

HAZKTORIA



ROAD TO NOWHERE

Chapter 1: First Contact

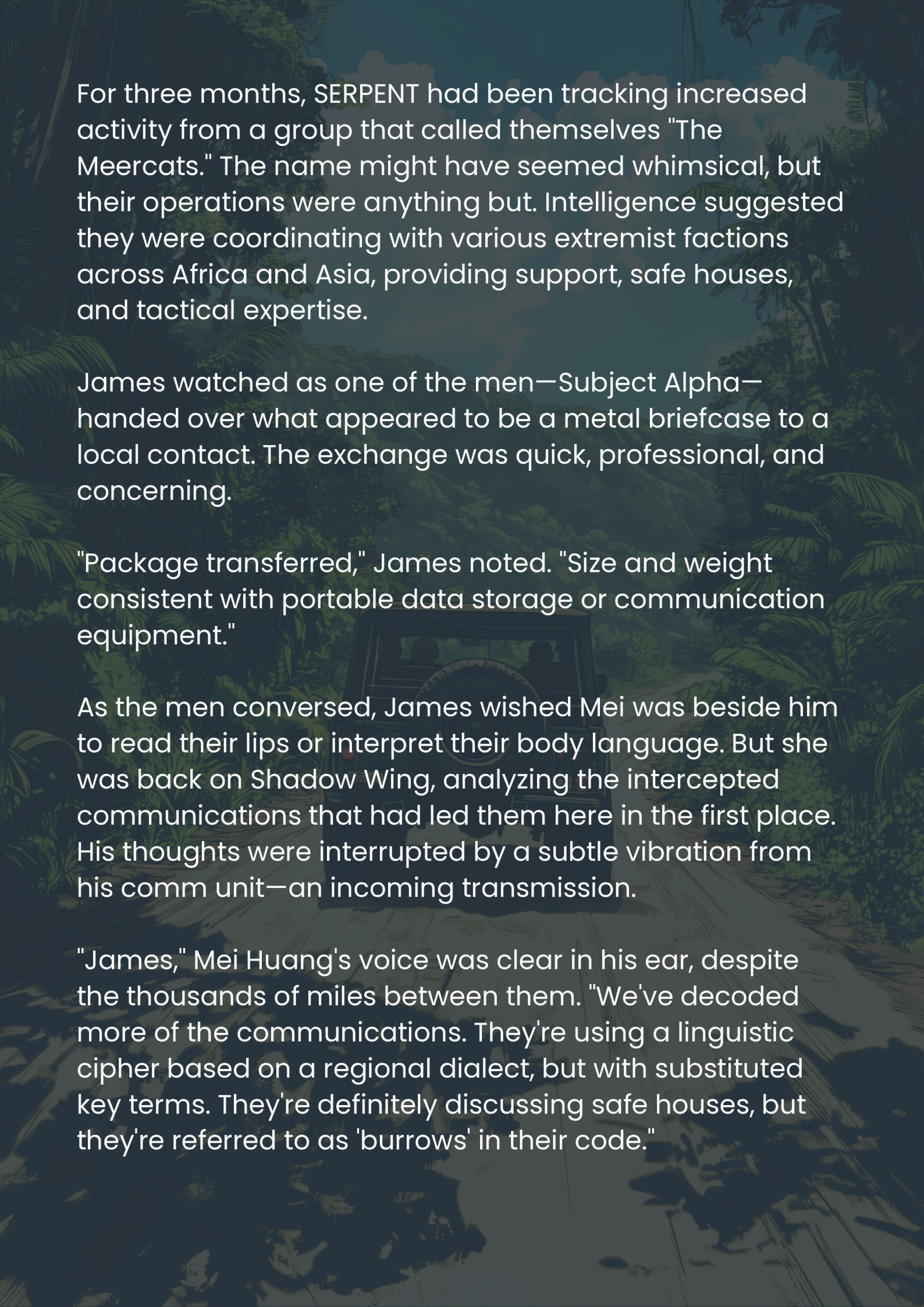
The heat shimmered above the parched earth, distorting the horizon into wavy lines that reminded James Brown of ripples in water—something this arid region of Northern Kenya had precious little of. He adjusted the focus on his high-powered binoculars, the sweat from his brow threatening to drip onto the lenses. Three weeks in the field had left his normally immaculate appearance somewhat compromised, but his mind remained razor-sharp.

"Movement at the south entrance," he whispered into his encrypted comm unit. The device, disguised as a standard earpiece, was one of Dimitri's latest creations—capable of transmitting directly to Shadow Wing regardless of conventional signal barriers.

Across the ravine, a battered Toyota Land Cruiser pulled up to a nondescript building. Four men emerged, their movements practiced and efficient. James recognized the careful scanning of surroundings—these weren't ordinary militants.

"Confirmed visual on Subjects Alpha and Bravo," he continued, focusing on two particular individuals. "Plus two new players. Sending visual now."

With a subtle gesture, James activated the micro-camera embedded in his binoculars, capturing high-resolution images that would be relayed instantly to the analysts aboard Shadow Wing.



