

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair and blue eyes is sitting in front of a blue, textured wall. She is wearing an orange jumpsuit with a buttoned placket and two chest pockets. Her expression is serious and determined. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

WATCHTOWER

KIDNAPPED

HELP BRING BACK THE KIDNAPPED
DAUGHTER OF A US DIPLOMAT

Chapter 1: Shadows in Paris

The spring evening enveloped Paris in a gentle embrace, the fading sunlight casting long shadows across the Seine as diplomats and dignitaries filed into the ornate ballroom of the Hôtel de Crillon. The annual Franco-American Diplomatic Corps gala was in full swing, a sea of tailored suits and designer gowns flowing beneath crystal chandeliers.

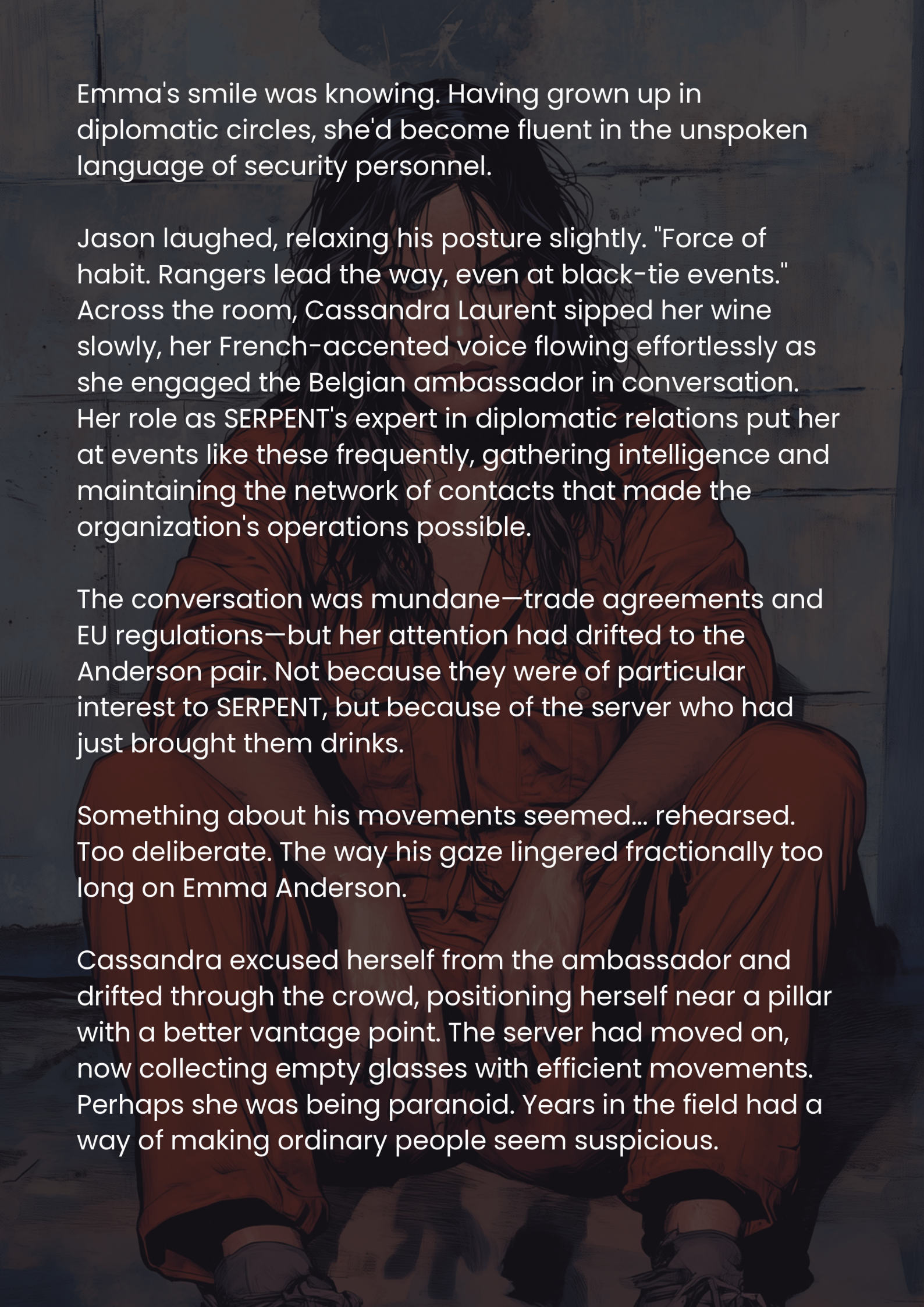
Jason Anderson adjusted his bow tie, scanning the room with the practiced vigilance of someone who never truly left his military past behind. Despite the transition from Army Ranger to diplomatic intelligence liaison, his eyes still performed automatic threat assessments, cataloging exits and potential security concerns even as he smiled and shook hands.

"Dad, you're doing the thing again," said a voice beside him.

Emma Anderson, seventeen and poised beyond her years, stood with a mocktail in hand, her dark hair cascading over one shoulder of her emerald dress. She had her mother's eyes and her father's instincts.

"What thing?" Jason asked, accepting a flute of champagne from a passing server.

"The thing where you're at a party but you're actually counting exits and sizing everyone up like they might pull a weapon."



Emma's smile was knowing. Having grown up in diplomatic circles, she'd become fluent in the unspoken language of security personnel.

Jason laughed, relaxing his posture slightly. "Force of habit. Rangers lead the way, even at black-tie events." Across the room, Cassandra Laurent sipped her wine slowly, her French-accented voice flowing effortlessly as she engaged the Belgian ambassador in conversation. Her role as SERPENT's expert in diplomatic relations put her at events like these frequently, gathering intelligence and maintaining the network of contacts that made the organization's operations possible.

The conversation was mundane—trade agreements and EU regulations—but her attention had drifted to the Anderson pair. Not because they were of particular interest to SERPENT, but because of the server who had just brought them drinks.

Something about his movements seemed... rehearsed. Too deliberate. The way his gaze lingered fractionally too long on Emma Anderson.

