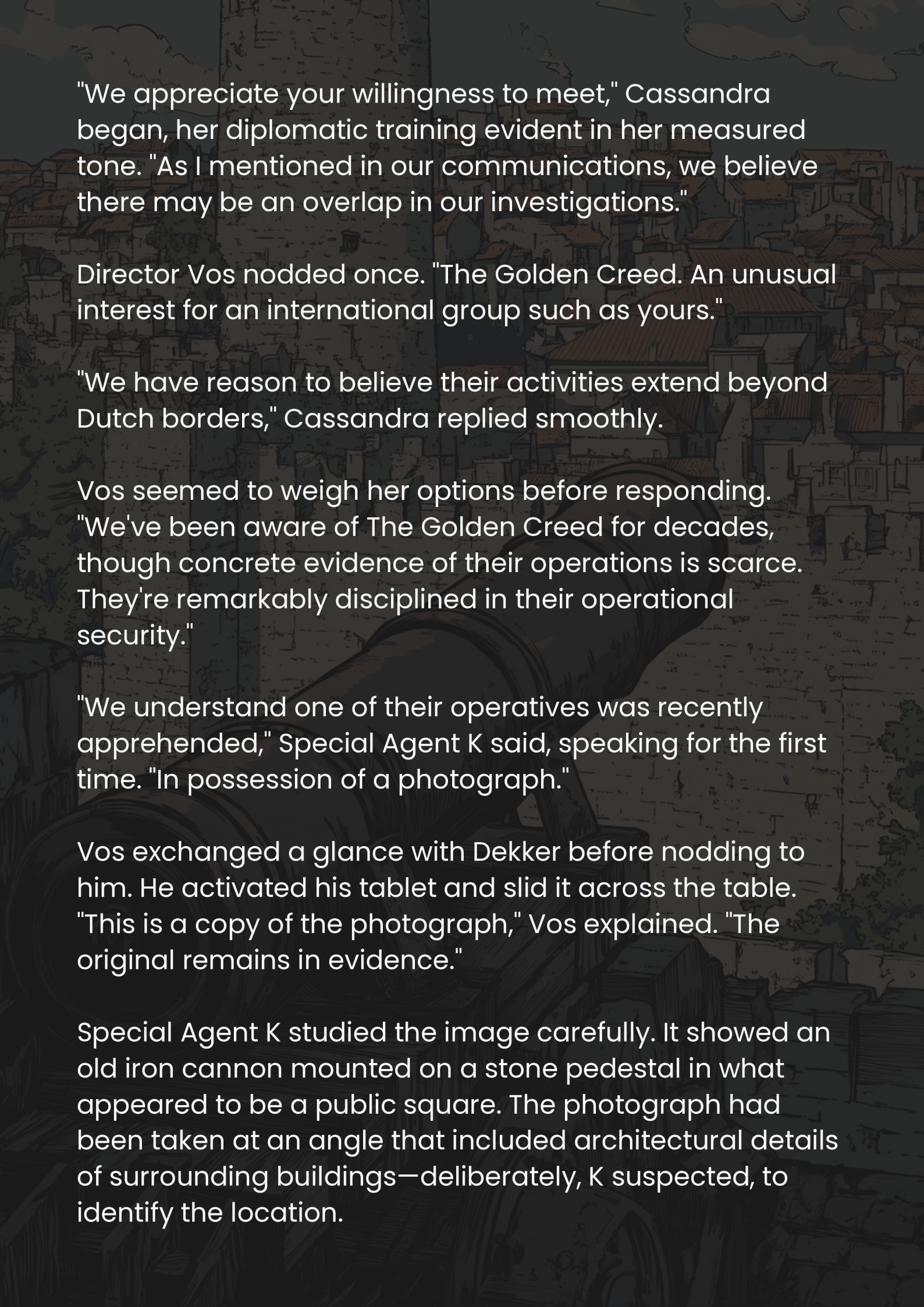
Chapter 3: The Photograph

The AIVD headquarters in Zoetermeer presented a façade of glass and steel that belied the sensitive work conducted within. Special Agent K observed the building's security measures with professional interest as Cassandra Laurent navigated the diplomatic proceedings that had granted them access. Her fluent Dutch and political connections had opened doors that might otherwise have remained firmly closed.