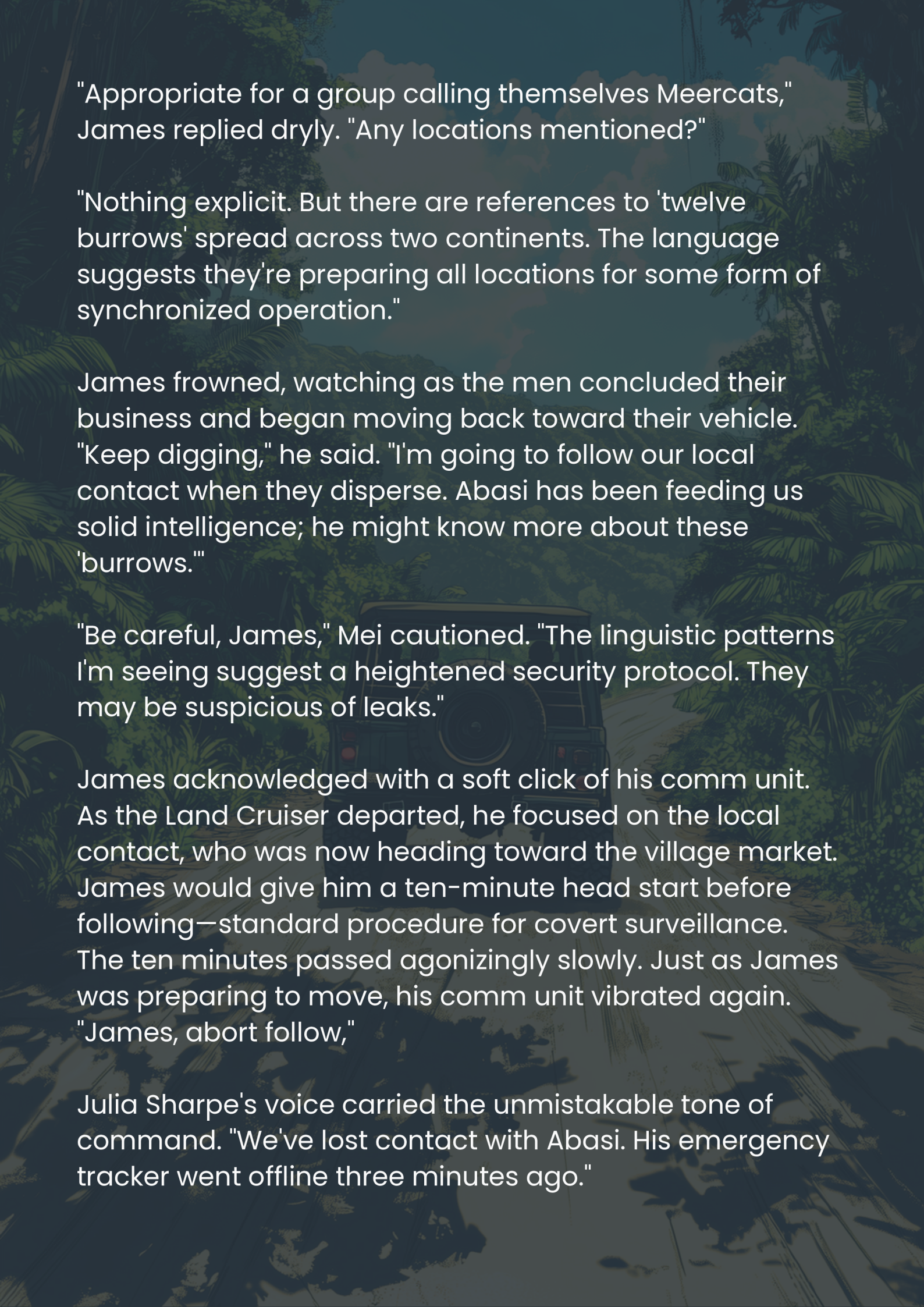
For three months, SERPENT had been tracking increased activity from a group that called themselves "The Meercats." The name might have seemed whimsical, but their operations were anything but. Intelligence suggested they were coordinating with various extremist factions across Africa and Asia, providing support, safe houses, and tactical expertise.

James watched as one of the men—Subject Alpha—handed over what appeared to be a metal briefcase to a local contact. The exchange was quick, professional, and concerning.

"Package transferred," James noted. "Size and weight consistent with portable data storage or communication equipment."

As the men conversed, James wished Mei was beside him to read their lips or interpret their body language. But she was back on Shadow Wing, analyzing the intercepted communications that had led them here in the first place. His thoughts were interrupted by a subtle vibration from his comm unit—an incoming transmission.

"James," Mei Huang's voice was clear in his ear, despite the thousands of miles between them. "We've decoded more of the communications. They're using a linguistic cipher based on a regional dialect, but with substituted key terms. They're definitely discussing safe houses, but they're referred to as 'burrows' in their code."



"Appropriate for a group calling themselves Meercats," James replied dryly. "Any locations mentioned?"

"Nothing explicit. But there are references to 'twelve burrows' spread across two continents. The language suggests they're preparing all locations for some form of synchronized operation."

James frowned, watching as the men concluded their business and began moving back toward their vehicle. "Keep digging," he said. "I'm going to follow our local contact when they disperse. Abasi has been feeding us solid intelligence; he might know more about these 'burrows.'"

"Be careful, James," Mei cautioned. "The linguistic patterns I'm seeing suggest a heightened security protocol. They may be suspicious of leaks."

James acknowledged with a soft click of his comm unit. As the Land Cruiser departed, he focused on the local contact, who was now heading toward the village market. James would give him a ten-minute head start before following—standard procedure for covert surveillance. The ten minutes passed agonizingly slowly. Just as James was preparing to move, his comm unit vibrated again.

"James, abort follow,"

Julia Sharpe's voice carried the unmistakable tone of command. "We've lost contact with Abasi. His emergency tracker went offline three minutes ago."

James felt a cold sensation that had nothing to do with the sweltering African heat.

"Location of last signal?"

"Two kilometers east of your position. An abandoned storage facility. Satellite imagery shows recent vehicle tracks, but no current activity."

"I'm moving there now," James replied, already packing his surveillance equipment.

"Negative. Maintain position and await extraction. Pablo and Peter are already en route with exfil drone. We need to reassess."

