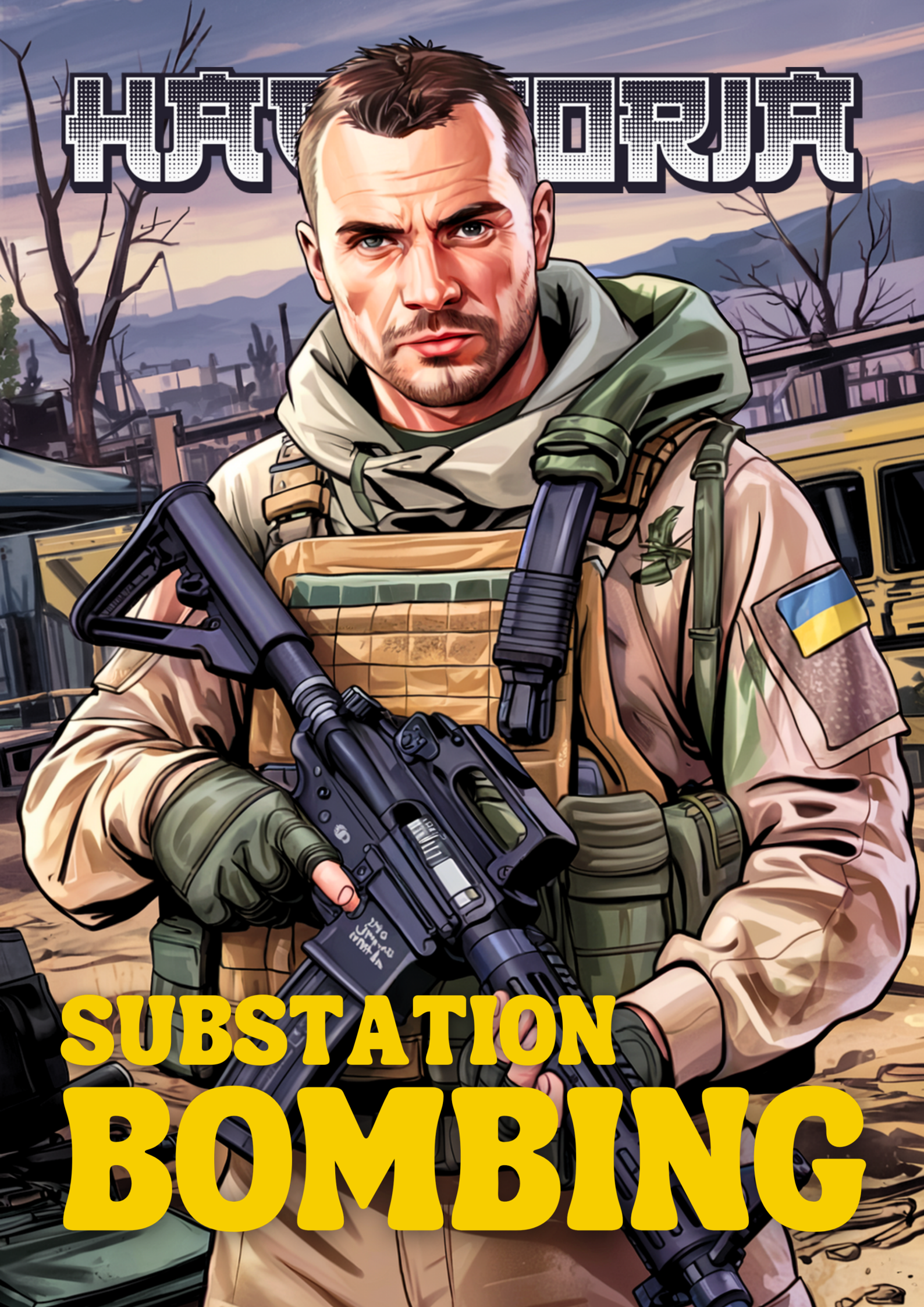


# 快報



## SUBSTATION BOMBING



## Chapter 1: Shadow Wing

The Bombardier Global 8000 cut through the night sky, its sleek black exterior reflecting nothing but darkness. Inside the aircraft, the mood was a mixture of relief and exhaustion. SERPENT's latest mission in the dense jungles of Colombia had been a success, but barely.

Julia Sharpe gazed out the window, her reflection in the reinforced glass showing a woman in her early forties with sharp eyes that missed nothing. The Overseer of SERPENT tapped her fingers rhythmically on the armrest of her seat, a habit that surfaced only when something was bothering her.