"Remember," Cassandra murmured as they were escorted through a series of security checkpoints, "the Dutch are naturally cautious. They've granted us this meeting out of professional courtesy, but they're not obligated to share classified information."

Special Agent K nodded. As SERPENT's specialist in Open Source Intelligence and Forensics, they were accustomed to working with fragmentary information. Sometimes, what wasn't shared was as telling as what was.

They were led to a conference room where two AIVD officers waited. The senior officer, a woman with silver-streaked hair and sharp eyes, introduced herself as Director Vos. Her colleague, a younger man with a tablet computer, was introduced simply as Analyst Dekker.



"We appreciate your willingness to meet," Cassandra began, her diplomatic training evident in her measured tone. "As I mentioned in our communications, we believe there may be an overlap in our investigations."

Director Vos nodded once. "The Golden Creed. An unusual interest for an international group such as yours."

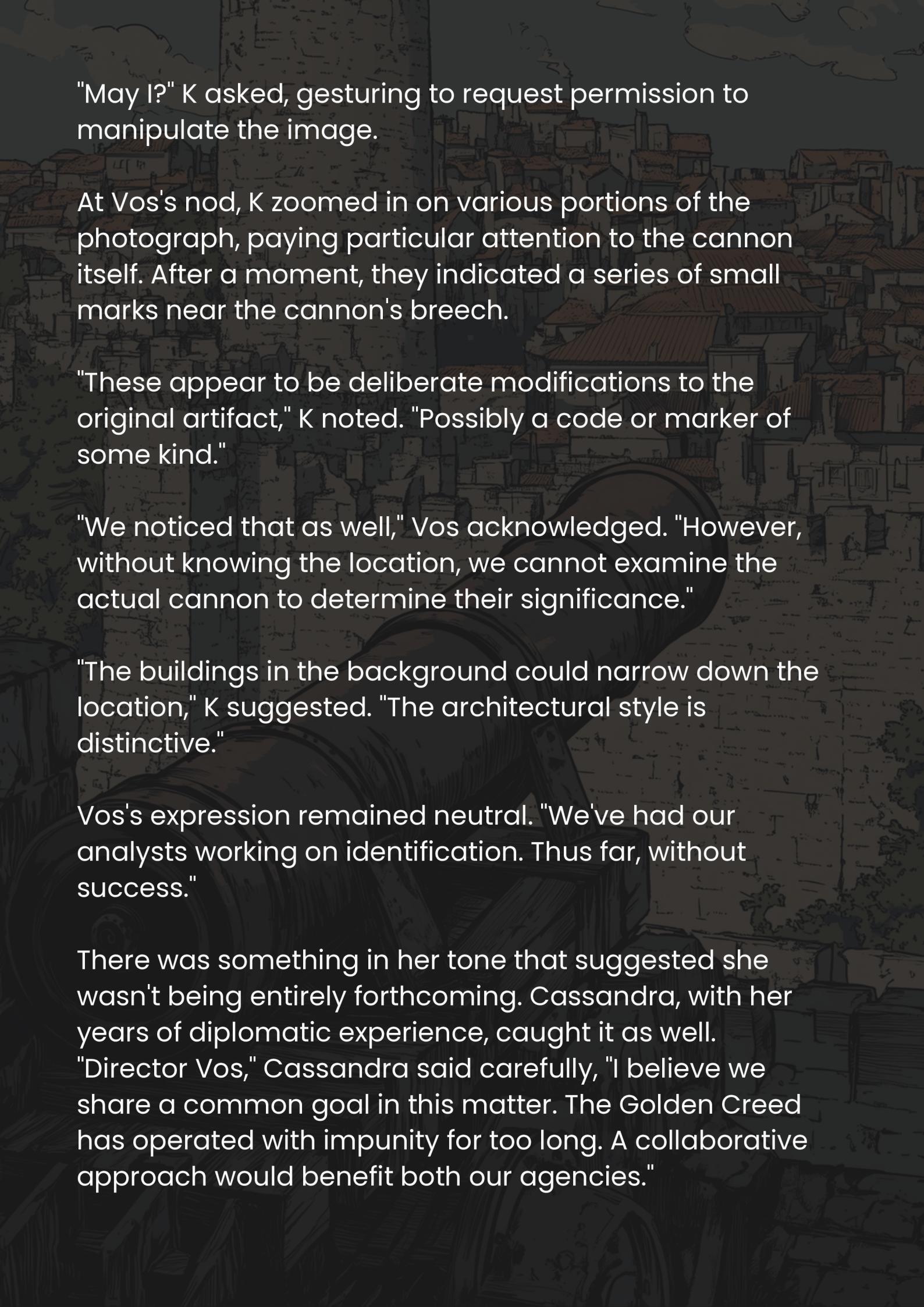
"We have reason to believe their activities extend beyond Dutch borders," Cassandra replied smoothly.