James wanted to argue but knew better. Julia Sharpe didn't make such decisions lightly. If she was calling for immediate extraction, the situation had deteriorated beyond what was visible from his position.

As he prepared for extraction, James cast one final glance toward the building where the exchange had taken place. Something much bigger was happening, and now their primary local asset was compromised.

The micro-drone arrived twenty minutes later, barely visible against the darkening sky. As it lowered the extraction harness, James couldn't shake the feeling that they were several steps behind their adversaries. What he didn't know then was just how right he was.

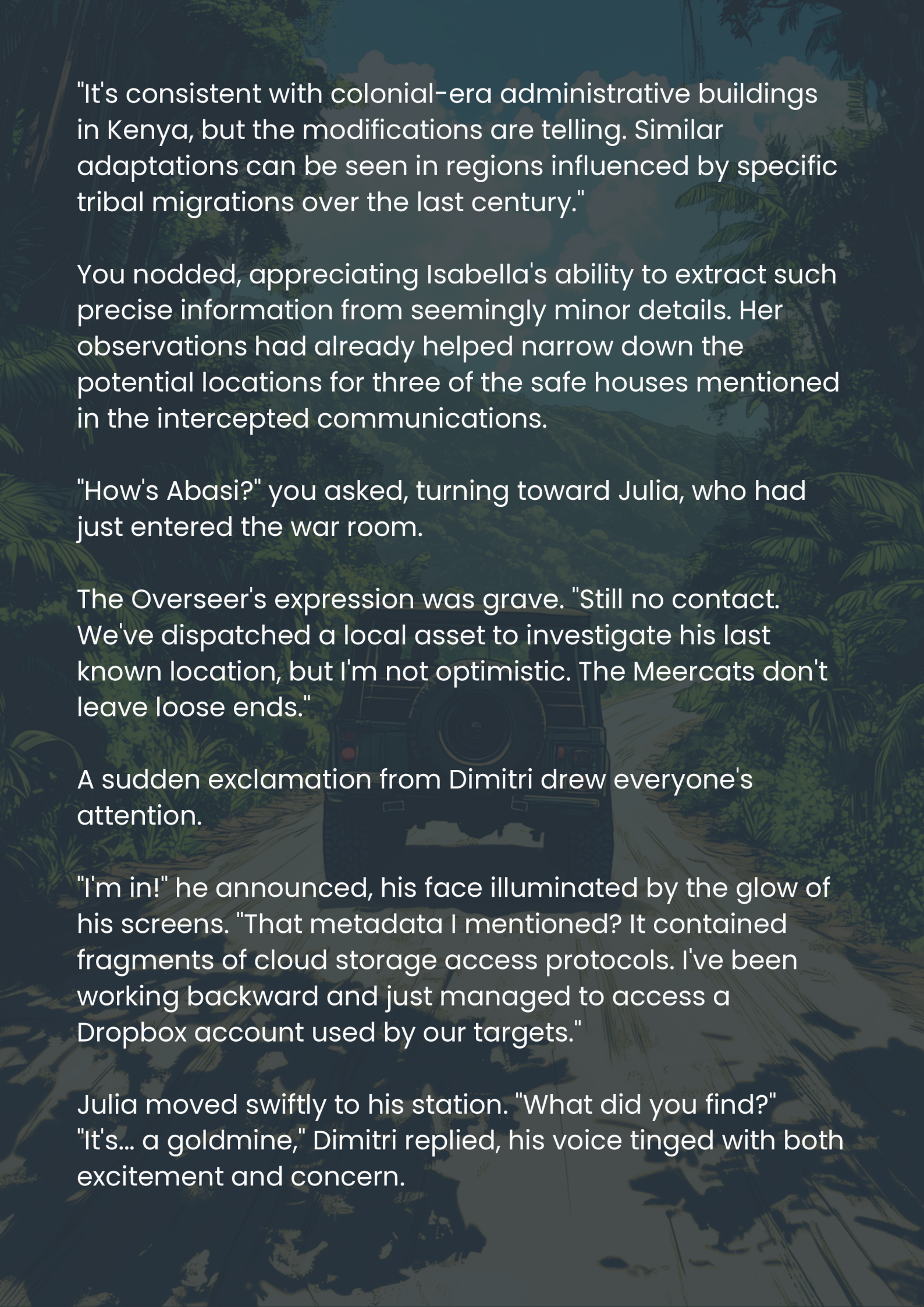
CHAPTER 2: Digital Breadcrumbs

Special Agent K studied the photographs transmitted by James Brown, manipulating the holographic display with practiced gestures. The war room aboard Shadow Wing hummed with activity as the aircraft maintained a holding pattern over international waters, safely beyond the reach of conventional detection.

"These two," you said, isolating the images of the men James had identified as Subjects Alpha and Bravo. "Run them through our recognition software again, but this time cross-reference with the intelligence package from M16's Southeast Asia operations."

"Already on it," Dimitri Zechev replied from his workstation. The Bulgarian tech specialist's fingers danced across multiple keyboards, lines of code reflecting in his glasses. "But I'm also following another lead. The communications Mei intercepted contained embedded metadata that I've been tracing."

Isabella Moreno approached the holographic display, studying the surrounding environment in the photographs. Her expertise in cultural and historical contexts had proven invaluable for pinpointing geographic locations with minimal visual cues. "This architecture," she said, pointing to a structure partially visible in the background.



"It's consistent with colonial-era administrative buildings in Kenya, but the modifications are telling. Similar adaptations can be seen in regions influenced by specific tribal migrations over the last century."

You nodded, appreciating Isabella's ability to extract such precise information from seemingly minor details. Her observations had already helped narrow down the potential locations for three of the safe houses mentioned in the intercepted communications.