Cassandra excused herself from the ambassador and drifted through the crowd, positioning herself near a pillar with a better vantage point. The server had moved on, now collecting empty glasses with efficient movements. Perhaps she was being paranoid. Years in the field had a way of making ordinary people seem suspicious.



Her phone vibrated. A message from Julia Sharpe: "Check in when you're clear. Situation developing in Eastern Europe."

She typed a quick acknowledgment and returned the phone to her clutch. The server had disappeared into the kitchen. Cassandra made a mental note to mention her observation in her report, but without anything concrete, it hardly seemed worth pursuing further.

The evening progressed with speeches and toasts. By eleven, the crowd had thinned considerably. Jason checked his watch.

"I've got that security briefing at the embassy at midnight," he told Emma. "Marcel is waiting with the car to take you home."

Emma rolled her eyes. "I'm practically an adult, Dad. I could take a taxi."

"Humor your overprotective father," Jason said, kissing her forehead. "I won't be more than a couple of hours."

As Emma departed, escorted by their longtime driver, Jason didn't notice the same server slipping out a service entrance, speaking quietly into a phone.

"The girl is leaving now. Alone with the driver. The father stays behind." The photographer checked the image, then sent it with a text message: "Phase one ready. Proceeding on schedule."

Chapter 2: The Empty Room

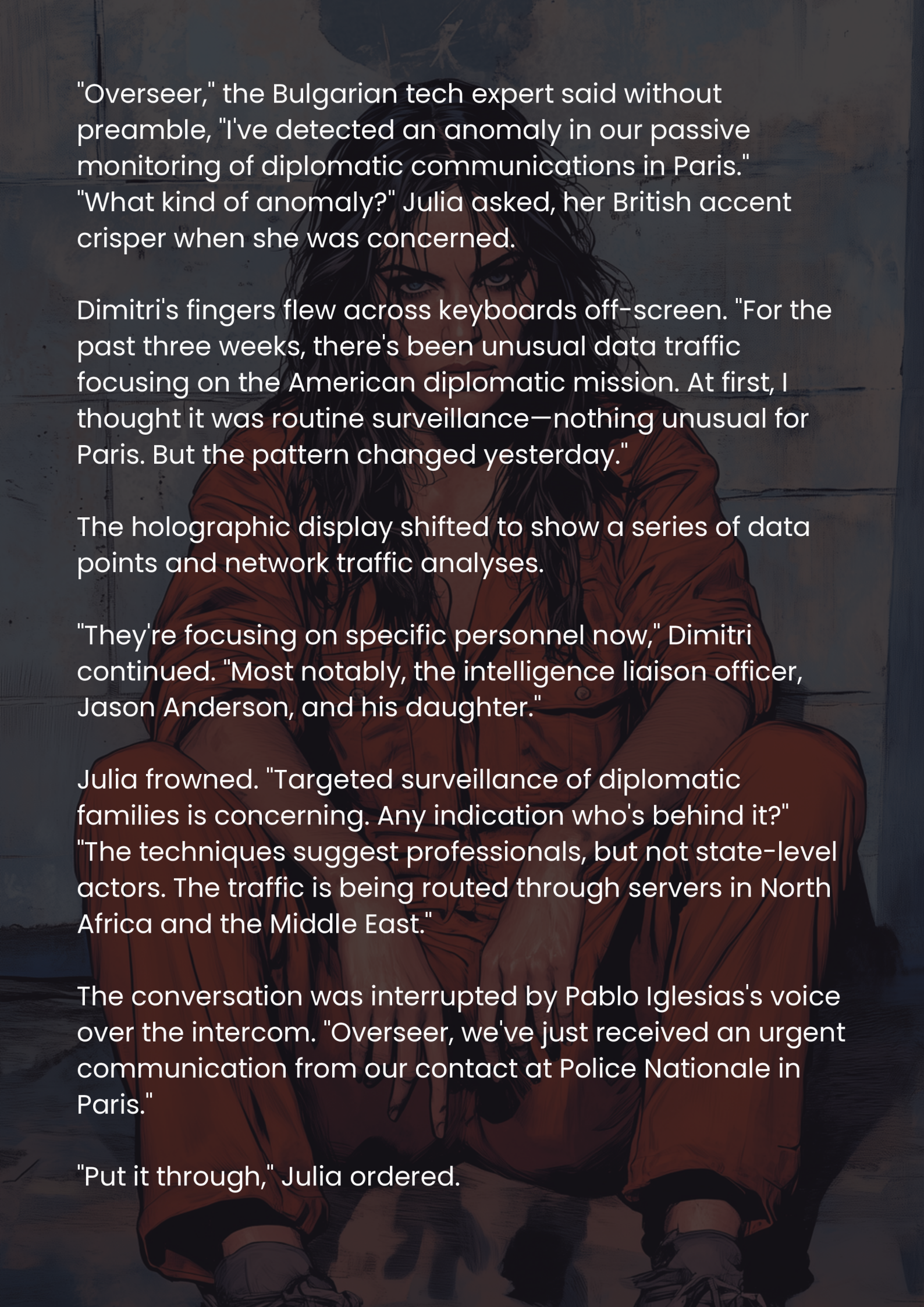
Thirty-five thousand feet above the Mediterranean, the Shadow Wing sliced through thin clouds, its modified engines barely audible inside the cabin. The Bombardier Global 8000 had long since ceased to resemble a luxury jet and now functioned as SERPENT's mobile command center, a palace of technology and tactical planning in perpetual motion.

In the mid-cabin war room, Julia Sharpe stood before the holographic command table, her tailored suit impeccable despite the late hour. The blue light of the display illuminated her features as she studied the intelligence reports with Isabella Moreno and Mei Huang.

"The arms shipment was diverted through Odessa," Isabella said, highlighting a port on the digital map. Her expertise in history and culture made her invaluable in predicting how regional conflicts might develop. "If our intelligence is correct, they're trying to move the weapons through Romania."

Mei nodded, her fingers dancing across her tablet. "The psychological profile of the group's leader suggests he's becoming more desperate. Each operation is riskier than the last."

Julia was about to respond when a priority alert flashed across the main screen. She touched a control on the table, and Dimitri Zechev's face appeared on the display.

