

A stylized illustration of a man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie. He is standing in front of a mosque with ornate golden domes and arches. The background is a warm, golden-brown color. The man is looking slightly to the left. The overall style is reminiscent of a comic book or a high-end magazine cover.

HAZARDOUS

OPERATION BLOODHOUND

Chapter 1: Shadow in Vienna

The chandeliers of Vienna's Palais Coburg cast a warm glow over the assembled elite. Crystal glasses clinked, quiet laughter bubbled through the room, and millions of euros in illicit deals were being negotiated behind practiced smiles.

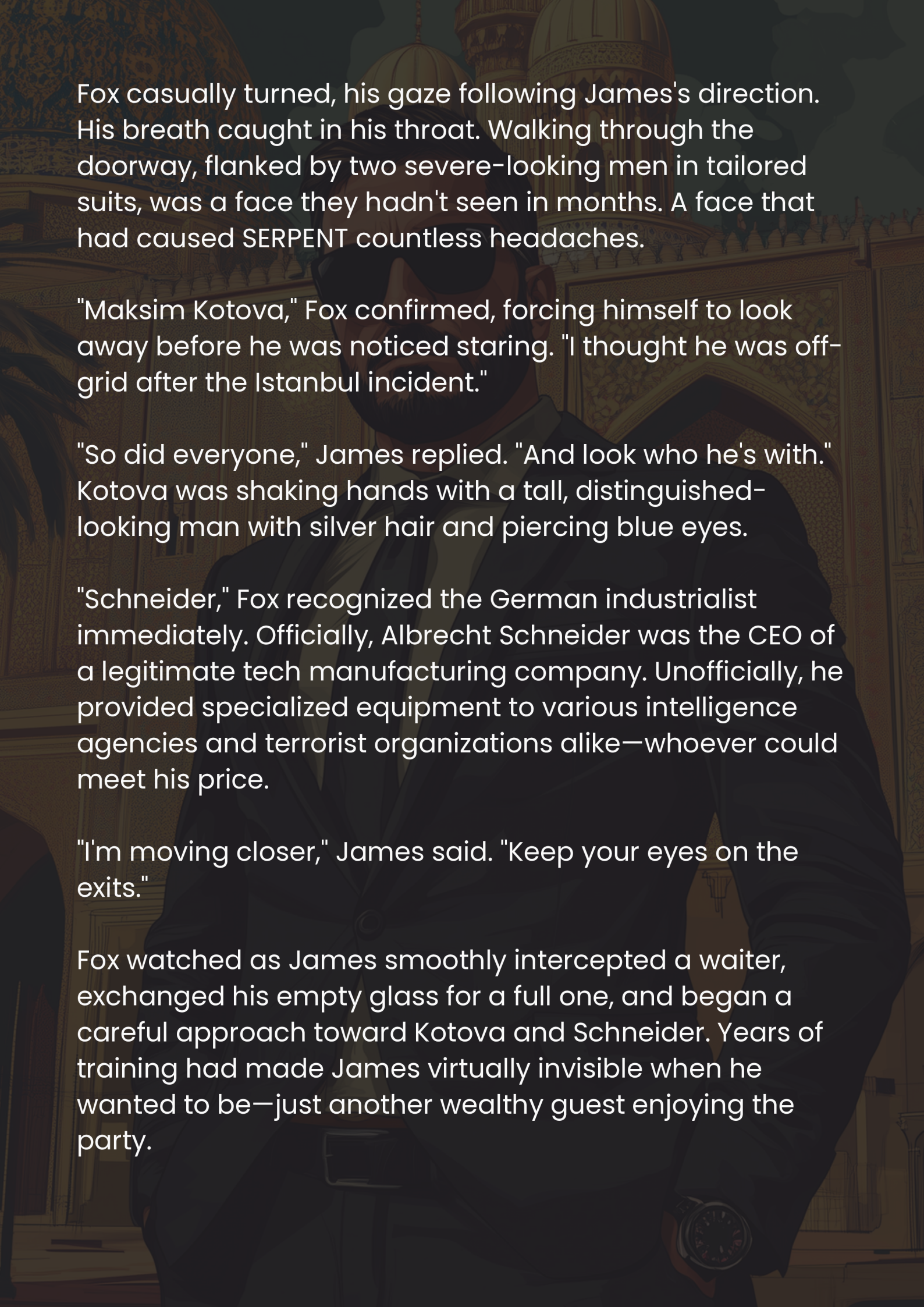
Fox Meyer adjusted his bowtie, scanning the crowd with practiced nonchalance. His earpiece crackled softly. "Anything yet?" came James Brown's voice, pitched low enough that only Fox could hear.

"Negative," Fox murmured, lifting a champagne flute to his lips without drinking. "Though Baroness Schroeder just negotiated what I believe was a shipment of surface-to-air missiles with the gentleman from Azerbaijan."

James chuckled, the sound barely audible through the comm. "Typical Tuesday, then."

Fox had positioned himself near the grand staircase, while James circulated through the crowd, charm turned up to eleven as he extracted information from unsuspecting guests. The gala—ostensibly a charity event for children's education—was in reality a gathering of Europe's most prolific arms dealers, and SERPENT had intelligence suggesting several high-value targets would be in attendance.

"Hold," James said suddenly, his voice losing all trace of humor. "East entrance. Is that...?"

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and a light-colored shirt, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the right. In the background, the ornate architecture of a mosque with large domes and arches is visible. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an evening or indoor setting with low light.

Fox casually turned, his gaze following James's direction. His breath caught in his throat. Walking through the doorway, flanked by two severe-looking men in tailored suits, was a face they hadn't seen in months. A face that had caused SERPENT countless headaches.

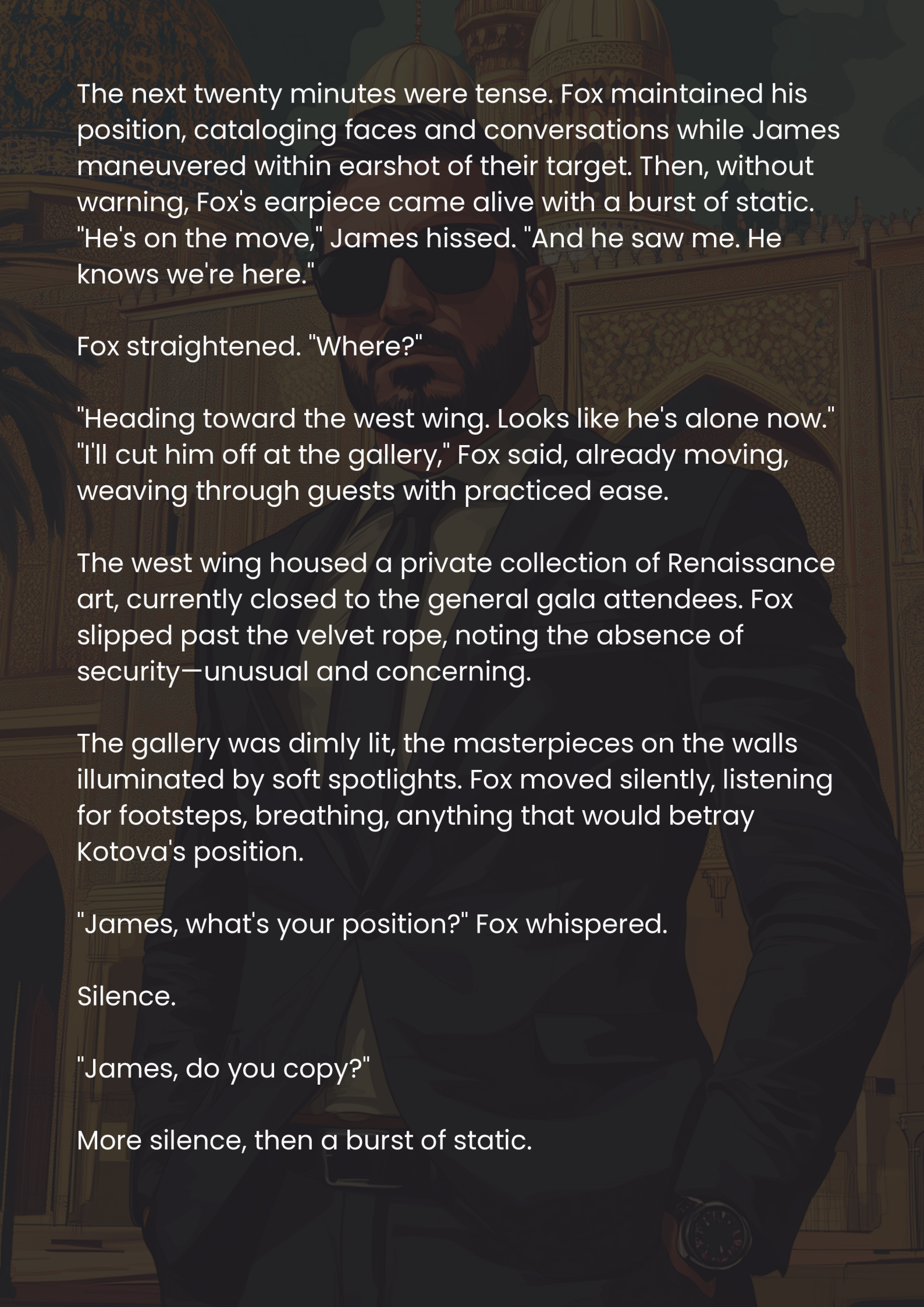
"Maksim Kotova," Fox confirmed, forcing himself to look away before he was noticed staring. "I thought he was off-grid after the Istanbul incident."