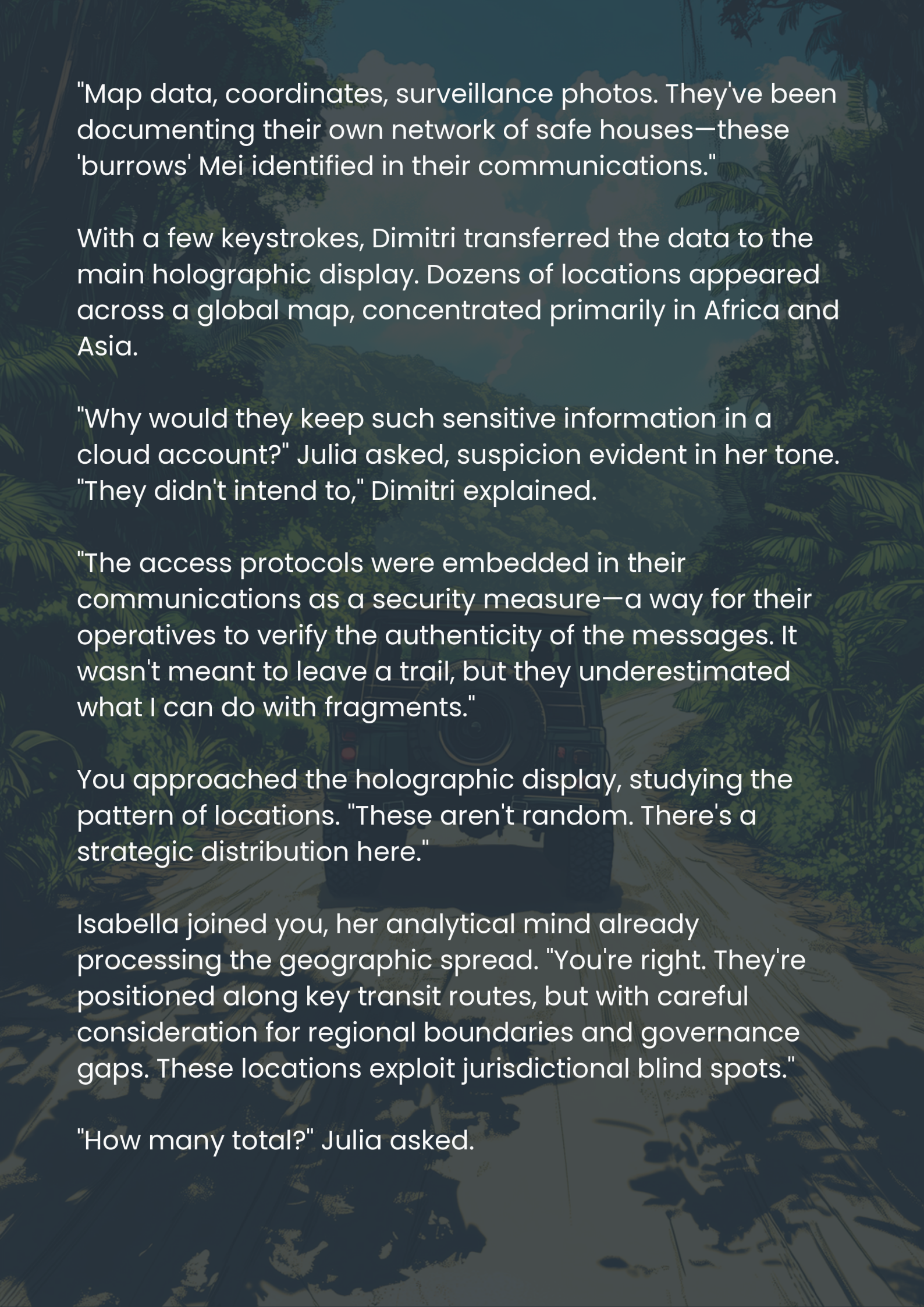
"How's Abasi?" you asked, turning toward Julia, who had just entered the war room.

The Overseer's expression was grave. "Still no contact. We've dispatched a local asset to investigate his last known location, but I'm not optimistic. The Meercats don't leave loose ends."

A sudden exclamation from Dimitri drew everyone's attention.

"I'm in!" he announced, his face illuminated by the glow of his screens. "That metadata I mentioned? It contained fragments of cloud storage access protocols. I've been working backward and just managed to access a Dropbox account used by our targets."

Julia moved swiftly to his station. "What did you find?" "It's... a goldmine," Dimitri replied, his voice tinged with both excitement and concern.



"Map data, coordinates, surveillance photos. They've been documenting their own network of safe houses—these 'burrows' Mei identified in their communications."

With a few keystrokes, Dimitri transferred the data to the main holographic display. Dozens of locations appeared across a global map, concentrated primarily in Africa and Asia.