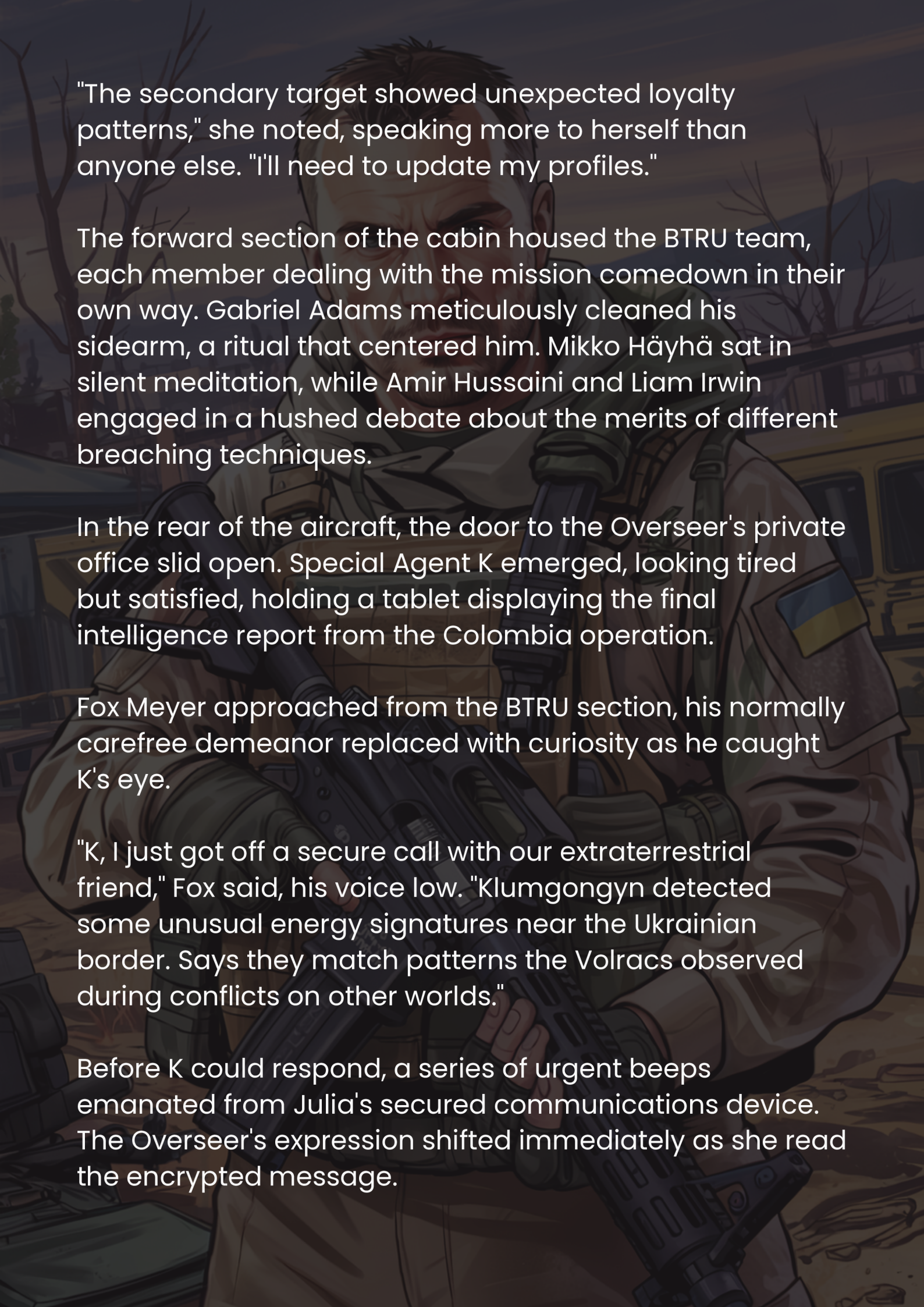
"Dmitri," she called out, her British accent crisp against the hum of the engines. "Do a final sweep of communications. I want to be sure we weren't followed digitally."

From his workstation in the mid-cabin war room, Dimitri Zechev nodded, his fingers already flying across the keyboard. The Bulgarian tech expert hadn't slept in thirty-six hours, but no one would know it from the focus in his eyes.

"Already on it," he replied, lines of code reflecting in his glasses. "No digital footprint. We're ghosts, as always."

Across from Dimitri, Mei Huang was reviewing psychological profiles of the cartel leaders they had just outwitted. Her analytical mind was never at rest, even when the mission was complete.





"The secondary target showed unexpected loyalty patterns," she noted, speaking more to herself than anyone else. "I'll need to update my profiles."