"So did everyone," James replied. "And look who he's with." Kotova was shaking hands with a tall, distinguished-looking man with silver hair and piercing blue eyes.

"Schneider," Fox recognized the German industrialist immediately. Officially, Albrecht Schneider was the CEO of a legitimate tech manufacturing company. Unofficially, he provided specialized equipment to various intelligence agencies and terrorist organizations alike—whoever could meet his price.

"I'm moving closer," James said. "Keep your eyes on the exits."

Fox watched as James smoothly intercepted a waiter, exchanged his empty glass for a full one, and began a careful approach toward Kotova and Schneider. Years of training had made James virtually invisible when he wanted to be—just another wealthy guest enjoying the party.

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the left. In the background, there is a large, ornate building with multiple domes and arches, suggesting a historical or religious site. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, golden-brown color palette.

The next twenty minutes were tense. Fox maintained his position, cataloging faces and conversations while James maneuvered within earshot of their target. Then, without warning, Fox's earpiece came alive with a burst of static. "He's on the move," James hissed. "And he saw me. He knows we're here."

Fox straightened. "Where?"

"Heading toward the west wing. Looks like he's alone now." "I'll cut him off at the gallery," Fox said, already moving, weaving through guests with practiced ease.

The west wing housed a private collection of Renaissance art, currently closed to the general gala attendees. Fox slipped past the velvet rope, noting the absence of security—unusual and concerning.

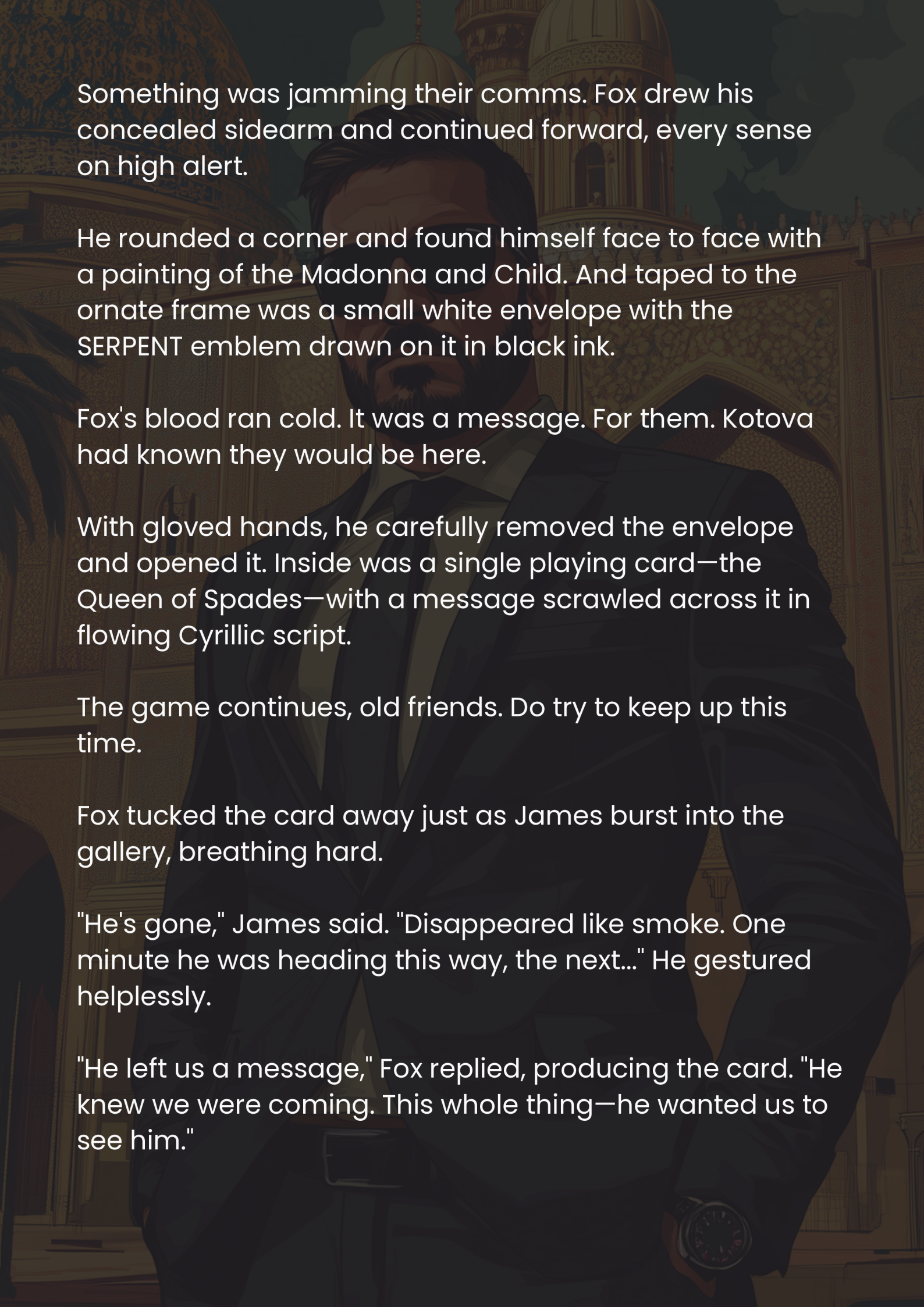
The gallery was dimly lit, the masterpieces on the walls illuminated by soft spotlights. Fox moved silently, listening for footsteps, breathing, anything that would betray Kotova's position.

"James, what's your position?" Fox whispered.

Silence.

"James, do you copy?"

More silence, then a burst of static.

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the side. In the background, there is a large, ornate building with multiple domes and arches, suggesting a historical or religious site. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, golden-brown color palette.

Something was jamming their comms. Fox drew his concealed sidearm and continued forward, every sense on high alert.

He rounded a corner and found himself face to face with a painting of the Madonna and Child. And taped to the ornate frame was a small white envelope with the SERPENT emblem drawn on it in black ink.

Fox's blood ran cold. It was a message. For them. Kotova had known they would be here.

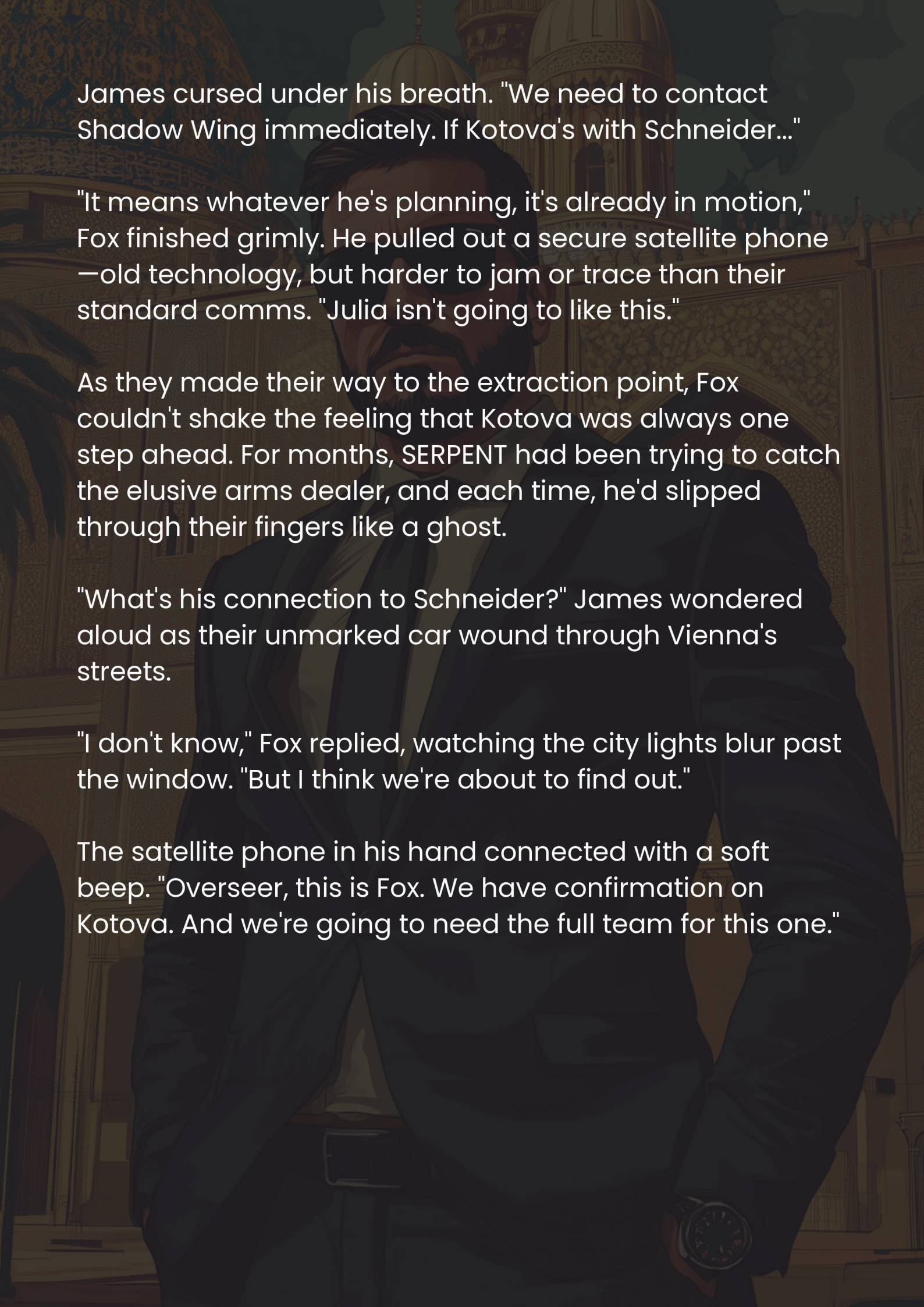
With gloved hands, he carefully removed the envelope and opened it. Inside was a single playing card—the Queen of Spades—with a message scrawled across it in flowing Cyrillic script.