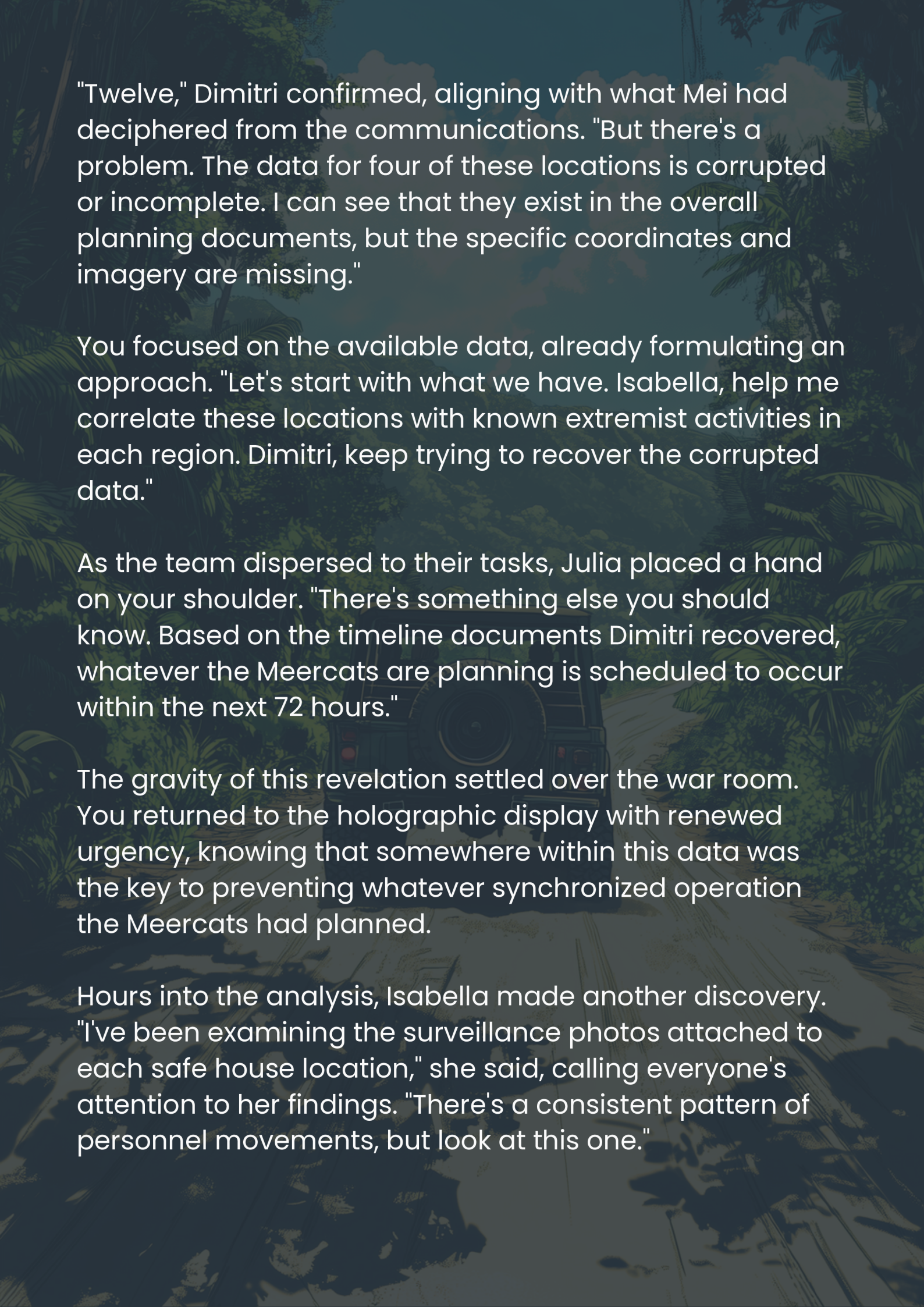
"Why would they keep such sensitive information in a cloud account?" Julia asked, suspicion evident in her tone. "They didn't intend to," Dimitri explained.

"The access protocols were embedded in their communications as a security measure—a way for their operatives to verify the authenticity of the messages. It wasn't meant to leave a trail, but they underestimated what I can do with fragments."

You approached the holographic display, studying the pattern of locations. "These aren't random. There's a strategic distribution here."

Isabella joined you, her analytical mind already processing the geographic spread. "You're right. They're positioned along key transit routes, but with careful consideration for regional boundaries and governance gaps. These locations exploit jurisdictional blind spots."

"How many total?" Julia asked.



"Twelve," Dimitri confirmed, aligning with what Mei had deciphered from the communications. "But there's a problem. The data for four of these locations is corrupted or incomplete. I can see that they exist in the overall planning documents, but the specific coordinates and imagery are missing."

You focused on the available data, already formulating an approach. "Let's start with what we have. Isabella, help me correlate these locations with known extremist activities in each region. Dimitri, keep trying to recover the corrupted data."

As the team dispersed to their tasks, Julia placed a hand on your shoulder. "There's something else you should know. Based on the timeline documents Dimitri recovered, whatever the Meercats are planning is scheduled to occur within the next 72 hours."

The gravity of this revelation settled over the war room. You returned to the holographic display with renewed urgency, knowing that somewhere within this data was the key to preventing whatever synchronized operation the Meercats had planned.

Hours into the analysis, Isabella made another discovery. "I've been examining the surveillance photos attached to each safe house location," she said, calling everyone's attention to her findings. "There's a consistent pattern of personnel movements, but look at this one."

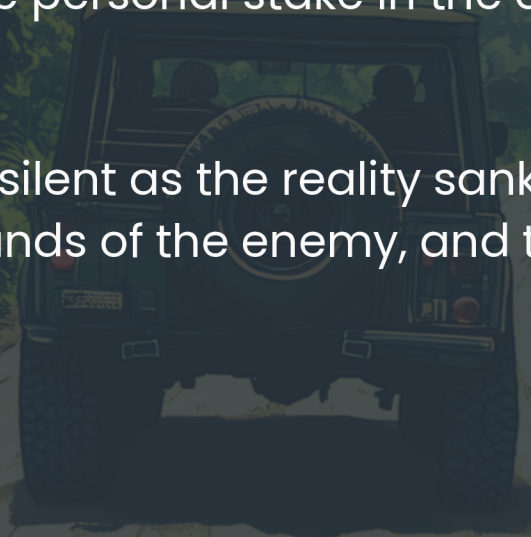
She highlighted one of the images, showing what appeared to be a prisoner transfer at one of the identified locations.