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting on the floor, leaning against a wall. She is wearing a red jacket and dark pants. Her expression is serious and concerned. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

"Overseer," the Bulgarian tech expert said without preamble, "I've detected an anomaly in our passive monitoring of diplomatic communications in Paris."

"What kind of anomaly?" Julia asked, her British accent crisper when she was concerned.

Dimitri's fingers flew across keyboards off-screen. "For the past three weeks, there's been unusual data traffic focusing on the American diplomatic mission. At first, I thought it was routine surveillance—nothing unusual for Paris. But the pattern changed yesterday."

The holographic display shifted to show a series of data points and network traffic analyses.

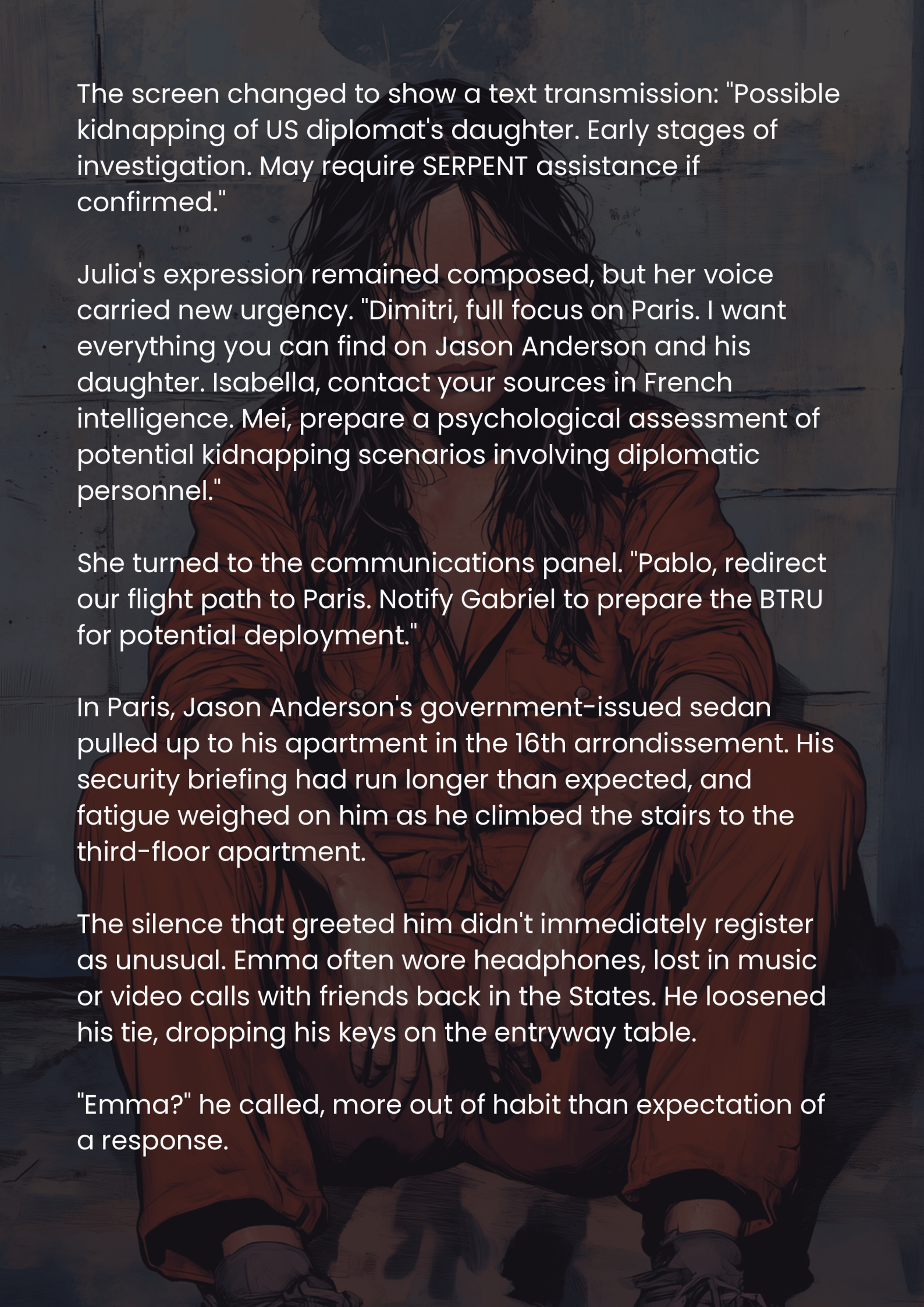
"They're focusing on specific personnel now," Dimitri continued. "Most notably, the intelligence liaison officer, Jason Anderson, and his daughter."

Julia frowned. "Targeted surveillance of diplomatic families is concerning. Any indication who's behind it?"

"The techniques suggest professionals, but not state-level actors. The traffic is being routed through servers in North Africa and the Middle East."

The conversation was interrupted by Pablo Iglesias's voice over the intercom. "Overseer, we've just received an urgent communication from our contact at Police Nationale in Paris."

"Put it through," Julia ordered.



The screen changed to show a text transmission: "Possible kidnapping of US diplomat's daughter. Early stages of investigation. May require SERPENT assistance if confirmed."