The game continues, old friends. Do try to keep up this time.

Fox tucked the card away just as James burst into the gallery, breathing hard.

"He's gone," James said. "Disappeared like smoke. One minute he was heading this way, the next..." He gestured helplessly.

"He left us a message," Fox replied, producing the card. "He knew we were coming. This whole thing—he wanted us to see him."

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in front of a large, ornate building with domes and arches. The scene is dimly lit, with the building's lights providing a warm glow. The man is looking slightly to the side with a serious expression.

James cursed under his breath. "We need to contact Shadow Wing immediately. If Kotova's with Schneider..."

"It means whatever he's planning, it's already in motion," Fox finished grimly. He pulled out a secure satellite phone—old technology, but harder to jam or trace than their standard comms. "Julia isn't going to like this."

As they made their way to the extraction point, Fox couldn't shake the feeling that Kotova was always one step ahead. For months, SERPENT had been trying to catch the elusive arms dealer, and each time, he'd slipped through their fingers like a ghost.

"What's his connection to Schneider?" James wondered aloud as their unmarked car wound through Vienna's streets.

"I don't know," Fox replied, watching the city lights blur past the window. "But I think we're about to find out."

The satellite phone in his hand connected with a soft beep. "Overseer, this is Fox. We have confirmation on Kotova. And we're going to need the full team for this one."

Chapter 2: Infiltration

The Shadow Wing sliced through cloud cover, its sleek, modified frame belying the command center humming with activity inside. Julia Sharpe stood at the holographic command table, her keen eyes absorbing every detail of the intelligence being fed to her.

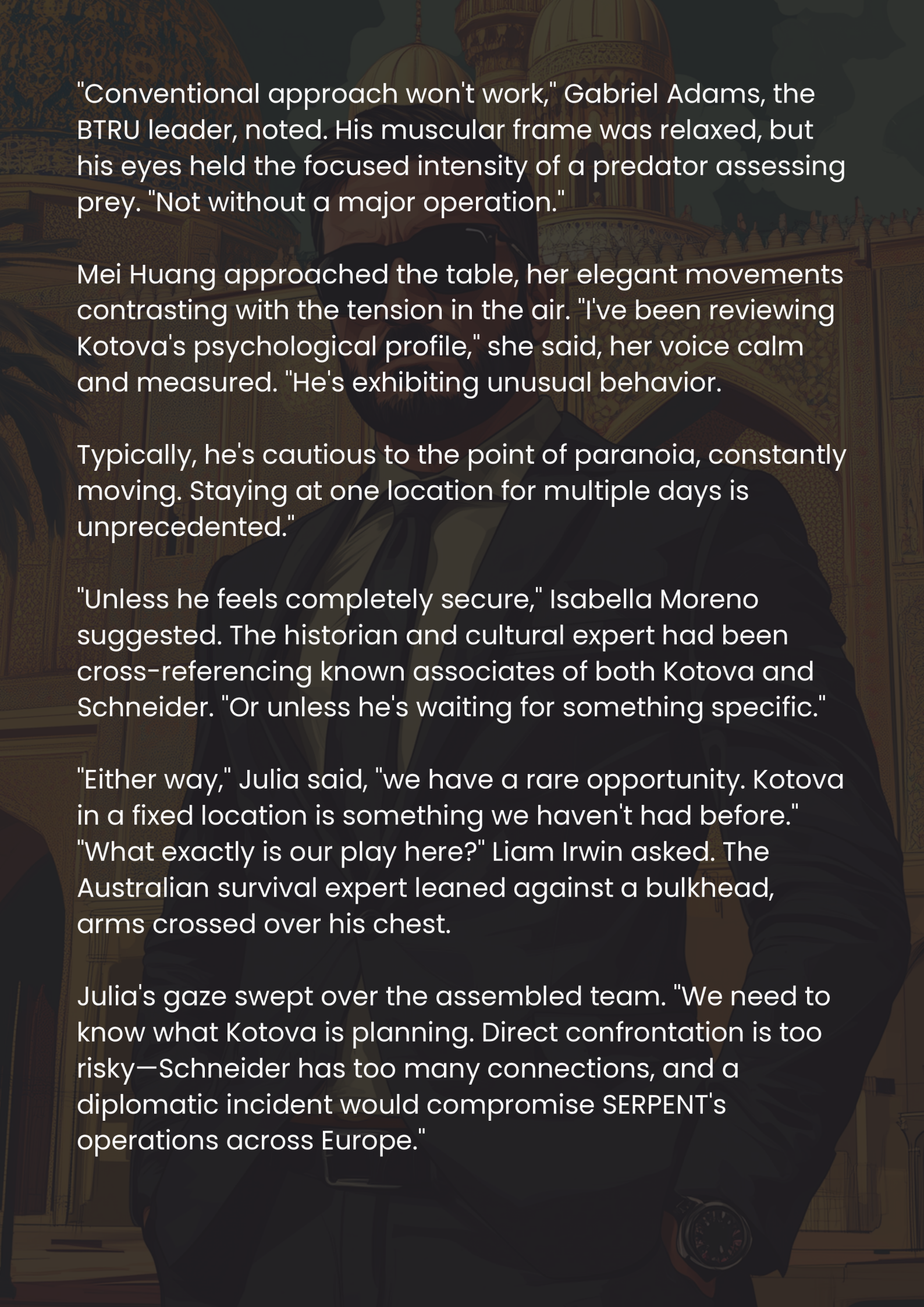
"Schneider's estate is here," she said, gesturing to a sprawling compound nestled in the Bavarian Alps. The holographic image zoomed in, revealing a main house, several outbuildings, and an intricate security perimeter.

"According to satellite imagery, Kotova arrived three days ago and hasn't left."

Special Agent K studied the layout, mentally cataloging entry points and blind spots. "Security?"

"Top of the line," Dimitri Zechev answered, his fingers dancing across his tablet. The Bulgarian tech expert pulled up additional overlays on the hologram.

"Electromagnetic fence, motion sensors, heat detection, facial recognition at all entry points, and at least a dozen armed guards rotating shifts."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking directly at the camera. In the background, the ornate architecture of a mosque with large domes and minarets is visible under a clear sky.

"Conventional approach won't work," Gabriel Adams, the BTRU leader, noted. His muscular frame was relaxed, but his eyes held the focused intensity of a predator assessing prey. "Not without a major operation."

Mei Huang approached the table, her elegant movements contrasting with the tension in the air. "I've been reviewing Kotova's psychological profile," she said, her voice calm and measured. "He's exhibiting unusual behavior."