Vos seemed to weigh her options before responding. "We've been aware of The Golden Creed for decades, though concrete evidence of their operations is scarce. They're remarkably disciplined in their operational security."

"We understand one of their operatives was recently apprehended," Special Agent K said, speaking for the first time. "In possession of a photograph."

Vos exchanged a glance with Dekker before nodding to him. He activated his tablet and slid it across the table. "This is a copy of the photograph," Vos explained. "The original remains in evidence."

Special Agent K studied the image carefully. It showed an old iron cannon mounted on a stone pedestal in what appeared to be a public square. The photograph had been taken at an angle that included architectural details of surrounding buildings—deliberately, K suspected, to identify the location.

The background is a dark, textured illustration of a cityscape. In the foreground, a large, dark cannon barrel is visible, pointing towards the right. The city in the background has many buildings with red roofs, and the overall tone is dark and moody.

"May I?" K asked, gesturing to request permission to manipulate the image.

At Vos's nod, K zoomed in on various portions of the photograph, paying particular attention to the cannon itself. After a moment, they indicated a series of small marks near the cannon's breech.

"These appear to be deliberate modifications to the original artifact," K noted. "Possibly a code or marker of some kind."

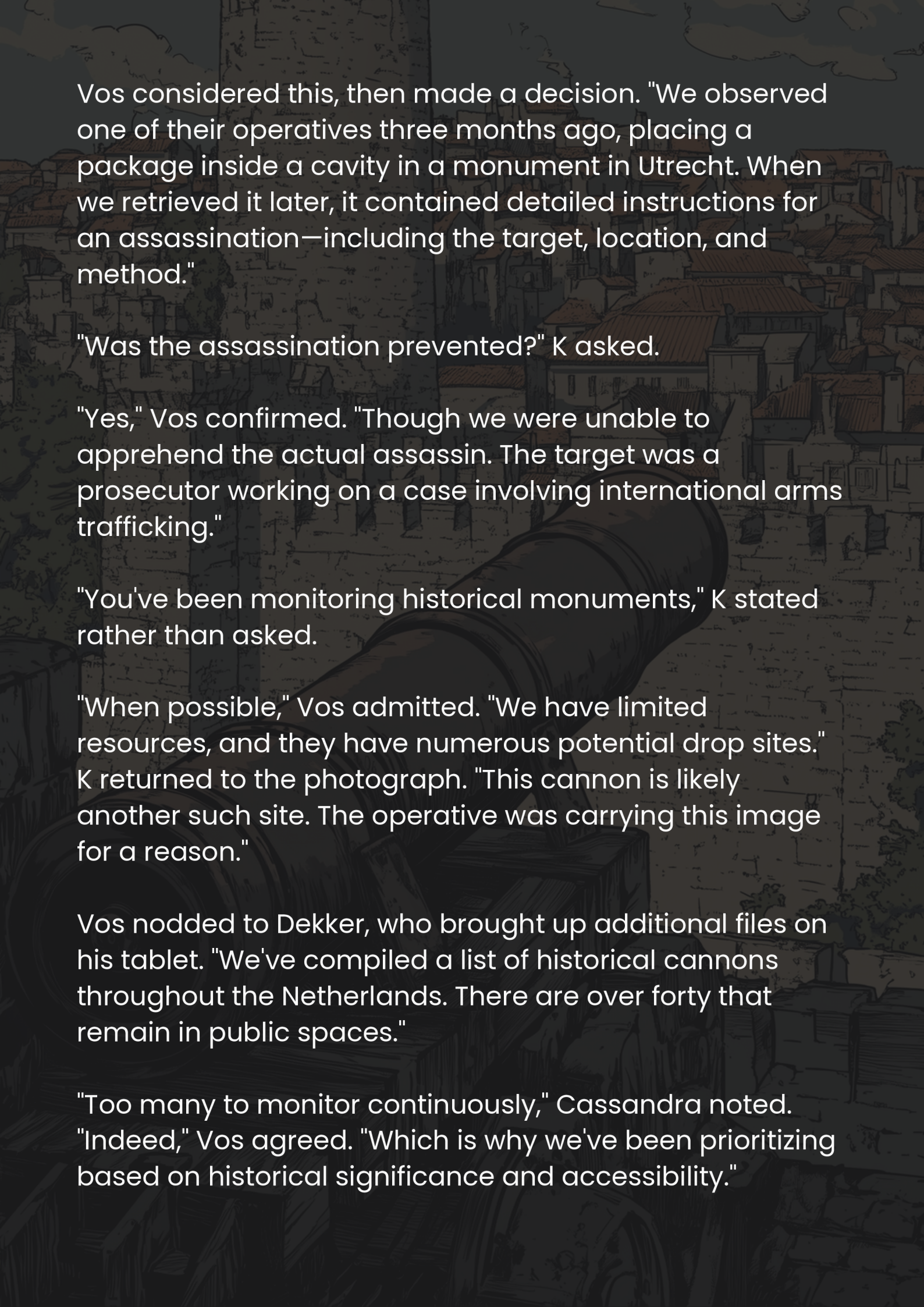
"We noticed that as well," Vos acknowledged. "However, without knowing the location, we cannot examine the actual cannon to determine their significance."

"The buildings in the background could narrow down the location," K suggested. "The architectural style is distinctive."

Vos's expression remained neutral. "We've had our analysts working on identification. Thus far, without success."

There was something in her tone that suggested she wasn't being entirely forthcoming. Cassandra, with her years of diplomatic experience, caught it as well.

"Director Vos," Cassandra said carefully, "I believe we share a common goal in this matter. The Golden Creed has operated with impunity for too long. A collaborative approach would benefit both our agencies."

The background is a dark, textured illustration of a cityscape, likely Utrecht, with a large cannon in the foreground. The text is overlaid on this background.

Vos considered this, then made a decision. "We observed one of their operatives three months ago, placing a package inside a cavity in a monument in Utrecht. When we retrieved it later, it contained detailed instructions for an assassination—including the target, location, and method."

"Was the assassination prevented?" K asked.

"Yes," Vos confirmed. "Though we were unable to apprehend the actual assassin. The target was a prosecutor working on a case involving international arms trafficking."