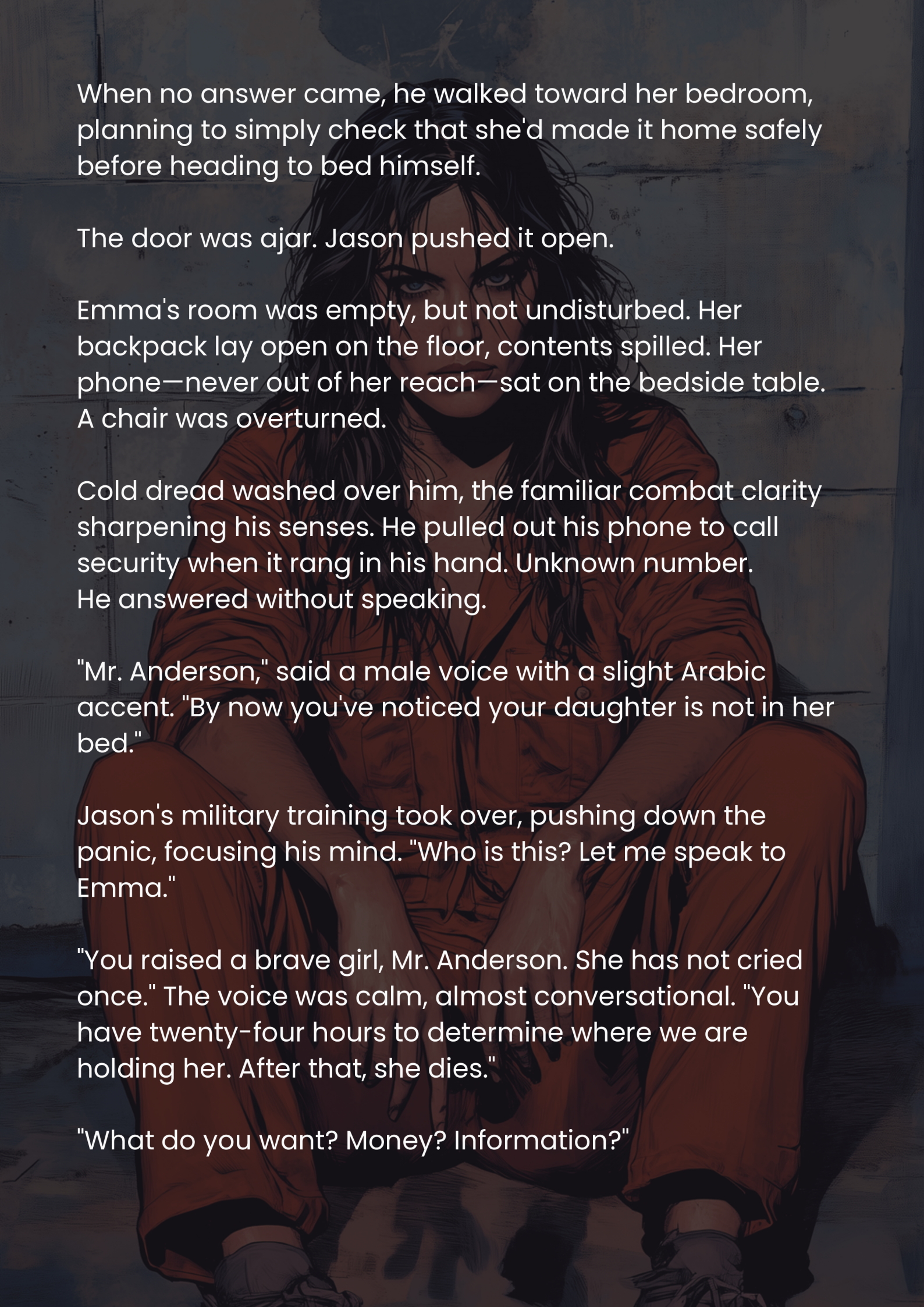
Julia's expression remained composed, but her voice carried new urgency. "Dimitri, full focus on Paris. I want everything you can find on Jason Anderson and his daughter. Isabella, contact your sources in French intelligence. Mei, prepare a psychological assessment of potential kidnapping scenarios involving diplomatic personnel."

She turned to the communications panel. "Pablo, redirect our flight path to Paris. Notify Gabriel to prepare the BTRU for potential deployment."

In Paris, Jason Anderson's government-issued sedan pulled up to his apartment in the 16th arrondissement. His security briefing had run longer than expected, and fatigue weighed on him as he climbed the stairs to the third-floor apartment.

The silence that greeted him didn't immediately register as unusual. Emma often wore headphones, lost in music or video calls with friends back in the States. He loosened his tie, dropping his keys on the entryway table.

"Emma?" he called, more out of habit than expectation of a response.

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting on the floor, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. She is wearing a red jacket and dark pants. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

When no answer came, he walked toward her bedroom, planning to simply check that she'd made it home safely before heading to bed himself.

The door was ajar. Jason pushed it open.

Emma's room was empty, but not undisturbed. Her backpack lay open on the floor, contents spilled. Her phone—never out of her reach—sat on the bedside table. A chair was overturned.

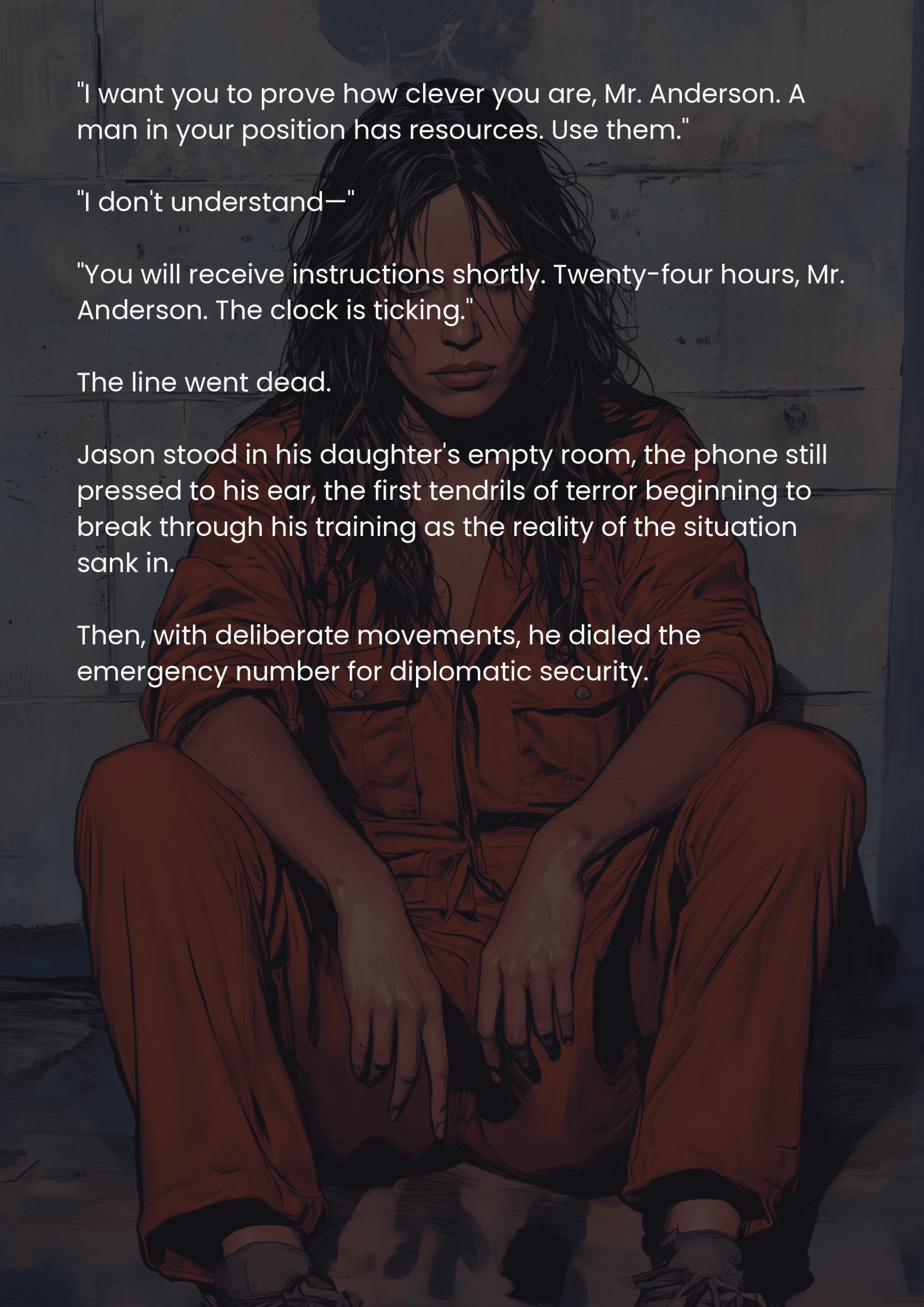
Cold dread washed over him, the familiar combat clarity sharpening his senses. He pulled out his phone to call security when it rang in his hand. Unknown number. He answered without speaking.