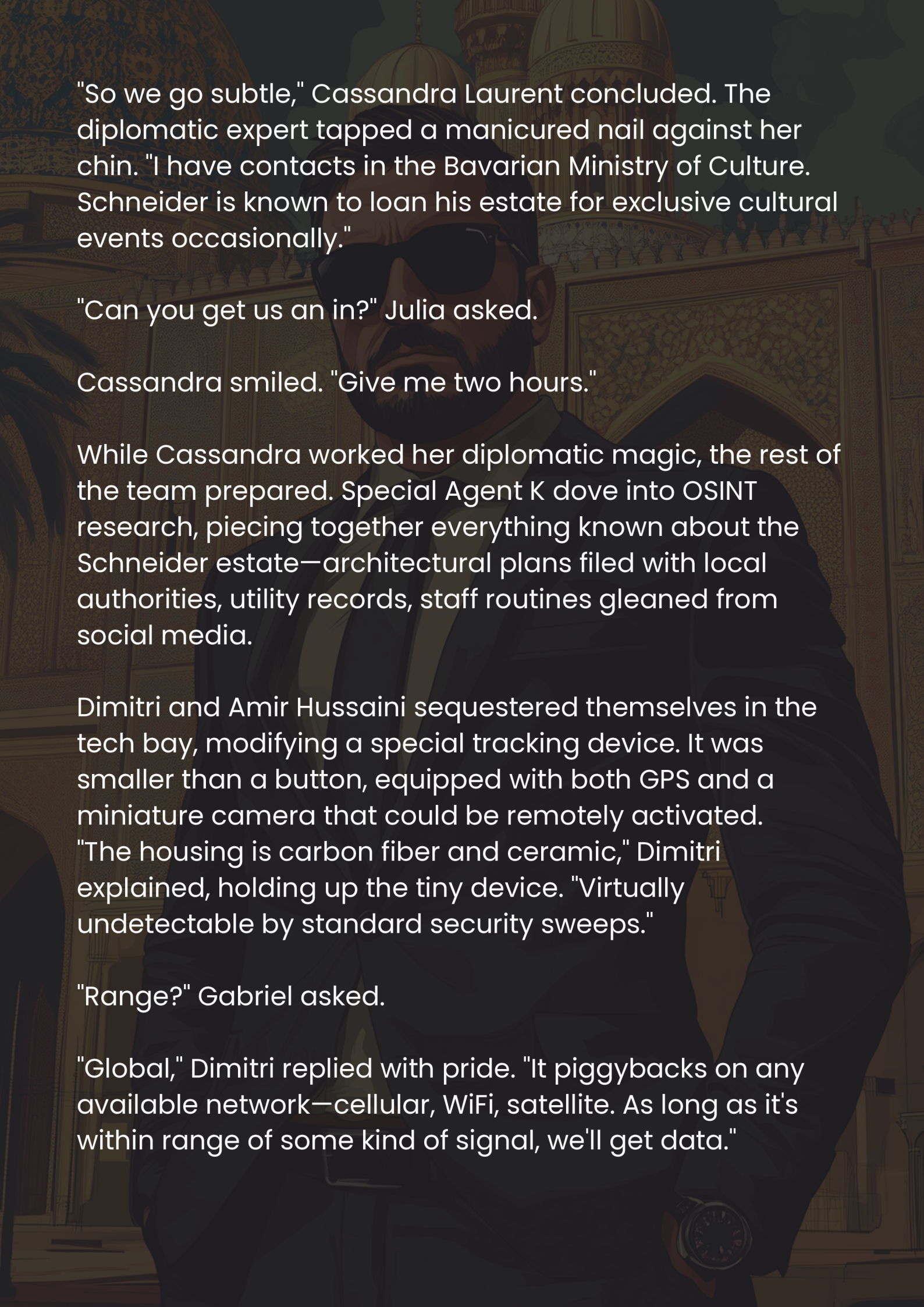
Typically, he's cautious to the point of paranoia, constantly moving. Staying at one location for multiple days is unprecedented."

"Unless he feels completely secure," Isabella Moreno suggested. The historian and cultural expert had been cross-referencing known associates of both Kotova and Schneider. "Or unless he's waiting for something specific."

"Either way," Julia said, "we have a rare opportunity. Kotova in a fixed location is something we haven't had before."

"What exactly is our play here?" Liam Irwin asked. The Australian survival expert leaned against a bulkhead, arms crossed over his chest.

Julia's gaze swept over the assembled team. "We need to know what Kotova is planning. Direct confrontation is too risky—Schneider has too many connections, and a diplomatic incident would compromise SERPENT's operations across Europe."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and a light-colored shirt, stands in front of a mosque with large domes and arches. The scene is dimly lit, with the man's face partially in shadow.

"So we go subtle," Cassandra Laurent concluded. The diplomatic expert tapped a manicured nail against her chin. "I have contacts in the Bavarian Ministry of Culture. Schneider is known to loan his estate for exclusive cultural events occasionally."

"Can you get us an in?" Julia asked.

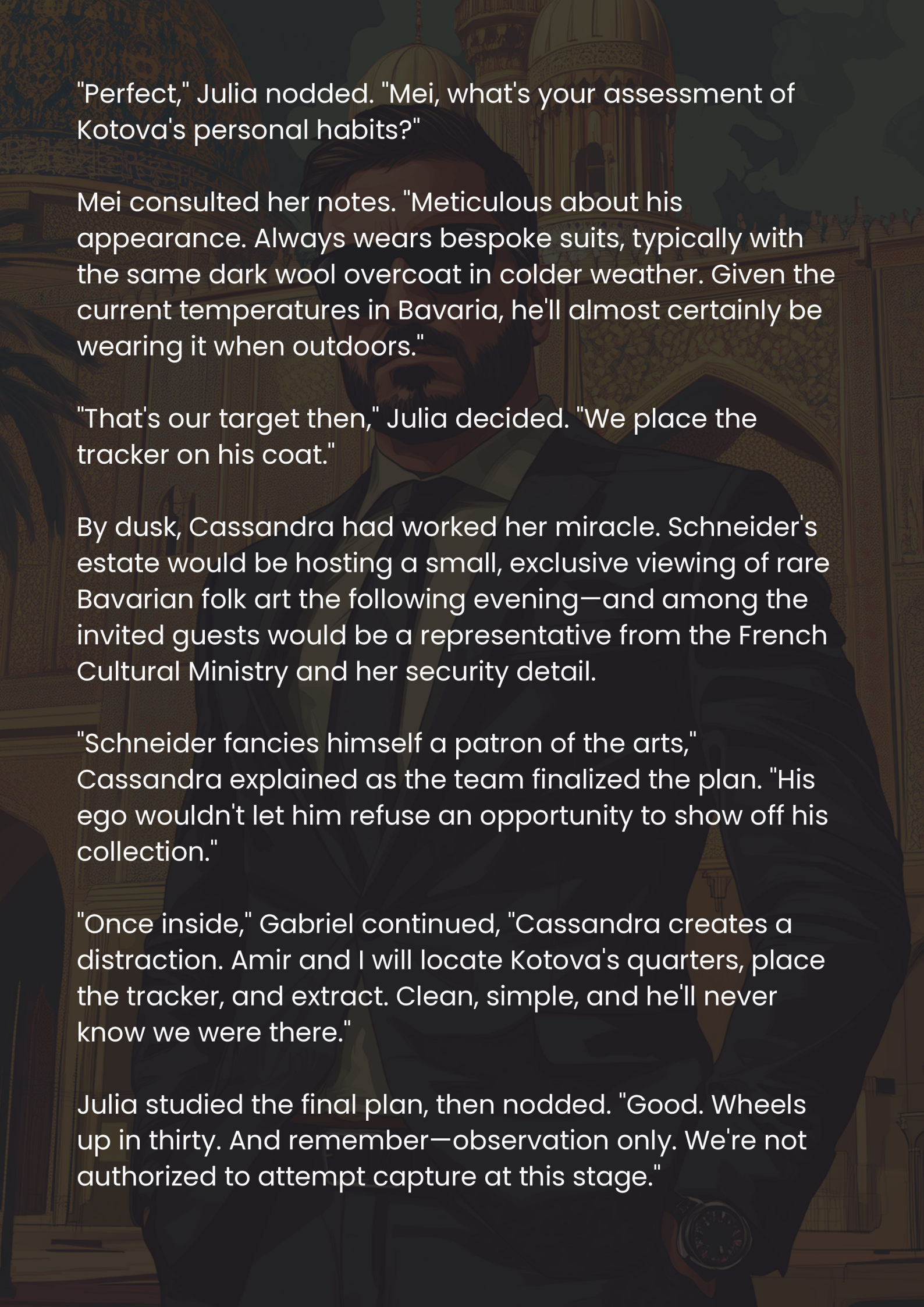
Cassandra smiled. "Give me two hours."

While Cassandra worked her diplomatic magic, the rest of the team prepared. Special Agent K dove into OSINT research, piecing together everything known about the Schneider estate—architectural plans filed with local authorities, utility records, staff routines gleaned from social media.

Dimitri and Amir Hussaini sequestered themselves in the tech bay, modifying a special tracking device. It was smaller than a button, equipped with both GPS and a miniature camera that could be remotely activated. "The housing is carbon fiber and ceramic," Dimitri explained, holding up the tiny device. "Virtually undetectable by standard security sweeps."

"Range?" Gabriel asked.

"Global," Dimitri replied with pride. "It piggybacks on any available network—cellular, WiFi, satellite. As long as it's within range of some kind of signal, we'll get data."

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, stands in the foreground. He is wearing dark sunglasses and a watch on his left wrist. The background is a dimly lit, ornate interior of a mosque or similar religious building, featuring large domes and intricate architectural details. The lighting is low, creating a moody atmosphere.

"Perfect," Julia nodded. "Mei, what's your assessment of Kotova's personal habits?"

Mei consulted her notes. "Meticulous about his appearance. Always wears bespoke suits, typically with the same dark wool overcoat in colder weather. Given the current temperatures in Bavaria, he'll almost certainly be wearing it when outdoors."