The forward section of the cabin housed the BTRU team, each member dealing with the mission comedown in their own way. Gabriel Adams meticulously cleaned his sidearm, a ritual that centered him. Mikko Häyhä sat in silent meditation, while Amir Hussaini and Liam Irwin engaged in a hushed debate about the merits of different breaching techniques.

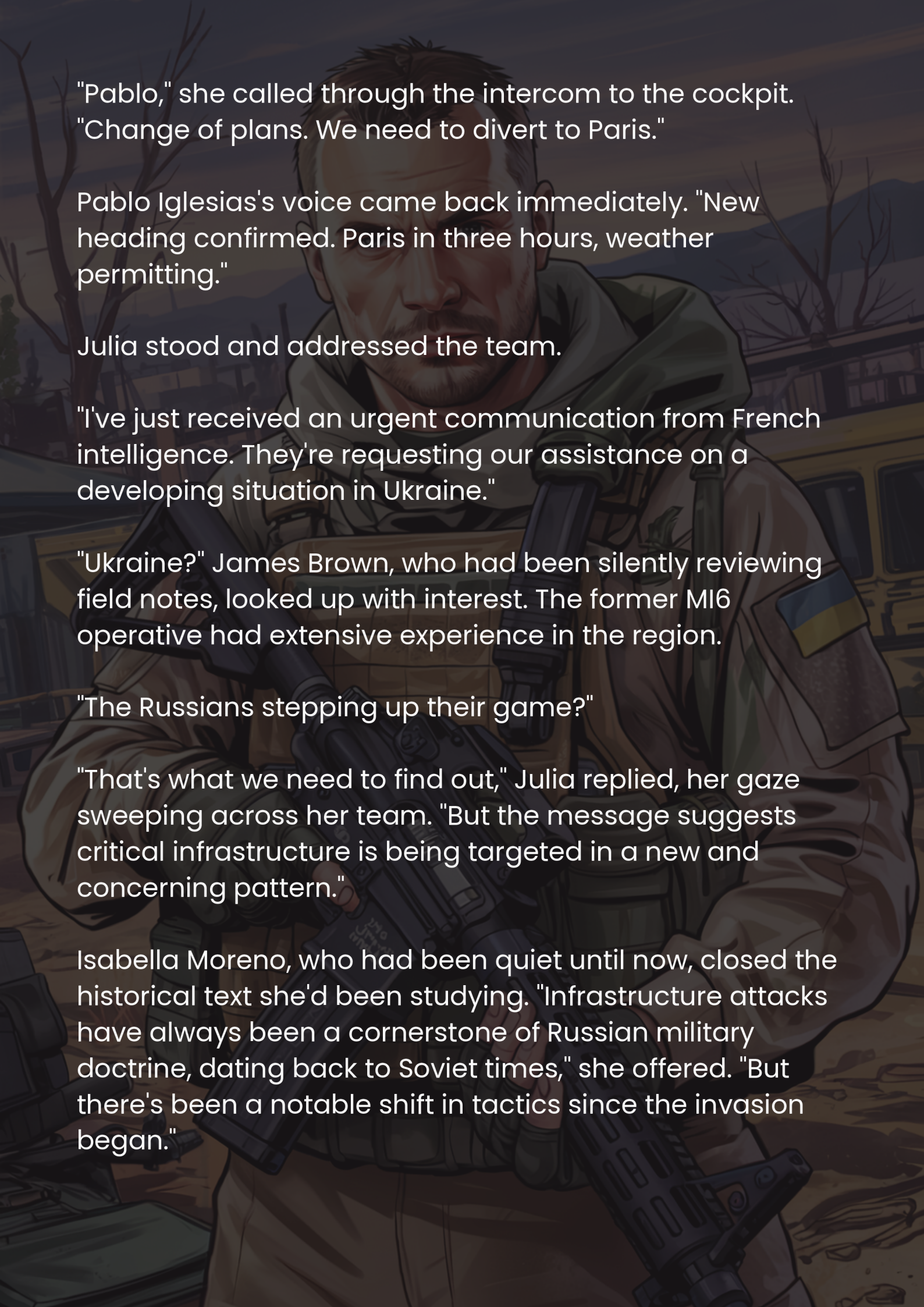
In the rear of the aircraft, the door to the Overseer's private office slid open. Special Agent K emerged, looking tired but satisfied, holding a tablet displaying the final intelligence report from the Colombia operation.

Fox Meyer approached from the BTRU section, his normally carefree demeanor replaced with curiosity as he caught K's eye.