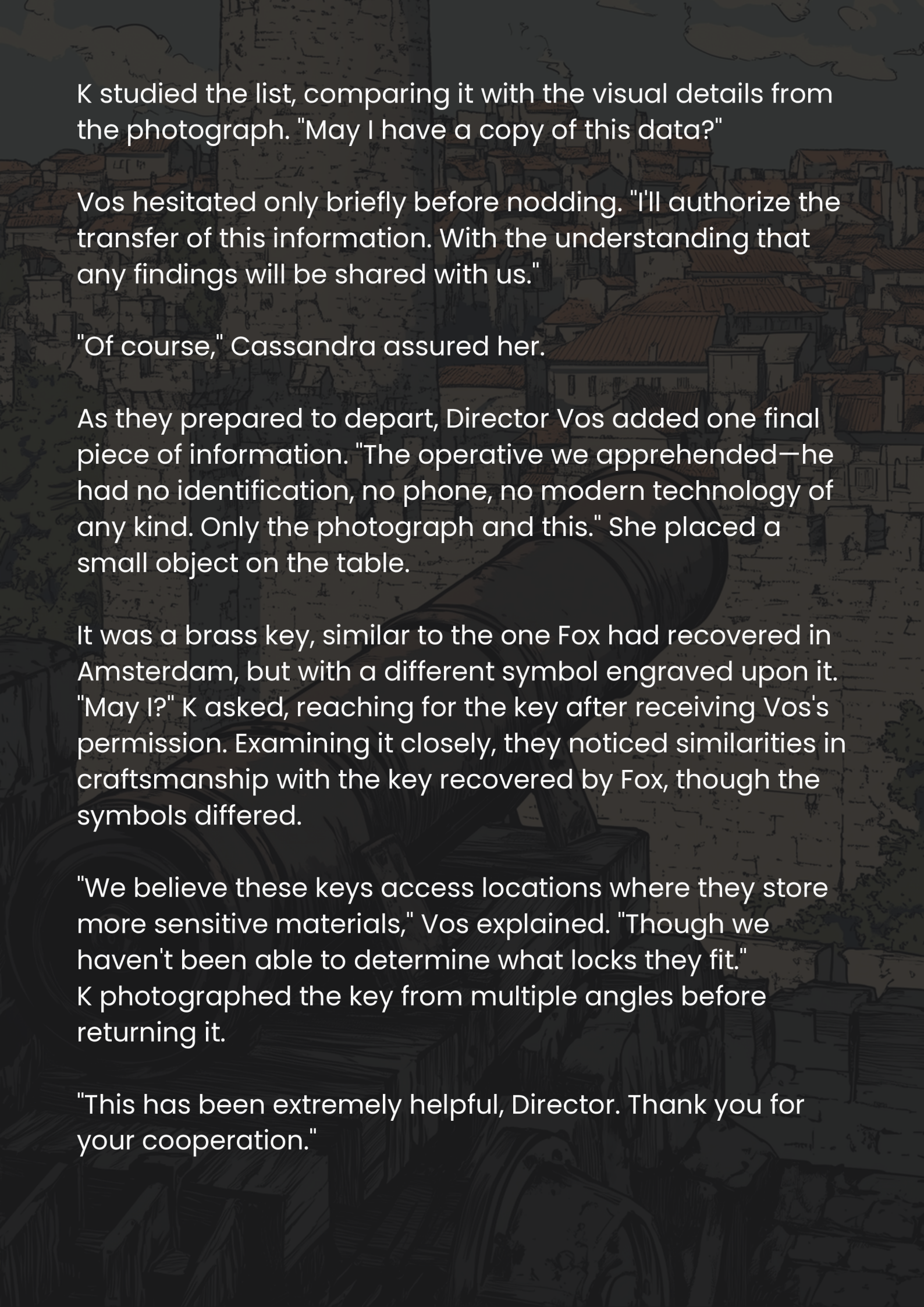
"You've been monitoring historical monuments," K stated rather than asked.

"When possible," Vos admitted. "We have limited resources, and they have numerous potential drop sites." K returned to the photograph. "This cannon is likely another such site. The operative was carrying this image for a reason."