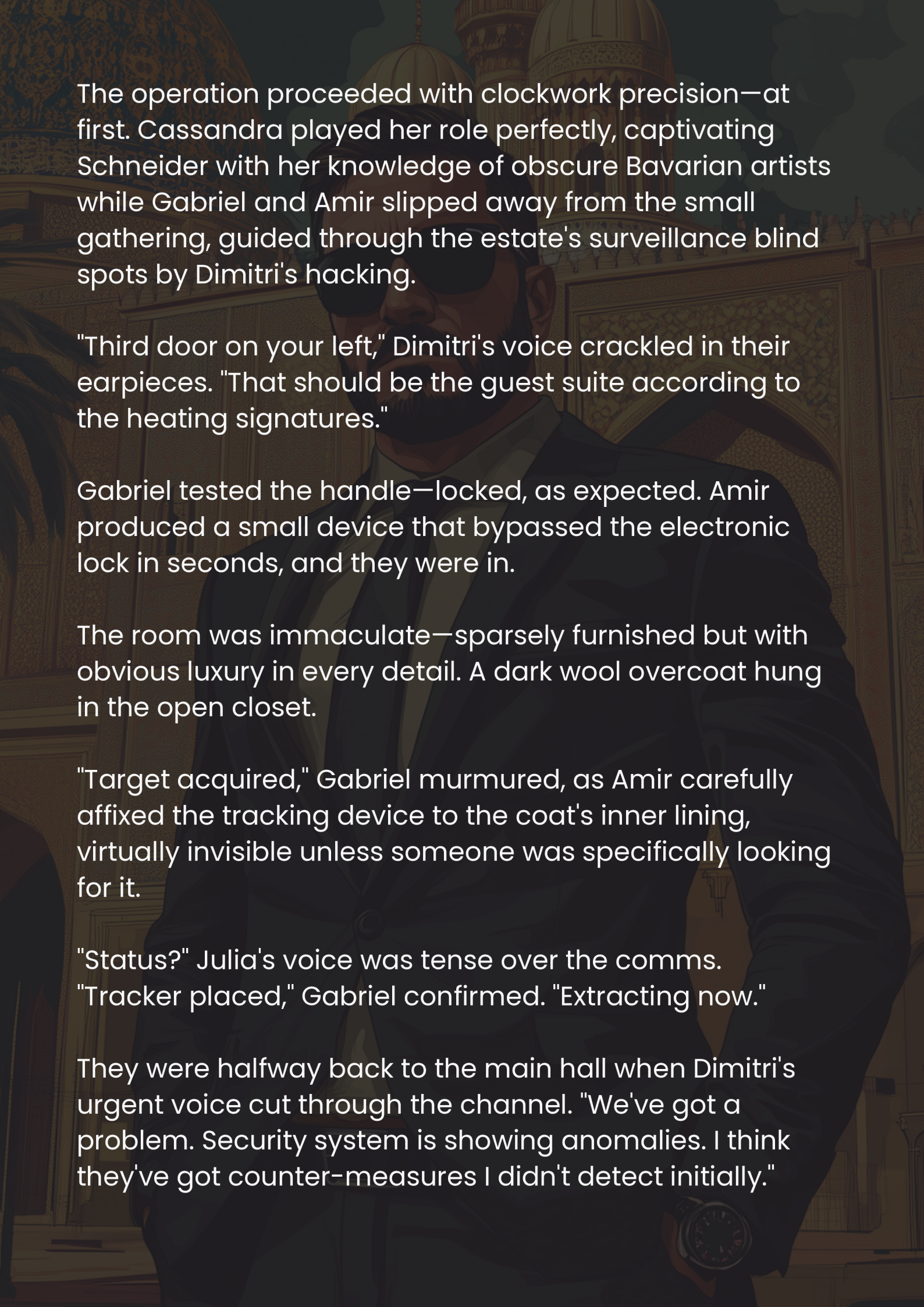
"That's our target then," Julia decided. "We place the tracker on his coat."

By dusk, Cassandra had worked her miracle. Schneider's estate would be hosting a small, exclusive viewing of rare Bavarian folk art the following evening—and among the invited guests would be a representative from the French Cultural Ministry and her security detail.

"Schneider fancies himself a patron of the arts," Cassandra explained as the team finalized the plan. "His ego wouldn't let him refuse an opportunity to show off his collection."

"Once inside," Gabriel continued, "Cassandra creates a distraction. Amir and I will locate Kotova's quarters, place the tracker, and extract. Clean, simple, and he'll never know we were there."

Julia studied the final plan, then nodded. "Good. Wheels up in thirty. And remember—observation only. We're not authorized to attempt capture at this stage."

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The operation proceeded with clockwork precision—at first. Cassandra played her role perfectly, captivating Schneider with her knowledge of obscure Bavarian artists while Gabriel and Amir slipped away from the small gathering, guided through the estate's surveillance blind spots by Dimitri's hacking.

"Third door on your left," Dimitri's voice crackled in their earpieces. "That should be the guest suite according to the heating signatures."

Gabriel tested the handle—locked, as expected. Amir produced a small device that bypassed the electronic lock in seconds, and they were in.

The room was immaculate—sparsely furnished but with obvious luxury in every detail. A dark wool overcoat hung in the open closet.

"Target acquired," Gabriel murmured, as Amir carefully affixed the tracking device to the coat's inner lining, virtually invisible unless someone was specifically looking for it.

"Status?" Julia's voice was tense over the comms.

"Tracker placed," Gabriel confirmed. "Extracting now."

They were halfway back to the main hall when Dimitri's urgent voice cut through the channel. "We've got a problem. Security system is showing anomalies. I think they've got counter-measures I didn't detect initially."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the left. In the background, the ornate architecture of a mosque with domes and minarets is visible under a dark sky. The scene is dimly lit, with the man's face partially illuminated.

Gabriel and Amir exchanged glances. "Can you mask us?" Gabriel asked.

"Working on it," Dimitri replied, the sound of furious typing in the background. "But you need to move faster. And—wait, what's this?"

"Dimitri?" Julia prompted after a moment of silence.

"There's something weird about their system," Dimitri said slowly. "It's like... it's got redundancies I've never seen before. Military grade, but different somehow."

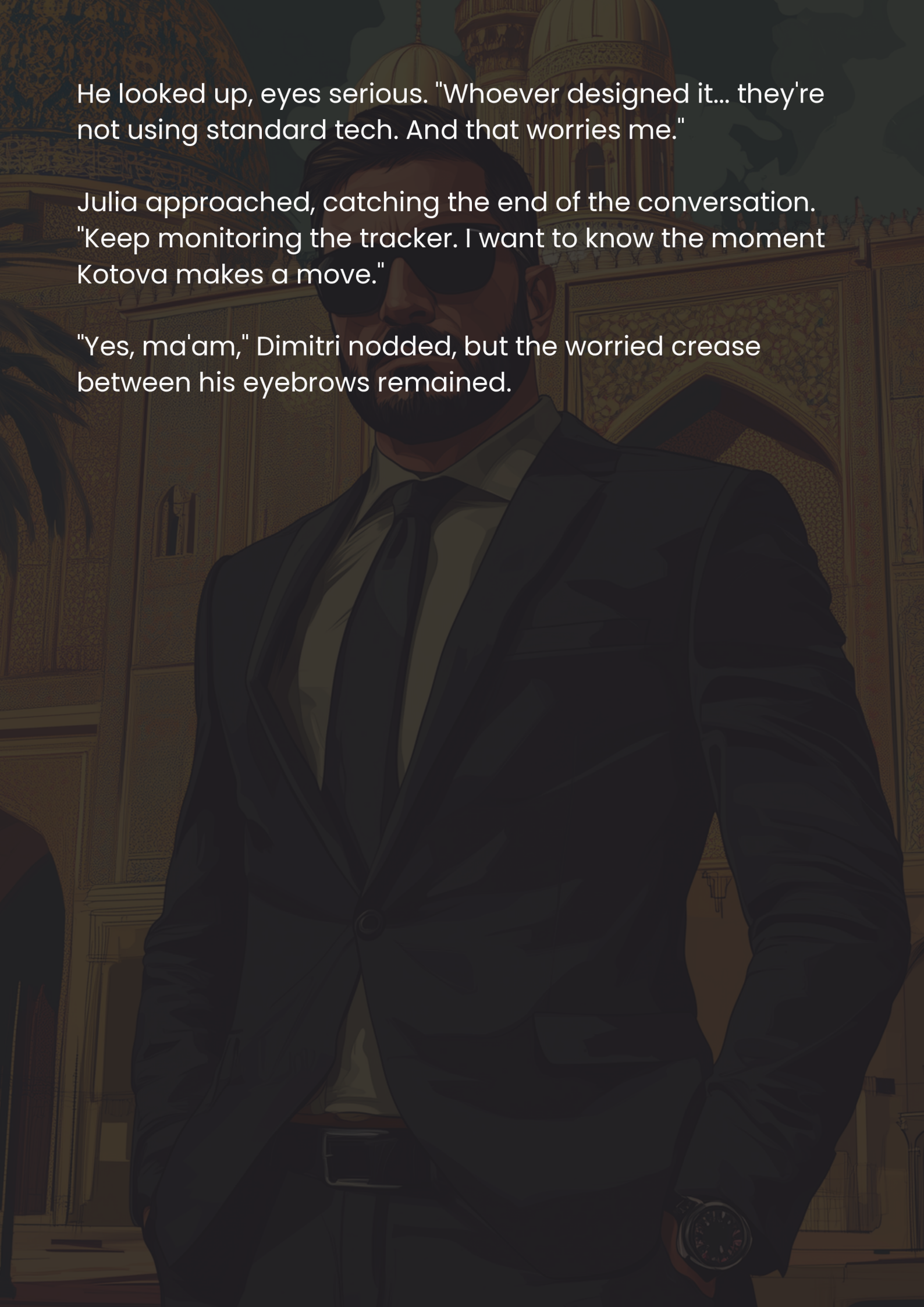
"Focus on getting our people out," Julia ordered. "We'll analyze the system later."

Gabriel and Amir rejoined the gathering without incident, and within the hour, the SERPENT team had departed the Schneider estate. The operation appeared successful—the tracker was in place, and Kotova remained unaware of their intrusion.

But as Shadow Wing lifted off, heading for a holding pattern at safe distance, Dimitri sat hunched over his screens, a troubled expression on his face.