"K, I just got off a secure call with our extraterrestrial friend," Fox said, his voice low. "Klungongyn detected some unusual energy signatures near the Ukrainian border. Says they match patterns the Volracs observed during conflicts on other worlds."

Before K could respond, a series of urgent beeps emanated from Julia's secured communications device. The Overseer's expression shifted immediately as she read the encrypted message.



A man in military gear, including a helmet and a rifle, is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. The background is a dark, desaturated landscape with some structures and trees. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, sans-serif font.

"Pablo," she called through the intercom to the cockpit.  
"Change of plans. We need to divert to Paris."

Pablo Iglesias's voice came back immediately. "New heading confirmed. Paris in three hours, weather permitting."

Julia stood and addressed the team.

"I've just received an urgent communication from French intelligence. They're requesting our assistance on a developing situation in Ukraine."

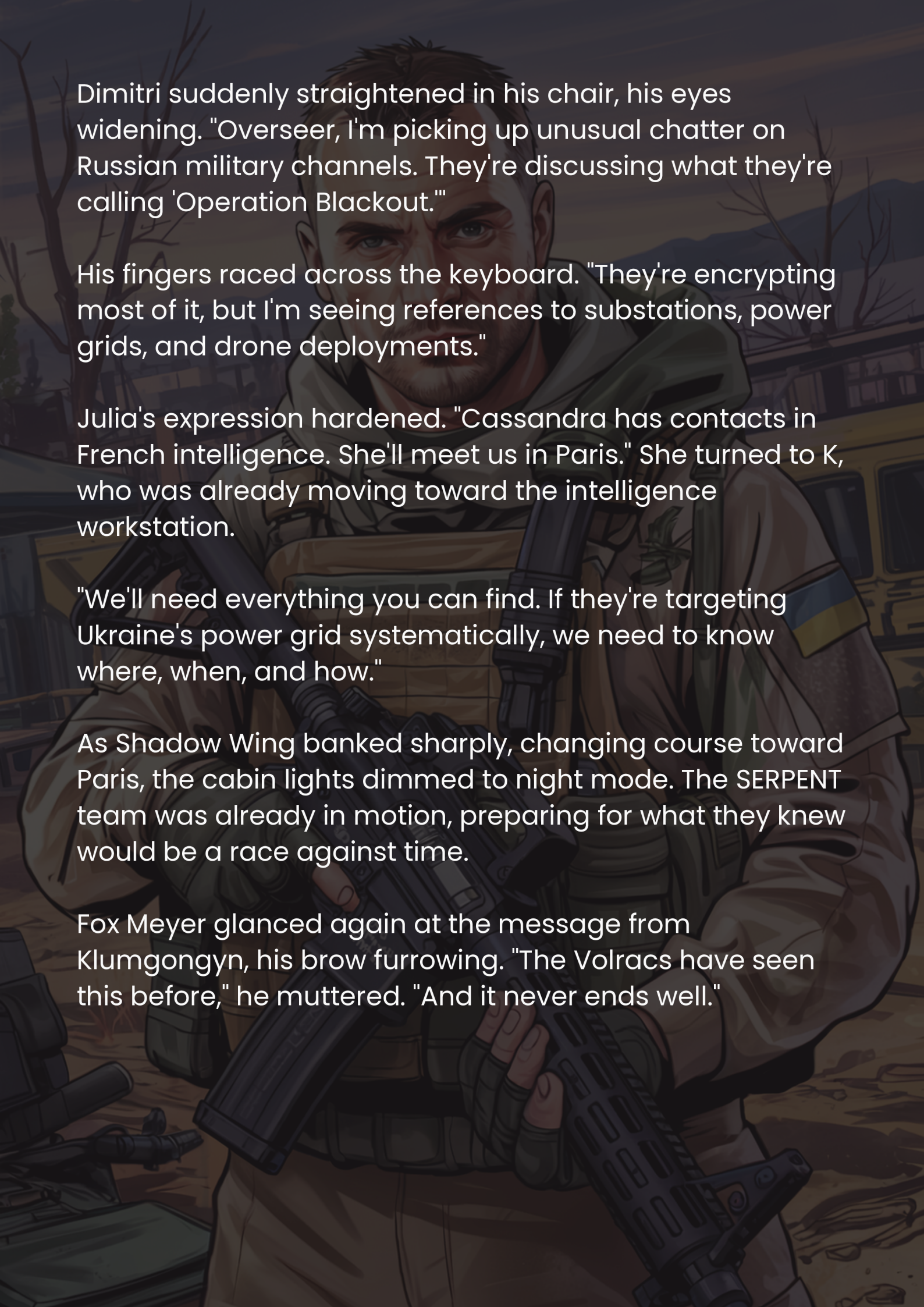
"Ukraine?" James Brown, who had been silently reviewing field notes, looked up with interest. The former MI6 operative had extensive experience in the region.