Vos nodded to Dekker, who brought up additional files on his tablet. "We've compiled a list of historical cannons throughout the Netherlands. There are over forty that remain in public spaces."

"Too many to monitor continuously," Cassandra noted.

"Indeed," Vos agreed. "Which is why we've been prioritizing based on historical significance and accessibility."



K studied the list, comparing it with the visual details from the photograph. "May I have a copy of this data?"

Vos hesitated only briefly before nodding. "I'll authorize the transfer of this information. With the understanding that any findings will be shared with us."

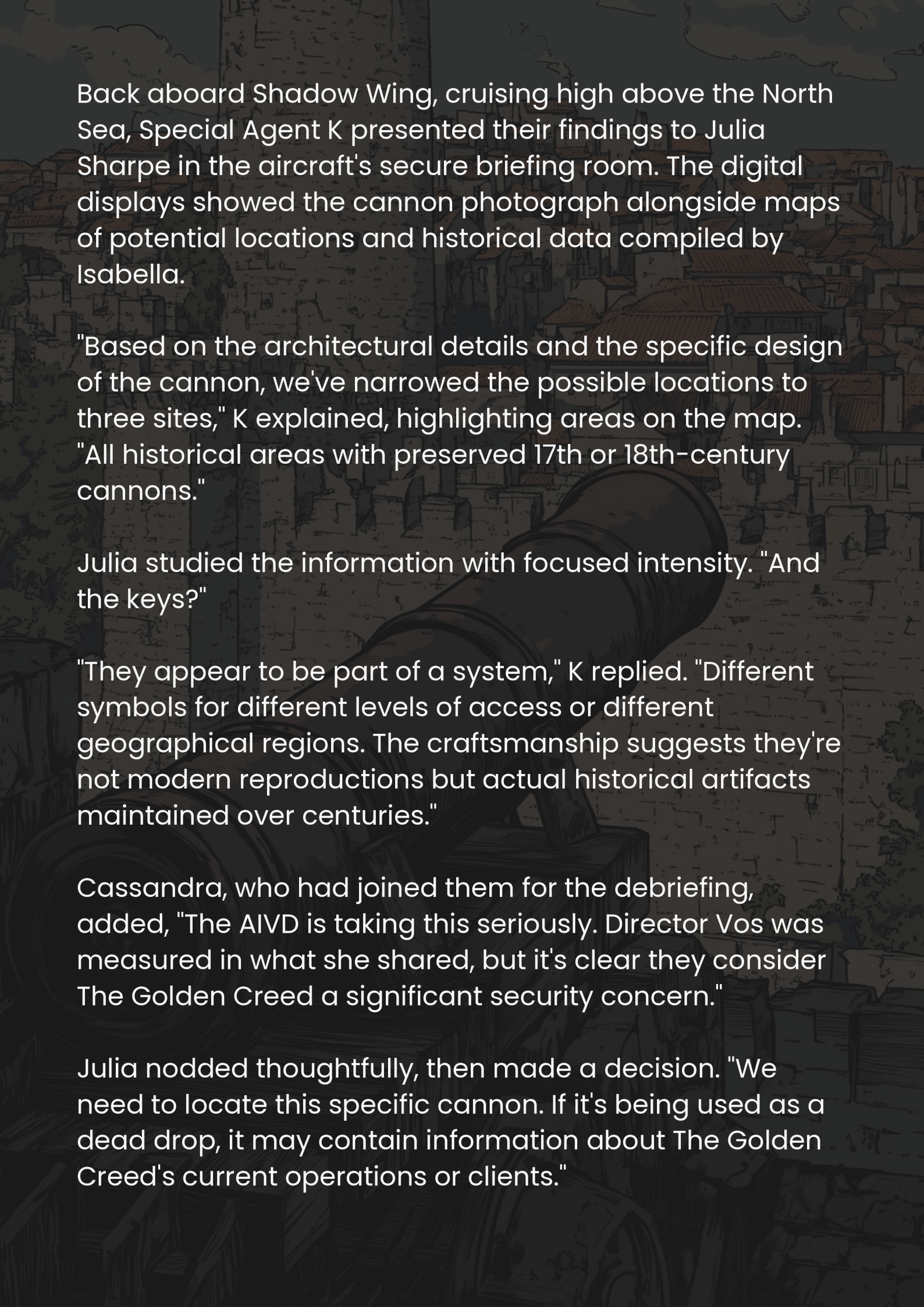
"Of course," Cassandra assured her.