"The clothing, posture, and physical dimensions match Abasi's profile," Isabella continued. "This was taken approximately six hours ago at one of the unidentified locations."

You studied the image, hope and determination rising simultaneously. "If Abasi is being held at one of these missing locations, we have even more reason to find them quickly."

"And a much more personal stake in the outcome," Julia added quietly.

The war room fell silent as the reality sank in: one of their own was in the hands of the enemy, and the clock was ticking.



CHAPTER 3: Race Against Time

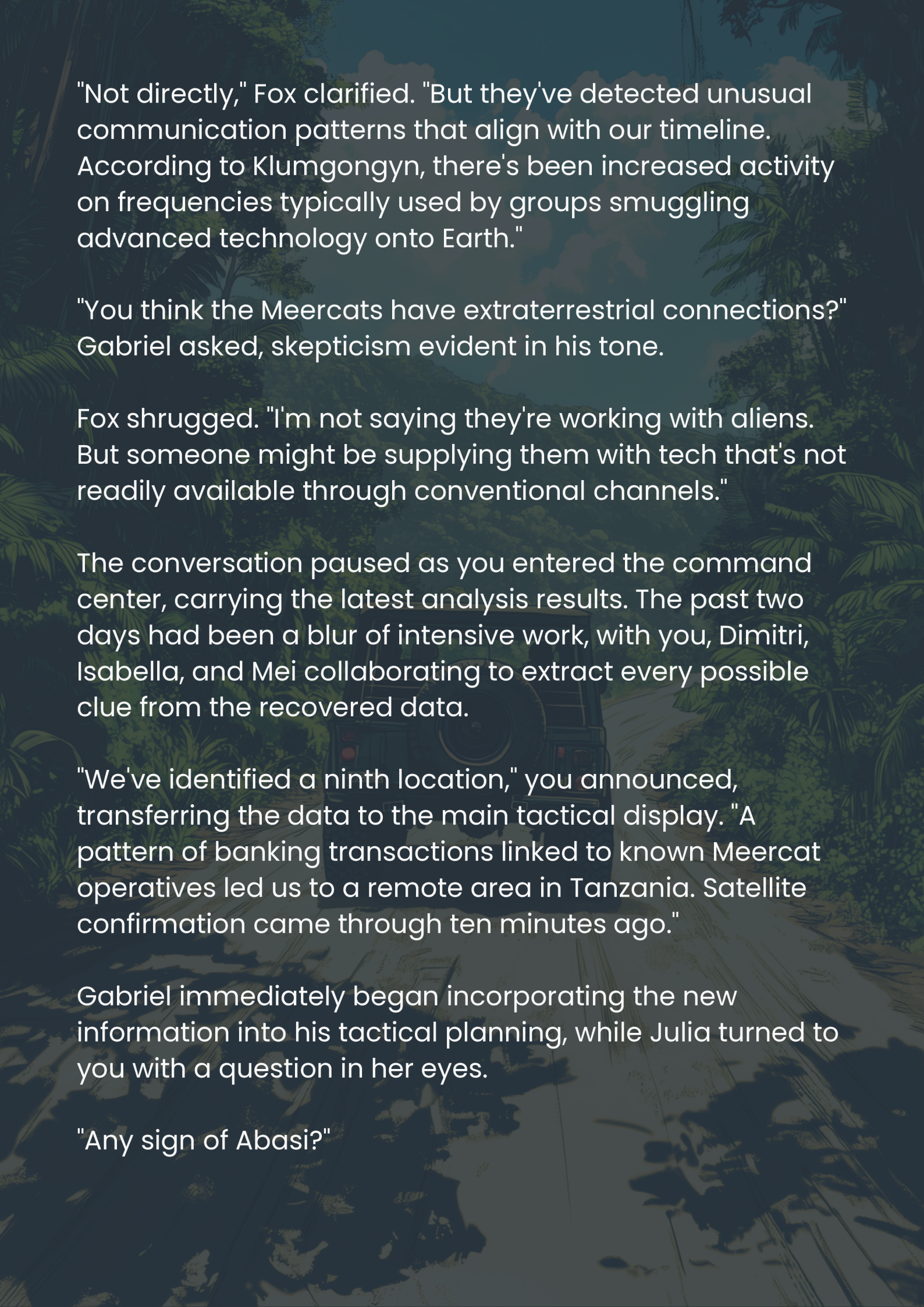
The atmosphere aboard Shadow Wing was electric with tension as the aircraft cut through the night sky at 45,000 feet. In the forty-eight hours since discovering the Dropbox repository, SERPENT had been operating at maximum capacity, coordinating with trusted local assets near each identified safe house while simultaneously working to pinpoint the remaining locations.

Gabriel Adams stood at the tactical planning table, his muscular frame bent over holographic representations of the eight confirmed Meercat safe houses. As leader of the BTRU, he was responsible for developing the assault strategy once all targets were identified.

"We'll need simultaneous strikes," he explained to Julia and Fox Meyer, who had just returned from a separate assignment. "Even a fifteen-minute delay between locations could give them enough time to initiate whatever they're planning or destroy evidence."

Fox nodded, his experience as both an extraterrestrial liaison and field operative giving him a unique perspective. "The timing is especially critical given what my contacts have shared."

Julia raised an eyebrow. "Your Volrac sources have intel on this?"

The background is a dark, moody illustration of a jungle scene. A dirt road or path leads from the bottom center towards the middle ground, where a dark-colored vehicle, possibly a truck or a large SUV, is parked or moving slowly. The road is flanked by dense, lush tropical vegetation, including palm trees and various leafy plants. The lighting is dim, with some highlights on the foliage and the road, creating a sense of mystery and depth. The overall color palette is dominated by dark greens, browns, and blues.