"The Russians stepping up their game?"

"That's what we need to find out," Julia replied, her gaze sweeping across her team. "But the message suggests critical infrastructure is being targeted in a new and concerning pattern."

Isabella Moreno, who had been quiet until now, closed the historical text she'd been studying. "Infrastructure attacks have always been a cornerstone of Russian military doctrine, dating back to Soviet times," she offered. "But there's been a notable shift in tactics since the invasion began."





Dimitri suddenly straightened in his chair, his eyes widening. "Overseer, I'm picking up unusual chatter on Russian military channels. They're discussing what they're calling 'Operation Blackout.'"

His fingers raced across the keyboard. "They're encrypting most of it, but I'm seeing references to substations, power grids, and drone deployments."

Julia's expression hardened. "Cassandra has contacts in French intelligence. She'll meet us in Paris." She turned to K, who was already moving toward the intelligence workstation.

"We'll need everything you can find. If they're targeting Ukraine's power grid systematically, we need to know where, when, and how."

As Shadow Wing banked sharply, changing course toward Paris, the cabin lights dimmed to night mode. The SERPENT team was already in motion, preparing for what they knew would be a race against time.

Fox Meyer glanced again at the message from Klumgongyn, his brow furrowing. "The Volracs have seen this before," he muttered. "And it never ends well."



## Chapter 2: The Paris Connection

Rain fell in sheets over Paris, casting the City of Light in a somber gray veil. Cassandra Laurent stood beneath the awning of Café Lumière, a nondescript establishment in the 11th arrondissement, far from the tourist crowds. Her tailored suit and confident posture marked her as someone with purpose, but not so much that she would draw attention.

Inside, at a corner table partially hidden by an ornamental plant, sat Henri Dubois, Cassandra's former colleague from the DGSI, France's internal intelligence service. Now a liaison with military intelligence, Henri had been the one to send the urgent message to SERPENT.

The bell above the door chimed as Julia Sharpe entered, followed by Special Agent K and James Brown. They moved with the casual precision of people accustomed to blending in while remaining ready for anything.

"Cassandra," Julia nodded as they approached the table. No embraces, no unnecessary words. SERPENT operated on efficiency.

"Julia," Cassandra replied, then gestured to her contact. "This is Henri Dubois. He has information about the Ukrainian power grid situation."

Henri, a man in his fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and sharp eyes, waited until they were all seated before speaking in a low voice.





"Three days ago, our satellites detected a pattern of systematic attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure," he began, sliding a tablet across the table. "The attacks have been precisely targeted, hitting transmission nodes and substations in a sequence that suggests intimate knowledge of the grid's architecture."

K took the tablet, fingers immediately beginning to scroll through the intelligence. The images showed various substations, some still smoking from recent attacks, others intact but marked as potential targets.