"Mr. Anderson," said a male voice with a slight Arabic accent. "By now you've noticed your daughter is not in her bed."

Jason's military training took over, pushing down the panic, focusing his mind. "Who is this? Let me speak to Emma."

"You raised a brave girl, Mr. Anderson. She has not cried once." The voice was calm, almost conversational. "You have twenty-four hours to determine where we are holding her. After that, she dies."

"What do you want? Money? Information?"

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting on the floor, leaning against a wall. She is wearing an orange jumpsuit. Her expression is somber and weary. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

"I want you to prove how clever you are, Mr. Anderson. A man in your position has resources. Use them."

"I don't understand—"

"You will receive instructions shortly. Twenty-four hours, Mr. Anderson. The clock is ticking."

The line went dead.

Jason stood in his daughter's empty room, the phone still pressed to his ear, the first tendrils of terror beginning to break through his training as the reality of the situation sank in.

Then, with deliberate movements, he dialed the emergency number for diplomatic security.

Chapter 3: The Cipher

The headquarters of the Police Nationale buzzed with activity despite the early morning hour. In a conference room commandeered for the investigation, French detectives huddled with U.S. embassy security personnel, maps of Paris spread across tables alongside printouts of cell phone records and surveillance camera stills.

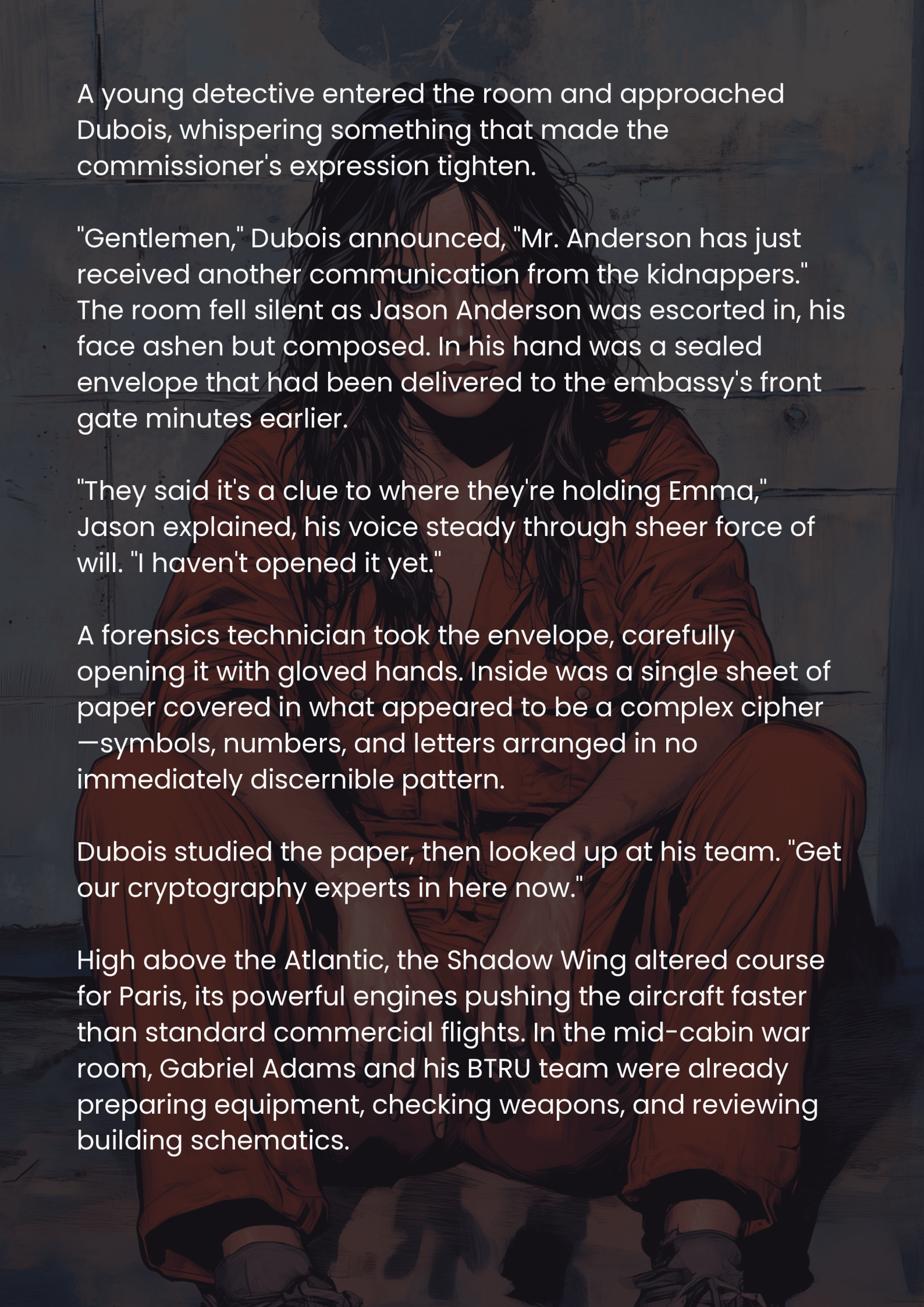
Commissioner Laurent Dubois, a veteran of the anti-terrorism unit, addressed the assembled team. "We have confirmation from the embassy's security cameras. The diplomatic vehicle arrived at Anderson's residence at 11:42 PM. The driver, Marcel Benoit, escorted Miss Anderson to the building entrance as per protocol."