As they prepared to depart, Director Vos added one final piece of information. "The operative we apprehended—he had no identification, no phone, no modern technology of any kind. Only the photograph and this." She placed a small object on the table.

It was a brass key, similar to the one Fox had recovered in Amsterdam, but with a different symbol engraved upon it. "May I?" K asked, reaching for the key after receiving Vos's permission. Examining it closely, they noticed similarities in craftsmanship with the key recovered by Fox, though the symbols differed.

"We believe these keys access locations where they store more sensitive materials," Vos explained. "Though we haven't been able to determine what locks they fit." K photographed the key from multiple angles before returning it.

"This has been extremely helpful, Director. Thank you for your cooperation."



Back aboard Shadow Wing, cruising high above the North Sea, Special Agent K presented their findings to Julia Sharpe in the aircraft's secure briefing room. The digital displays showed the cannon photograph alongside maps of potential locations and historical data compiled by Isabella.

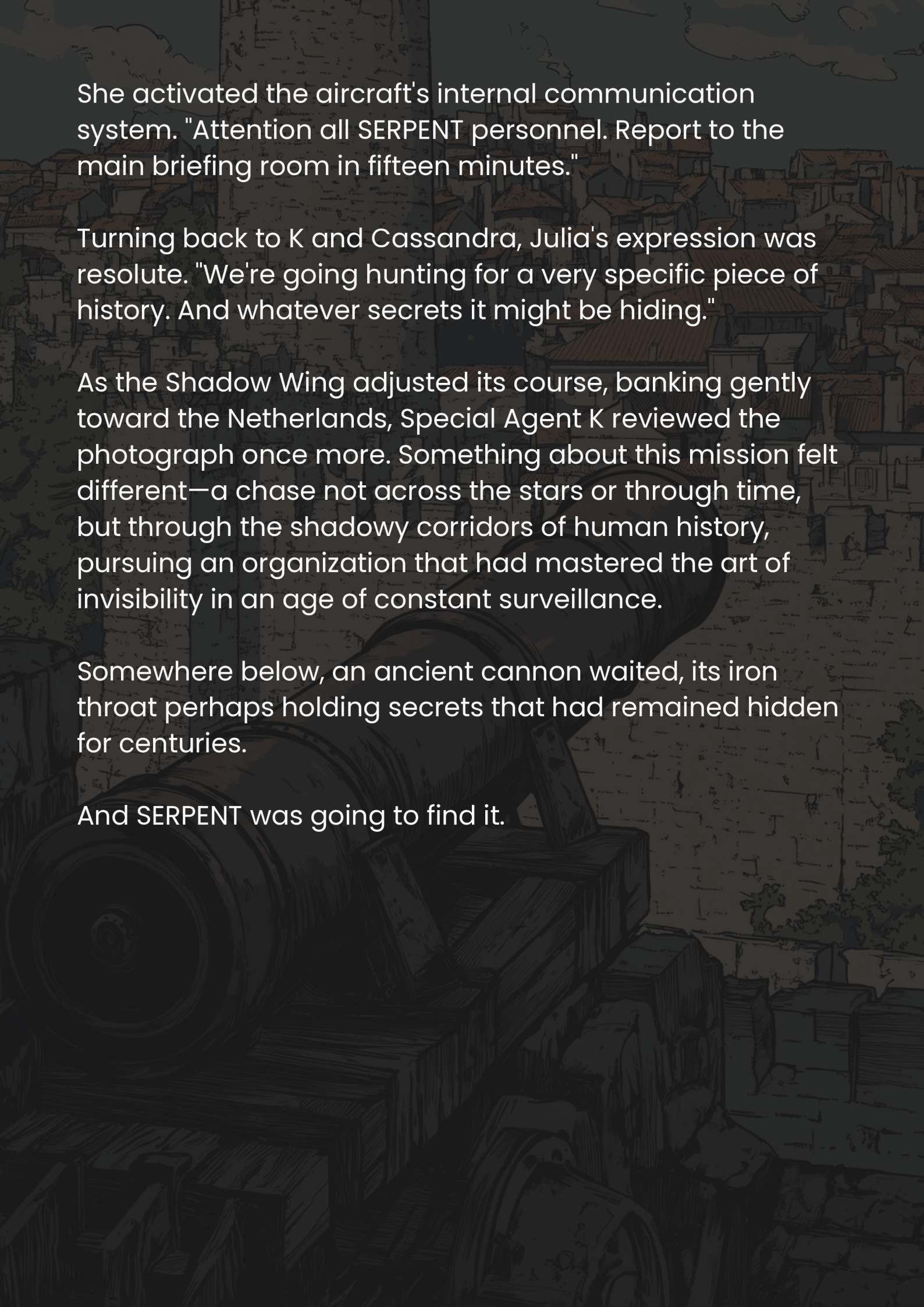
"Based on the architectural details and the specific design of the cannon, we've narrowed the possible locations to three sites," K explained, highlighting areas on the map. "All historical areas with preserved 17th or 18th-century cannons."