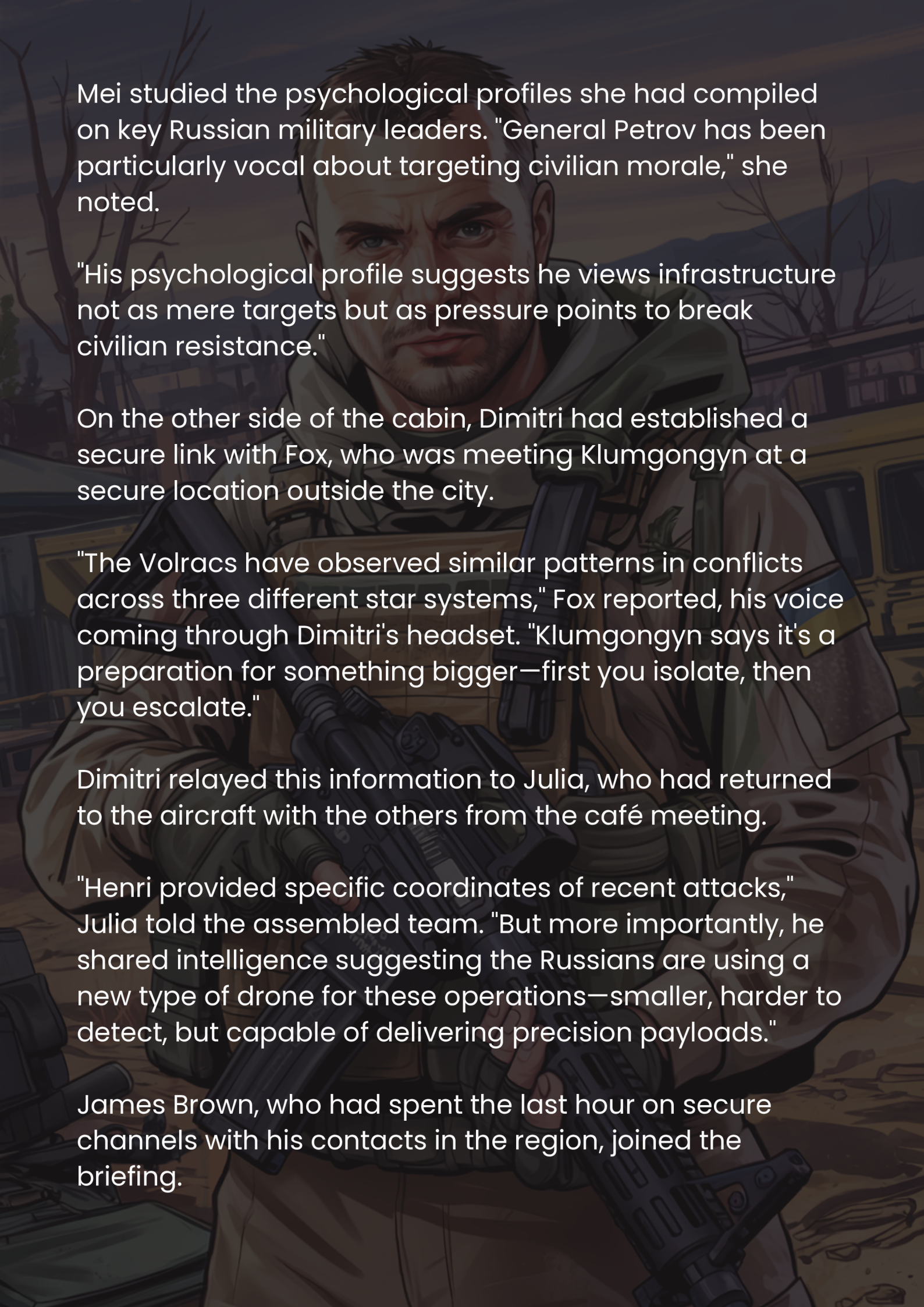
James Brown leaned forward. "Russian military?"

Henri shook his head. "That's what's concerning. These don't match standard Russian military protocols. They're too surgical, too specific. And with the Americans pulling back..." he trailed off, the implication clear.

Back on Shadow Wing, parked at a private airfield outside Paris, the rest of the team was engaged in their own analysis. Isabella Moreno had converted part of the war room into a historical intelligence center, with maps of Ukraine's power infrastructure dating back to Soviet times.

"Ukraine's power grid was built during the Soviet era," she explained to Gabriel Adams and Mei Huang, who had joined her. "It was designed to be interconnected with Russia's system, which means Russian engineers would have intimate knowledge of its vulnerabilities."





Mei studied the psychological profiles she had compiled on key Russian military leaders. "General Petrov has been particularly vocal about targeting civilian morale," she noted.

"His psychological profile suggests he views infrastructure not as mere targets but as pressure points to break civilian resistance."

On the other side of the cabin, Dimitri had established a secure link with Fox, who was meeting Klumgongyn at a secure location outside the city.