He tapped a grainy image showing Emma and an older man at the apartment building's door.

"Marcel reports that he waited until she entered the security door, then departed. This is standard procedure and matches the security footage."

"So she was taken from inside the building," said a U.S. embassy security officer. "What about the building's security cameras?"

"Disabled," Dubois replied grimly. "Professionally done. No footage from inside the building between 11:40 PM and 1:15 AM. By then, she was gone."

A person with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting on the ground, leaning against a wall. They are wearing a red jacket and dark pants. Their face is partially obscured by their hair and the shadows of the wall behind them. The background is a textured, greyish wall.

A young detective entered the room and approached Dubois, whispering something that made the commissioner's expression tighten.

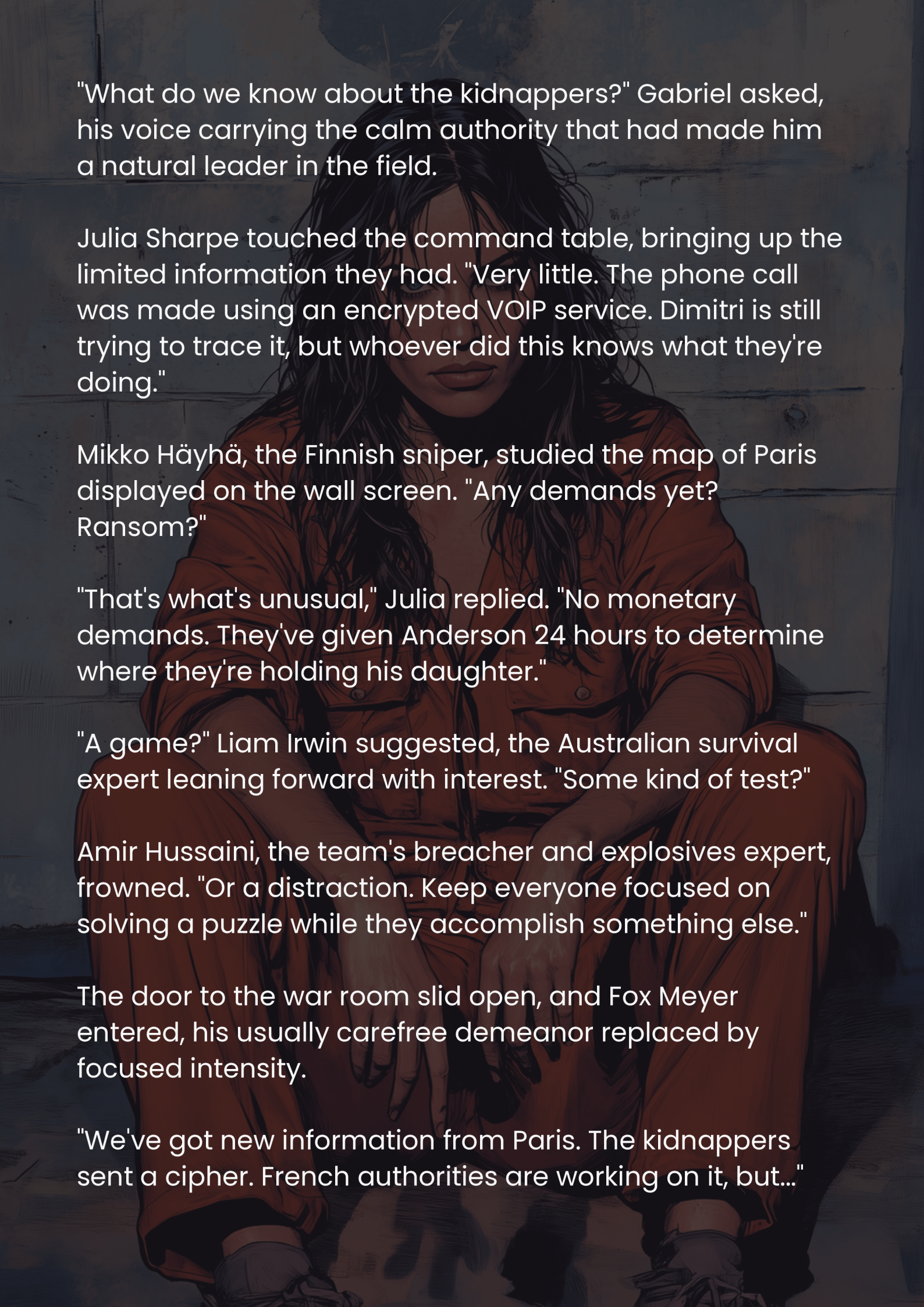
"Gentlemen," Dubois announced, "Mr. Anderson has just received another communication from the kidnappers." The room fell silent as Jason Anderson was escorted in, his face ashen but composed. In his hand was a sealed envelope that had been delivered to the embassy's front gate minutes earlier.