"What is it?" Special Agent K asked, noting his concern.

"That security system," Dimitri muttered. "It wasn't just advanced—it was adaptive. Like it was learning from my intrusion attempts in real-time."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in front of a large, ornate building with domes and arches, likely a mosque. The image is dark and moody, with the man's face partially obscured by his sunglasses. The background features intricate architectural details and a large dome.

He looked up, eyes serious. "Whoever designed it... they're not using standard tech. And that worries me."

Julia approached, catching the end of the conversation. "Keep monitoring the tracker. I want to know the moment Kotova makes a move."

"Yes, ma'am," Dimitri nodded, but the worried crease between his eyebrows remained.

Chapter 3: Ghost Protocol

Three days passed with agonizing slowness. Shadow Wing maintained its pattern, circling at a safe distance while the team monitored the tracker planted on Kotova's coat. So far, the device showed minimal movement—just short trips within the confines of the Schneider estate.

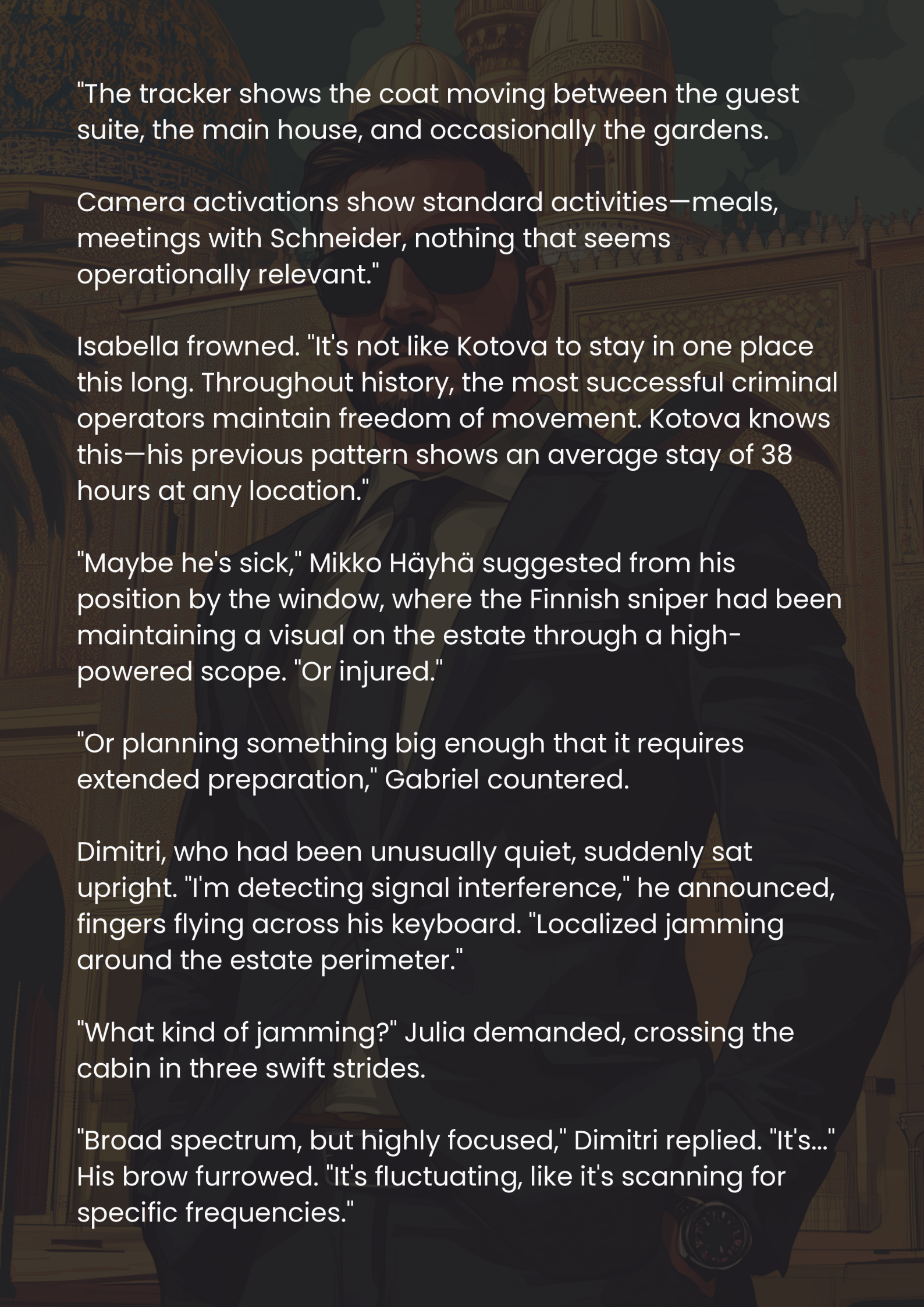
"This doesn't make sense," Pablo Iglesias commented as he checked the plane's systems during a quiet moment. The Chilean pilot had been flying the same holding pattern for 72 hours, with only his co-pilot Peter Jansen taking shifts. "What's Kotova waiting for?"

In the analysis section of the cabin, the question was being asked with increasing frequency. Special Agent K had hardly left the monitoring station, analyzing each fragment of data from the tracker for clues.

Isabella Moreno approached, carrying two cups of coffee. She handed one to K and settled into the adjacent seat.

"Any changes?"

"Nothing significant," K replied, accepting the coffee gratefully.

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, stands in the foreground. He is wearing dark sunglasses. The background is a large, ornate building with domes and minarets, likely a mosque, with intricate architectural details. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn.

"The tracker shows the coat moving between the guest suite, the main house, and occasionally the gardens.

Camera activations show standard activities—meals, meetings with Schneider, nothing that seems operationally relevant."

Isabella frowned. "It's not like Kotova to stay in one place this long. Throughout history, the most successful criminal operators maintain freedom of movement. Kotova knows this—his previous pattern shows an average stay of 38 hours at any location."

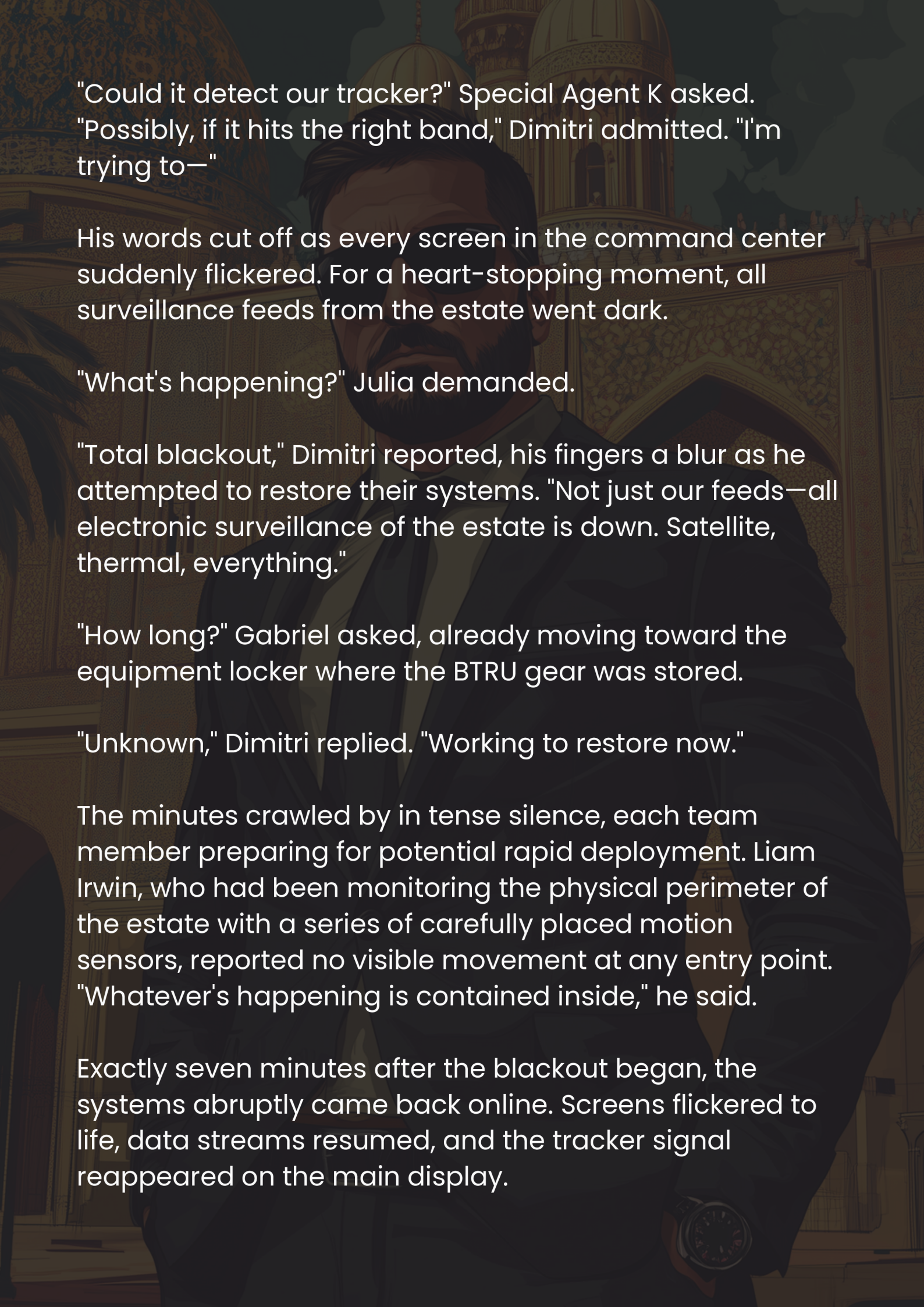
"Maybe he's sick," Mikko Häyhä suggested from his position by the window, where the Finnish sniper had been maintaining a visual on the estate through a high-powered scope. "Or injured."