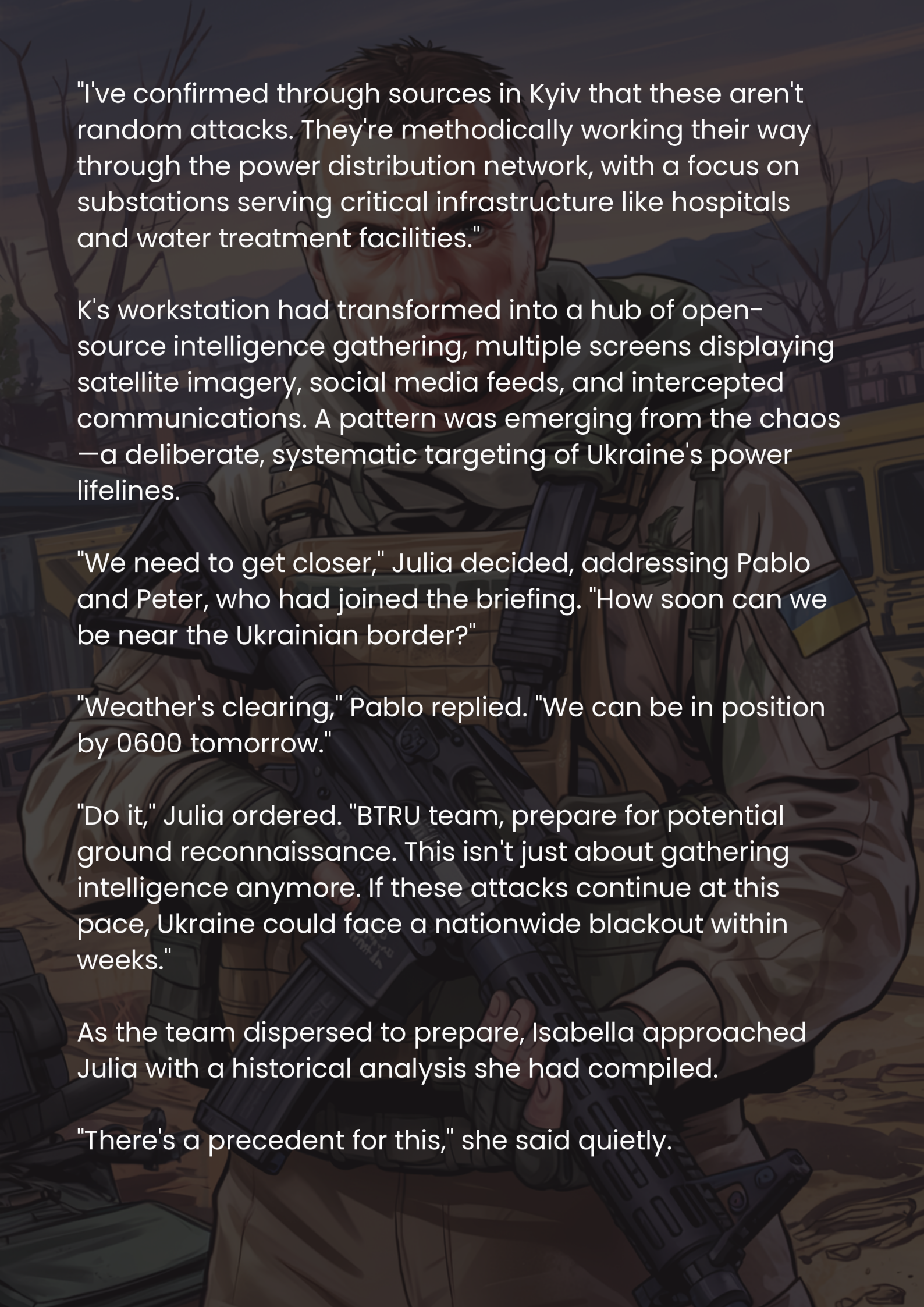
"The Volracs have observed similar patterns in conflicts across three different star systems," Fox reported, his voice coming through Dimitri's headset. "Klumgongyn says it's a preparation for something bigger—first you isolate, then you escalate."

Dimitri relayed this information to Julia, who had returned to the aircraft with the others from the café meeting.

"Henri provided specific coordinates of recent attacks," Julia told the assembled team. "But more importantly, he shared intelligence suggesting the Russians are using a new type of drone for these operations—smaller, harder to detect, but capable of delivering precision payloads."

James Brown, who had spent the last hour on secure channels with his contacts in the region, joined the briefing.





"I've confirmed through sources in Kyiv that these aren't random attacks. They're methodically working their way through the power distribution network, with a focus on substations serving critical infrastructure like hospitals and water treatment facilities."

K's workstation had transformed into a hub of open-source intelligence gathering, multiple screens displaying satellite imagery, social media feeds, and intercepted communications. A pattern was emerging from the chaos—a deliberate, systematic targeting of Ukraine's power lifelines.

"We need to get closer," Julia decided, addressing Pablo and Peter, who had joined the briefing. "How soon can we be near the Ukrainian border?"