"They said it's a clue to where they're holding Emma," Jason explained, his voice steady through sheer force of will. "I haven't opened it yet."

A forensics technician took the envelope, carefully opening it with gloved hands. Inside was a single sheet of paper covered in what appeared to be a complex cipher—symbols, numbers, and letters arranged in no immediately discernible pattern.

Dubois studied the paper, then looked up at his team. "Get our cryptography experts in here now."

High above the Atlantic, the Shadow Wing altered course for Paris, its powerful engines pushing the aircraft faster than standard commercial flights. In the mid-cabin war room, Gabriel Adams and his BTRU team were already preparing equipment, checking weapons, and reviewing building schematics.



"What do we know about the kidnappers?" Gabriel asked, his voice carrying the calm authority that had made him a natural leader in the field.

Julia Sharpe touched the command table, bringing up the limited information they had. "Very little. The phone call was made using an encrypted VOIP service. Dimitri is still trying to trace it, but whoever did this knows what they're doing."

Mikko Häyhä, the Finnish sniper, studied the map of Paris displayed on the wall screen. "Any demands yet? Ransom?"

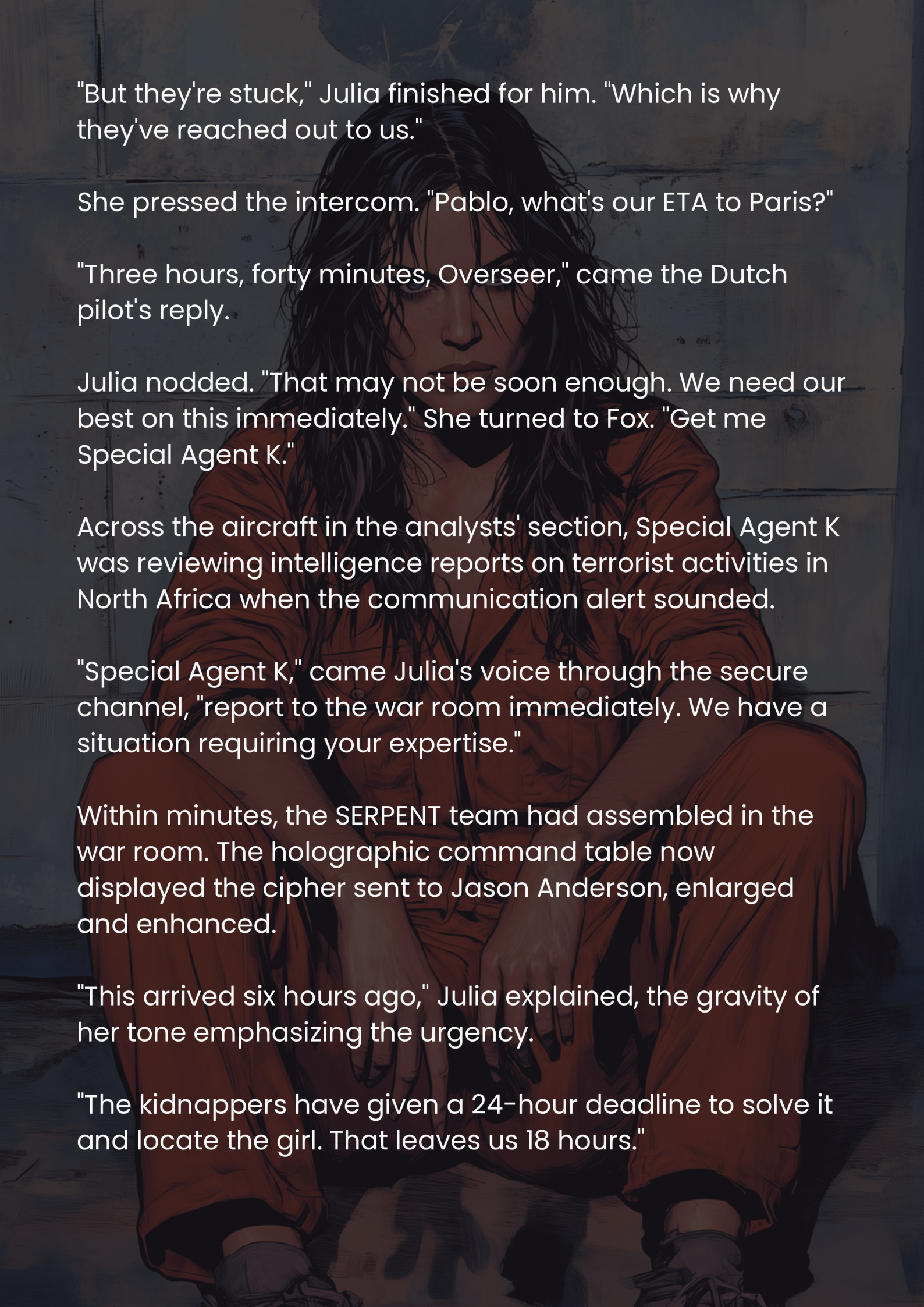
"That's what's unusual," Julia replied. "No monetary demands. They've given Anderson 24 hours to determine where they're holding his daughter."

"A game?" Liam Irwin suggested, the Australian survival expert leaning forward with interest. "Some kind of test?"

Amir Hussaini, the team's breacher and explosives expert, frowned. "Or a distraction. Keep everyone focused on solving a puzzle while they accomplish something else."

The door to the war room slid open, and Fox Meyer entered, his usually carefree demeanor replaced by focused intensity.

"We've got new information from Paris. The kidnappers sent a cipher. French authorities are working on it, but..."

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is sitting on the floor of what appears to be an aircraft. She is wearing an orange jumpsuit. Her expression is serious and focused. The background is a metallic, grey surface, likely the interior of a plane.

"But they're stuck," Julia finished for him. "Which is why they've reached out to us."

She pressed the intercom. "Pablo, what's our ETA to Paris?"

"Three hours, forty minutes, Overseer," came the Dutch pilot's reply.

Julia nodded. "That may not be soon enough. We need our best on this immediately." She turned to Fox. "Get me Special Agent K."