"Not directly," Fox clarified. "But they've detected unusual communication patterns that align with our timeline. According to Klumgongyn, there's been increased activity on frequencies typically used by groups smuggling advanced technology onto Earth."

"You think the Meercats have extraterrestrial connections?" Gabriel asked, skepticism evident in his tone.

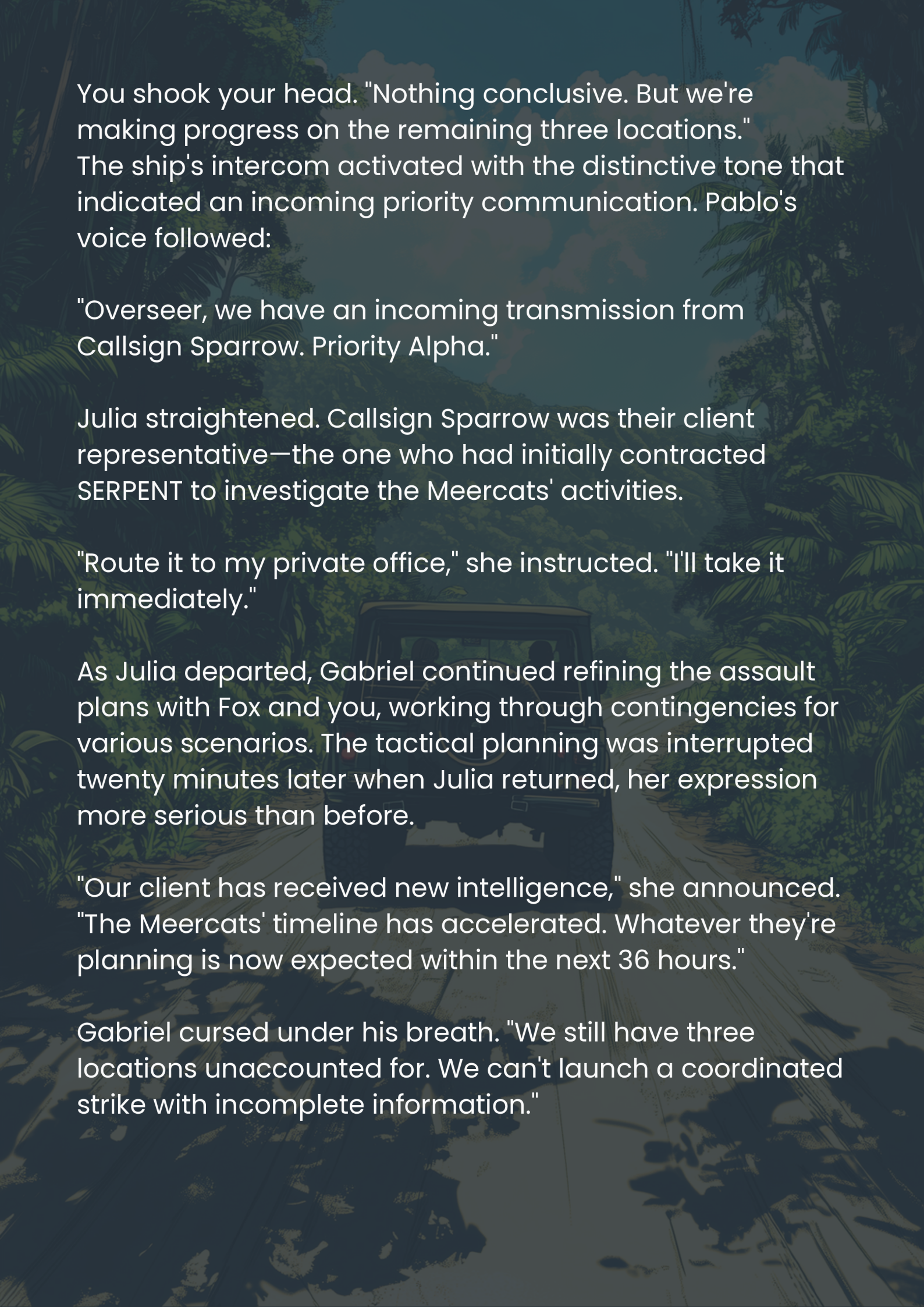
Fox shrugged. "I'm not saying they're working with aliens. But someone might be supplying them with tech that's not readily available through conventional channels."

The conversation paused as you entered the command center, carrying the latest analysis results. The past two days had been a blur of intensive work, with you, Dimitri, Isabella, and Mei collaborating to extract every possible clue from the recovered data.

"We've identified a ninth location," you announced, transferring the data to the main tactical display. "A pattern of banking transactions linked to known Meercat operatives led us to a remote area in Tanzania. Satellite confirmation came through ten minutes ago."

Gabriel immediately began incorporating the new information into his tactical planning, while Julia turned to you with a question in her eyes.

"Any sign of Abasi?"



You shook your head. "Nothing conclusive. But we're making progress on the remaining three locations." The ship's intercom activated with the distinctive tone that indicated an incoming priority communication. Pablo's voice followed:

"Overseer, we have an incoming transmission from Callsign Sparrow. Priority Alpha."