"Or planning something big enough that it requires extended preparation," Gabriel countered.

Dimitri, who had been unusually quiet, suddenly sat upright. "I'm detecting signal interference," he announced, fingers flying across his keyboard. "Localized jamming around the estate perimeter."

"What kind of jamming?" Julia demanded, crossing the cabin in three swift strides.

"Broad spectrum, but highly focused," Dimitri replied. "It's..." His brow furrowed. "It's fluctuating, like it's scanning for specific frequencies."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the side. In the background, there is a large, ornate building with multiple domes and arches, suggesting a Middle Eastern or Islamic architectural style. The scene is dimly lit, with the building's lights providing the main illumination.

"Could it detect our tracker?" Special Agent K asked.

"Possibly, if it hits the right band," Dimitri admitted. "I'm trying to—"

His words cut off as every screen in the command center suddenly flickered. For a heart-stopping moment, all surveillance feeds from the estate went dark.

"What's happening?" Julia demanded.

"Total blackout," Dimitri reported, his fingers a blur as he attempted to restore their systems. "Not just our feeds—all electronic surveillance of the estate is down. Satellite, thermal, everything."

"How long?" Gabriel asked, already moving toward the equipment locker where the BTRU gear was stored.

"Unknown," Dimitri replied. "Working to restore now."

The minutes crawled by in tense silence, each team member preparing for potential rapid deployment. Liam Irwin, who had been monitoring the physical perimeter of the estate with a series of carefully placed motion sensors, reported no visible movement at any entry point. "Whatever's happening is contained inside," he said.

Exactly seven minutes after the blackout began, the systems abruptly came back online. Screens flickered to life, data streams resumed, and the tracker signal reappeared on the main display.



"Status report," Julia ordered.

"All systems functional," Dimitri confirmed, though his expression remained troubled. "No detectable changes to the security protocols at the estate."

Isabella was studying the historical data with narrowed eyes. "Something's different," she murmured. "The pattern is... off somehow."

"Tracker shows the coat is still in the guest suite," Special Agent K noted. "No movement during the blackout."

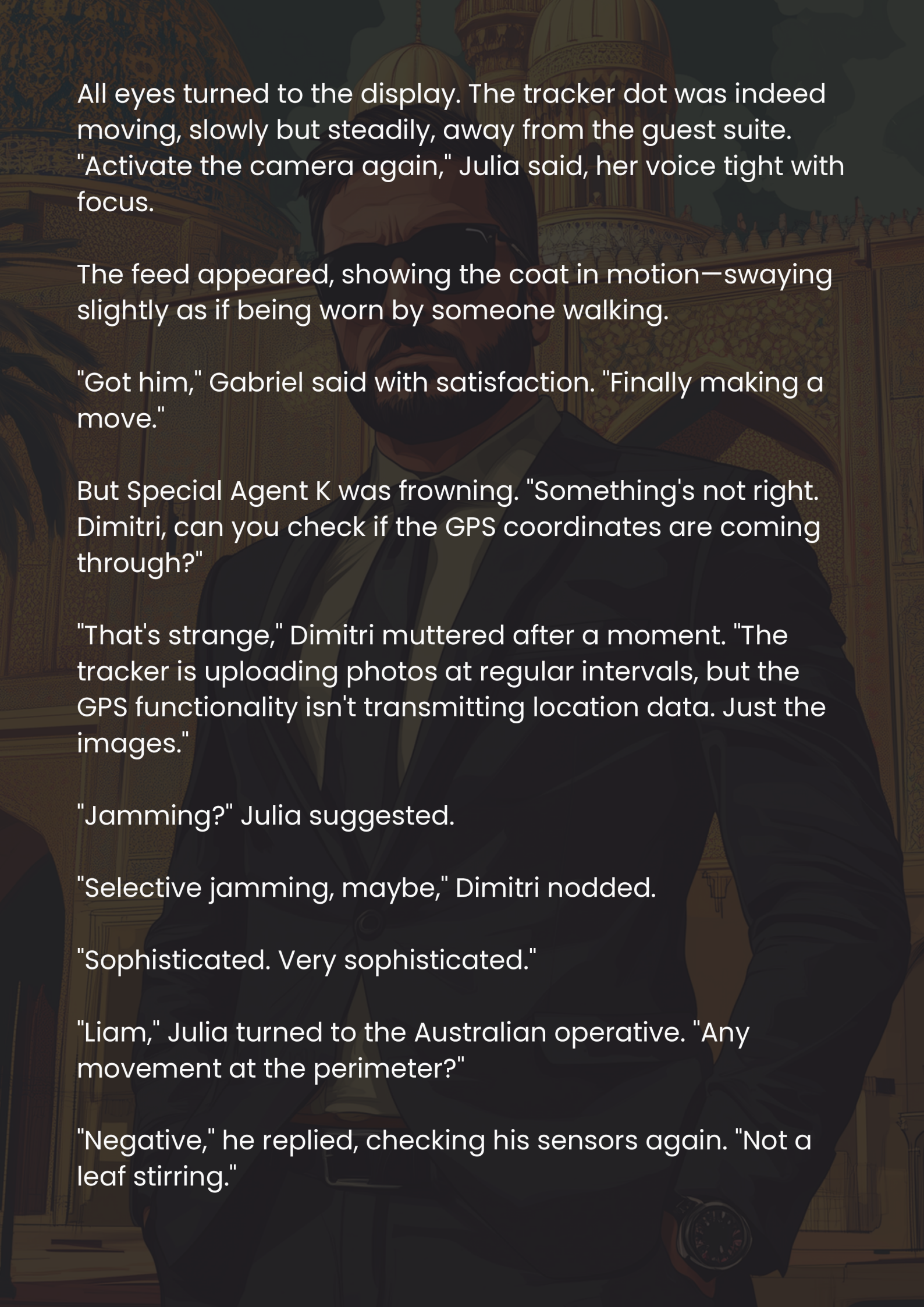
"Activate the camera," Julia commanded. "Let's see what Kotova is up to."

The feed from the miniature camera appeared on the main screen. It showed a dark closet interior, the coat hanging exactly where it had been for the past three days. "No Kotova," Mikko observed unnecessarily.

"Pull up the estate's external feeds," Julia ordered. Dimitri complied, bringing up the surveillance camera footage they'd been quietly piggybacking. Nothing seemed amiss—guards at their posts, staff going about their duties, no unusual activity.

"Wait," Special Agent K suddenly leaned forward, eyes fixed on the tracker data.

"The signal's moving."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the left. In the background, the ornate architecture of a mosque with large domes and minarets is visible under a hazy sky. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn.

All eyes turned to the display. The tracker dot was indeed moving, slowly but steadily, away from the guest suite. "Activate the camera again," Julia said, her voice tight with focus.

The feed appeared, showing the coat in motion—swaying slightly as if being worn by someone walking.

"Got him," Gabriel said with satisfaction. "Finally making a move."

But Special Agent K was frowning. "Something's not right. Dimitri, can you check if the GPS coordinates are coming through?"

"That's strange," Dimitri muttered after a moment. "The tracker is uploading photos at regular intervals, but the GPS functionality isn't transmitting location data. Just the images."