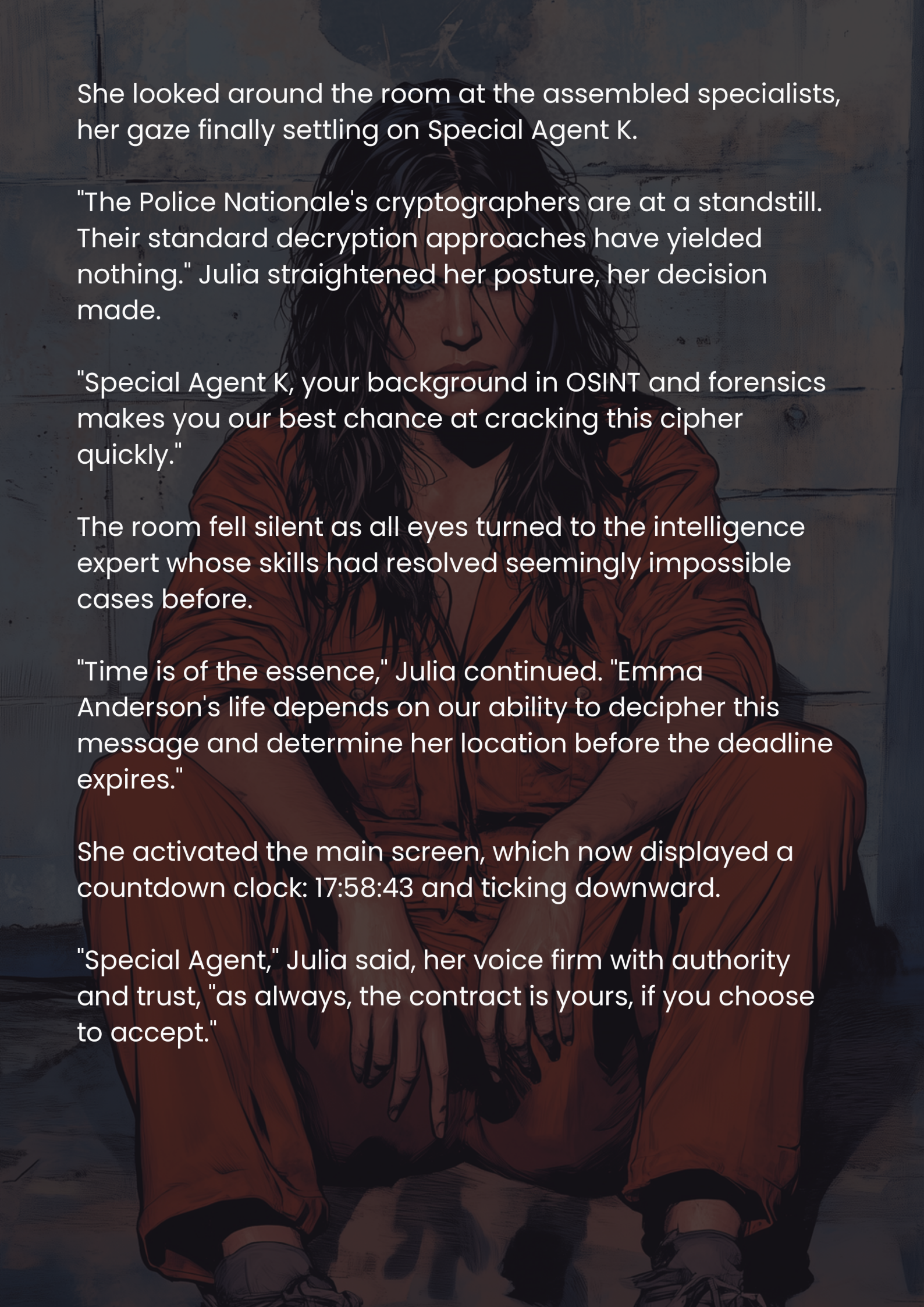
Across the aircraft in the analysts' section, Special Agent K was reviewing intelligence reports on terrorist activities in North Africa when the communication alert sounded.

"Special Agent K," came Julia's voice through the secure channel, "report to the war room immediately. We have a situation requiring your expertise."

Within minutes, the SERPENT team had assembled in the war room. The holographic command table now displayed the cipher sent to Jason Anderson, enlarged and enhanced.

"This arrived six hours ago," Julia explained, the gravity of her tone emphasizing the urgency.

"The kidnappers have given a 24-hour deadline to solve it and locate the girl. That leaves us 18 hours."



She looked around the room at the assembled specialists, her gaze finally settling on Special Agent K.

"The Police Nationale's cryptographers are at a standstill. Their standard decryption approaches have yielded nothing." Julia straightened her posture, her decision made.

"Special Agent K, your background in OSINT and forensics makes you our best chance at cracking this cipher quickly."

The room fell silent as all eyes turned to the intelligence expert whose skills had resolved seemingly impossible cases before.

"Time is of the essence," Julia continued. "Emma Anderson's life depends on our ability to decipher this message and determine her location before the deadline expires."

She activated the main screen, which now displayed a countdown clock: 17:58:43 and ticking downward.

"Special Agent," Julia said, her voice firm with authority and trust, "as always, the contract is yours, if you choose to accept."

Briefing



Greetings, Special Agent.

We have an urgent case on our hands. Our friends at the Police Nationale, in Paris France, have reached out for our assistance. It's a case concerning the daughter of a US diplomat residing in France. Recently, Jason Anderson, a former officer with the United States Army Rangers, now diplomat assigned as an intelligence liaison in Paris, received a phone call stating his daughter had been taken. Shortly after, Mr Anderson received a written message in cipher text. We have reason to believe they are closely related.

During the phone call, a man with an Arabic accent spoke to Mr Anderson about having his daughter in captivity. Also stating he has 24 hours to figure out where she is, before he would kill her. Now, this interaction happened 6 hours ago, between that time Mr Anderson contacted police, who reached out to us a few hours after getting stuck on the cipher text.

Your assignment is simple, over the next several hours, figure out what the message is behind the cipher text. We need answers quickly, so the police is left with enough time to intervene.

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

Materials

starting-text-kidnapped.txt

Answer Instruction

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

The answer is a what3words combination

Example answer: banana.truck.hairdresser

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.