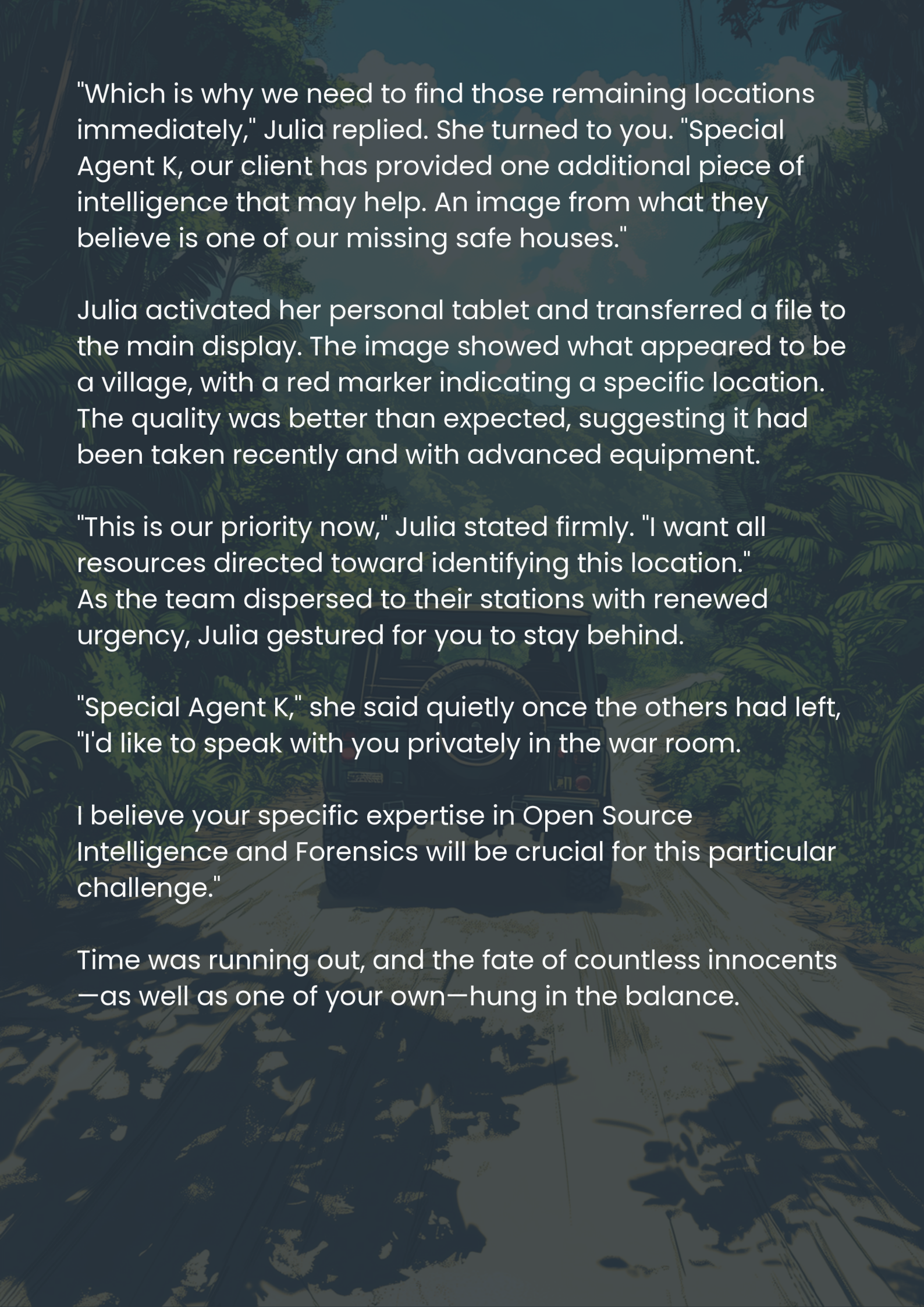
Julia straightened. Callsign Sparrow was their client representative—the one who had initially contracted SERPENT to investigate the Meercats' activities.

"Route it to my private office," she instructed. "I'll take it immediately."

As Julia departed, Gabriel continued refining the assault plans with Fox and you, working through contingencies for various scenarios. The tactical planning was interrupted twenty minutes later when Julia returned, her expression more serious than before.

"Our client has received new intelligence," she announced. "The Meercats' timeline has accelerated. Whatever they're planning is now expected within the next 36 hours."

Gabriel cursed under his breath. "We still have three locations unaccounted for. We can't launch a coordinated strike with incomplete information."



"Which is why we need to find those remaining locations immediately," Julia replied. She turned to you. "Special Agent K, our client has provided one additional piece of intelligence that may help. An image from what they believe is one of our missing safe houses."

Julia activated her personal tablet and transferred a file to the main display. The image showed what appeared to be a village, with a red marker indicating a specific location. The quality was better than expected, suggesting it had been taken recently and with advanced equipment.

"This is our priority now," Julia stated firmly. "I want all resources directed toward identifying this location." As the team dispersed to their stations with renewed urgency, Julia gestured for you to stay behind.

"Special Agent K," she said quietly once the others had left, "I'd like to speak with you privately in the war room."

I believe your specific expertise in Open Source Intelligence and Forensics will be crucial for this particular challenge."

Time was running out, and the fate of countless innocents—as well as one of your own—hung in the balance.

Briefing

Greetings, Special Agent.

Our client is involved in fighting terrorist groups in Asia and Africa. Recently, they gained access to a Dropbox account filled with map data. Most of these seem to be related to safe houses used by a terrorist organization called "The Meercats". Indeed a strange name, but nonetheless, they mean business.

After having located most safehouses, our client is still struggling to locate a few of them. Since the operation to take down all of these locations needs to be synchronized. There's an urgent need to identify them all before the next phase can begin.

Attached, you'll find an image of what appears to be a village, with a red marker to indicate the exact location. It's your assignment to find where in the world this is. Currently we have reason to believe this to be either in Africa or Asia. But, given the organizations' widespread members, this is only a guess at this time.

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

Materials

road-to-nowhere-challenge.jpg

Answer Instruction

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

Use the coordinates you find as the answer. Also, we heard the number 1920 is of importance in this case.

Answer format: 00.000000,00.000000,00

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.