Julia studied the information with focused intensity. "And the keys?"

"They appear to be part of a system," K replied. "Different symbols for different levels of access or different geographical regions. The craftsmanship suggests they're not modern reproductions but actual historical artifacts maintained over centuries."

Cassandra, who had joined them for the debriefing, added, "The AIVD is taking this seriously. Director Vos was measured in what she shared, but it's clear they consider The Golden Creed a significant security concern."

Julia nodded thoughtfully, then made a decision. "We need to locate this specific cannon. If it's being used as a dead drop, it may contain information about The Golden Creed's current operations or clients."



She activated the aircraft's internal communication system. "Attention all SERPENT personnel. Report to the main briefing room in fifteen minutes."

Turning back to K and Cassandra, Julia's expression was resolute. "We're going hunting for a very specific piece of history. And whatever secrets it might be hiding."

As the Shadow Wing adjusted its course, banking gently toward the Netherlands, Special Agent K reviewed the photograph once more. Something about this mission felt different—a chase not across the stars or through time, but through the shadowy corridors of human history, pursuing an organization that had mastered the art of invisibility in an age of constant surveillance.

Somewhere below, an ancient cannon waited, its iron throat perhaps holding secrets that had remained hidden for centuries.

And SERPENT was going to find it.

Briefing

Greetings, Special Agent.

We are on the hunt for operatives of “The Golden Creed”, in collaboration with the Dutch intelligence agency AIVD.

What made this Order fly under the radar for many years, is their total aversion for the digital world. Barely dipping their toes in web 1.0, The Golden Creed uses mostly analog means of communication. Making them infinitely harder to track.

Our friends at the AIVD however once observed a member of The Golden Creed insert a package into an opening of a monument. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be instructions for a hit being placed by a client of The Golden Creed.

This leads us to your objective. Last week, an operative of The Golden Creed was arrested by Dutch police. Carrying a picture with him of an old cannon. Given their tendency to hide information in historical objects, we believe this particular cannon is a location of interest. Possibly holding information, or being frequently used to pass information. Our client has asked us to locate the cannon.

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

Materials

starting-image-kanonniers.png

Answer Instruction

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

Use your findings to generate the answer. For this you will need the service: <https://what3words.com/>

Format: areacode-city-what-three-words

Example: 5555-lyon-belt-hamburger-phone

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.