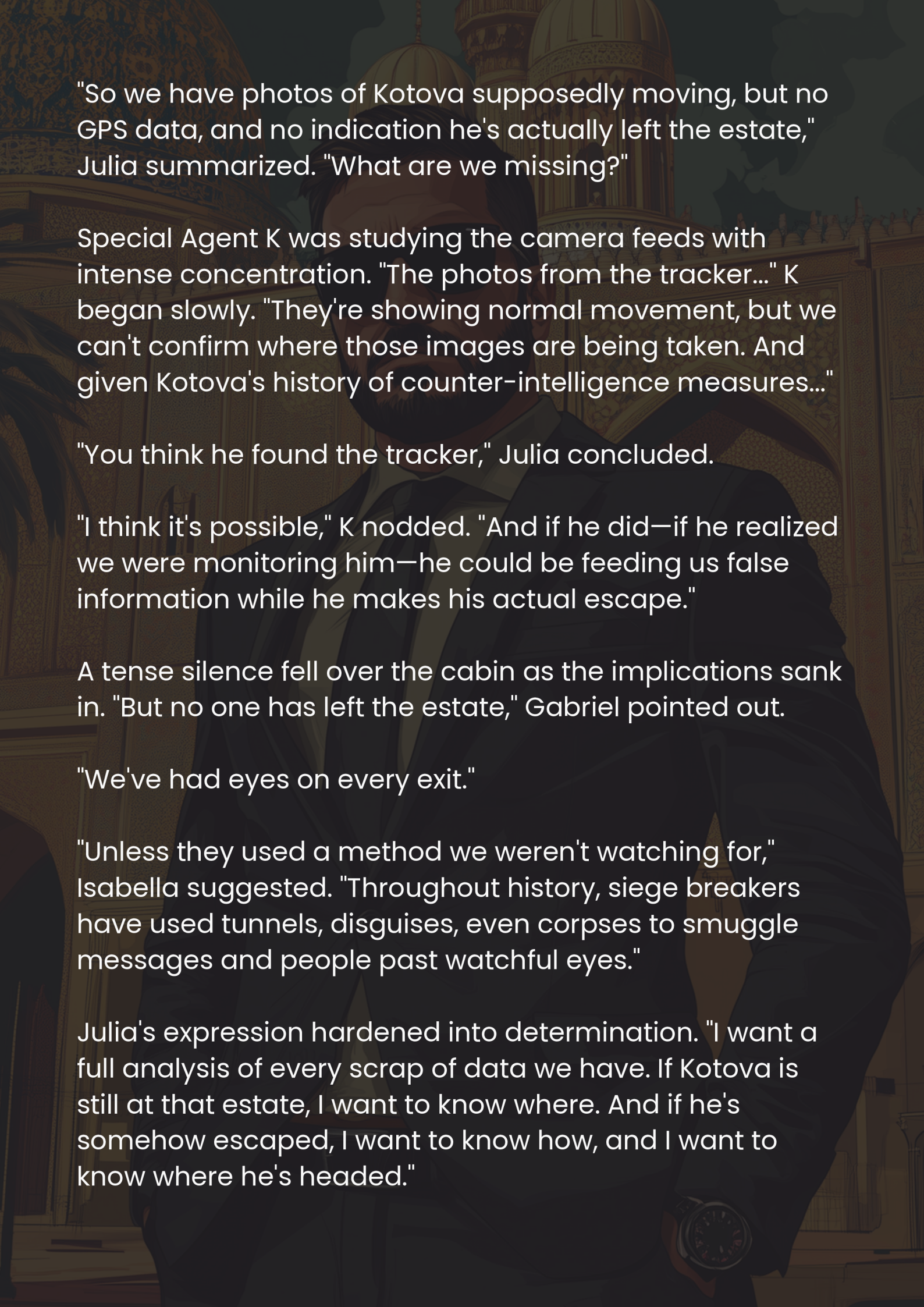
"Jamming?" Julia suggested.

"Selective jamming, maybe," Dimitri nodded.

"Sophisticated. Very sophisticated."

"Liam," Julia turned to the Australian operative. "Any movement at the perimeter?"

"Negative," he replied, checking his sensors again. "Not a leaf stirring."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in the foreground. He is looking slightly to the side. In the background, there is a large, ornate building with multiple domes and arches, suggesting a historical or religious site. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, golden-brown color palette.

"So we have photos of Kotova supposedly moving, but no GPS data, and no indication he's actually left the estate," Julia summarized. "What are we missing?"

Special Agent K was studying the camera feeds with intense concentration. "The photos from the tracker..." K began slowly. "They're showing normal movement, but we can't confirm where those images are being taken. And given Kotova's history of counter-intelligence measures..."

"You think he found the tracker," Julia concluded.

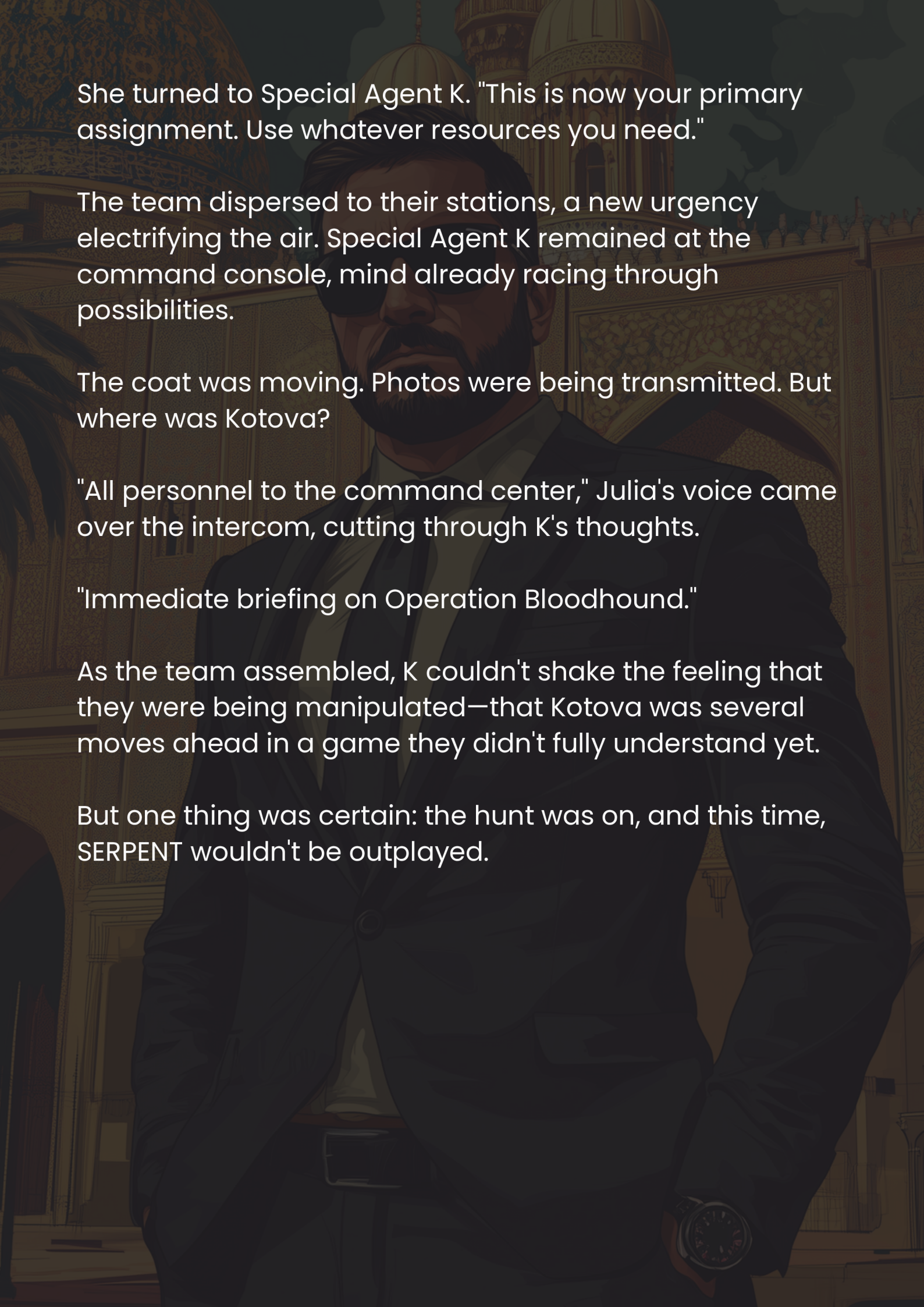
"I think it's possible," K nodded. "And if he did—if he realized we were monitoring him—he could be feeding us false information while he makes his actual escape."

A tense silence fell over the cabin as the implications sank in. "But no one has left the estate," Gabriel pointed out.

"We've had eyes on every exit."

"Unless they used a method we weren't watching for," Isabella suggested. "Throughout history, siege breakers have used tunnels, disguises, even corpses to smuggle messages and people past watchful eyes."

Julia's expression hardened into determination. "I want a full analysis of every scrap of data we have. If Kotova is still at that estate, I want to know where. And if he's somehow escaped, I want to know how, and I want to know where he's headed."

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands in front of a mosque with large domes and arches. The scene is dimly lit, with the man's face partially in shadow. He has a serious expression. A watch is visible on his left wrist.

She turned to Special Agent K. "This is now your primary assignment. Use whatever resources you need."

The team dispersed to their stations, a new urgency electrifying the air. Special Agent K remained at the command console, mind already racing through possibilities.

The coat was moving. Photos were being transmitted. But where was Kotova?

"All personnel to the command center," Julia's voice came over the intercom, cutting through K's thoughts.

"Immediate briefing on Operation Bloodhound."

As the team assembled, K couldn't shake the feeling that they were being manipulated—that Kotova was several moves ahead in a game they didn't fully understand yet.

But one thing was certain: the hunt was on, and this time, SERPENT wouldn't be outplayed.

Briefing

Greetings, Special Agent.

Our old friend Maksim Kotova has escaped the Schneider residence under mysterious circumstances, and our field agents did not see anyone leave.

Nevertheless, we are determined to capture him this time, by any means necessary. A few weeks ago, one of our field agents managed to sneak into the residence and attach a GPS tracker and camera device to Maksim's jacket.

Unfortunately, it seems that Maksim has taken some countermeasures, as the GPS functionality of our device doesn't seem to work, most likely due to some jamming device he has on him. Nevertheless, our device automatically connects to any public WiFi network in range and uploads the photos it takes.

It is your assignment to use these photos to locate Maksim Kotova. Once you do, we will send in the BTRU to extract him as an HVT.

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

Materials

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Answer Instruction

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

Use the name of the hotel, the city and phone number listed on Google Maps to create the answer that unlocks the flagfile.

Password example:

summerset-hotel-london-+442055512345

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.