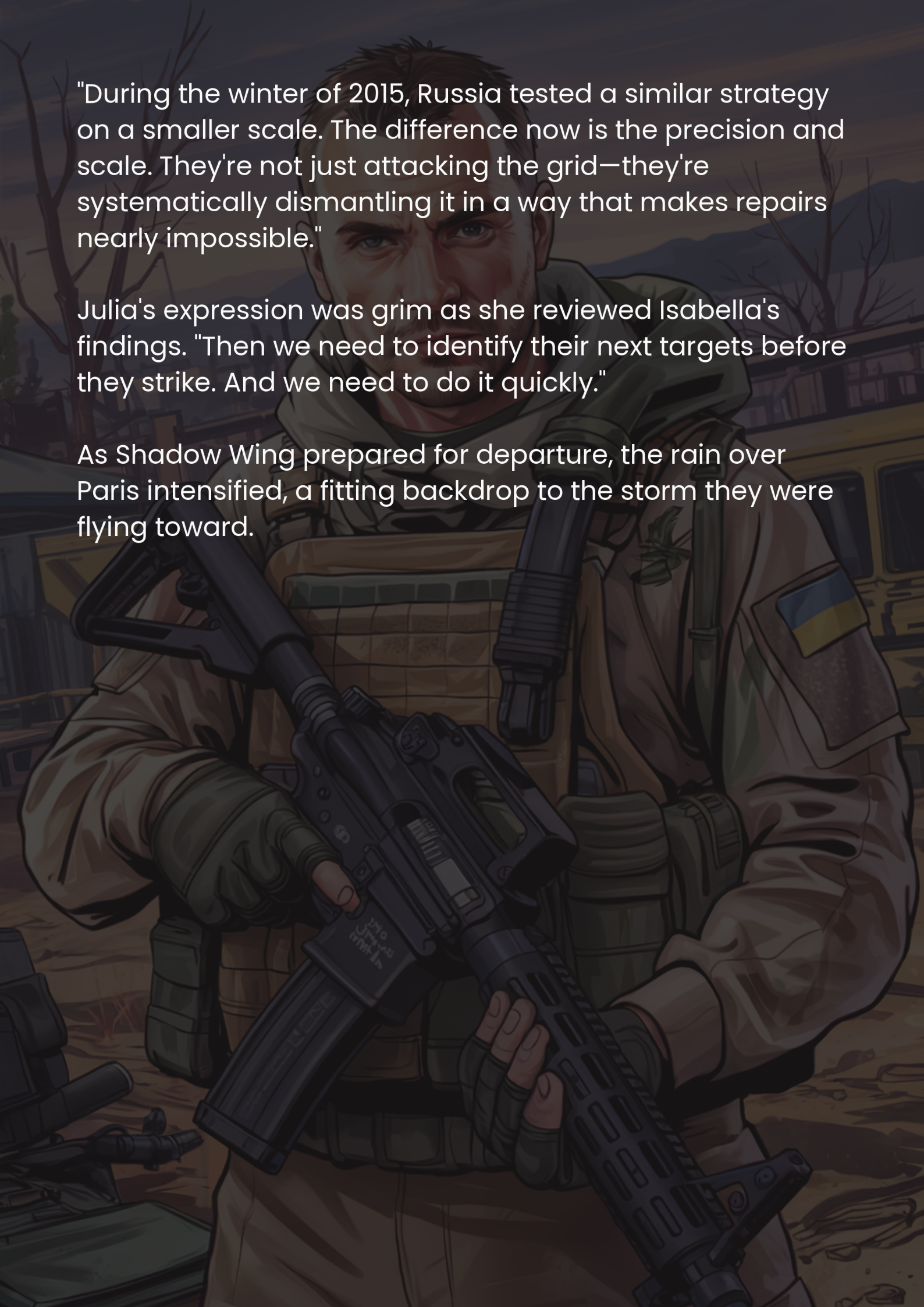
"Weather's clearing," Pablo replied. "We can be in position by 0600 tomorrow."

"Do it," Julia ordered. "BTRU team, prepare for potential ground reconnaissance. This isn't just about gathering intelligence anymore. If these attacks continue at this pace, Ukraine could face a nationwide blackout within weeks."

As the team dispersed to prepare, Isabella approached Julia with a historical analysis she had compiled.

"There's a precedent for this," she said quietly.



A detailed illustration of a soldier in a combat uniform, holding an assault rifle. The soldier has a serious expression and is looking directly at the viewer. The uniform is olive green with a Ukrainian flag patch on the right sleeve. The background is a dark, desaturated landscape with bare trees and a building in the distance.

"During the winter of 2015, Russia tested a similar strategy on a smaller scale. The difference now is the precision and scale. They're not just attacking the grid—they're systematically dismantling it in a way that makes repairs nearly impossible."

Julia's expression was grim as she reviewed Isabella's findings. "Then we need to identify their next targets before they strike. And we need to do it quickly."

As Shadow Wing prepared for departure, the rain over Paris intensified, a fitting backdrop to the storm they were flying toward.



## Chapter 3: Eyes in the Sky

Dawn broke over Eastern Europe as Shadow Wing cruised at 45,000 feet, its advanced stealth technology rendering it invisible to conventional radar. Below, the landscape transitioned from the dense forests of Poland to the rolling plains of western Ukraine, a land now scarred by war.

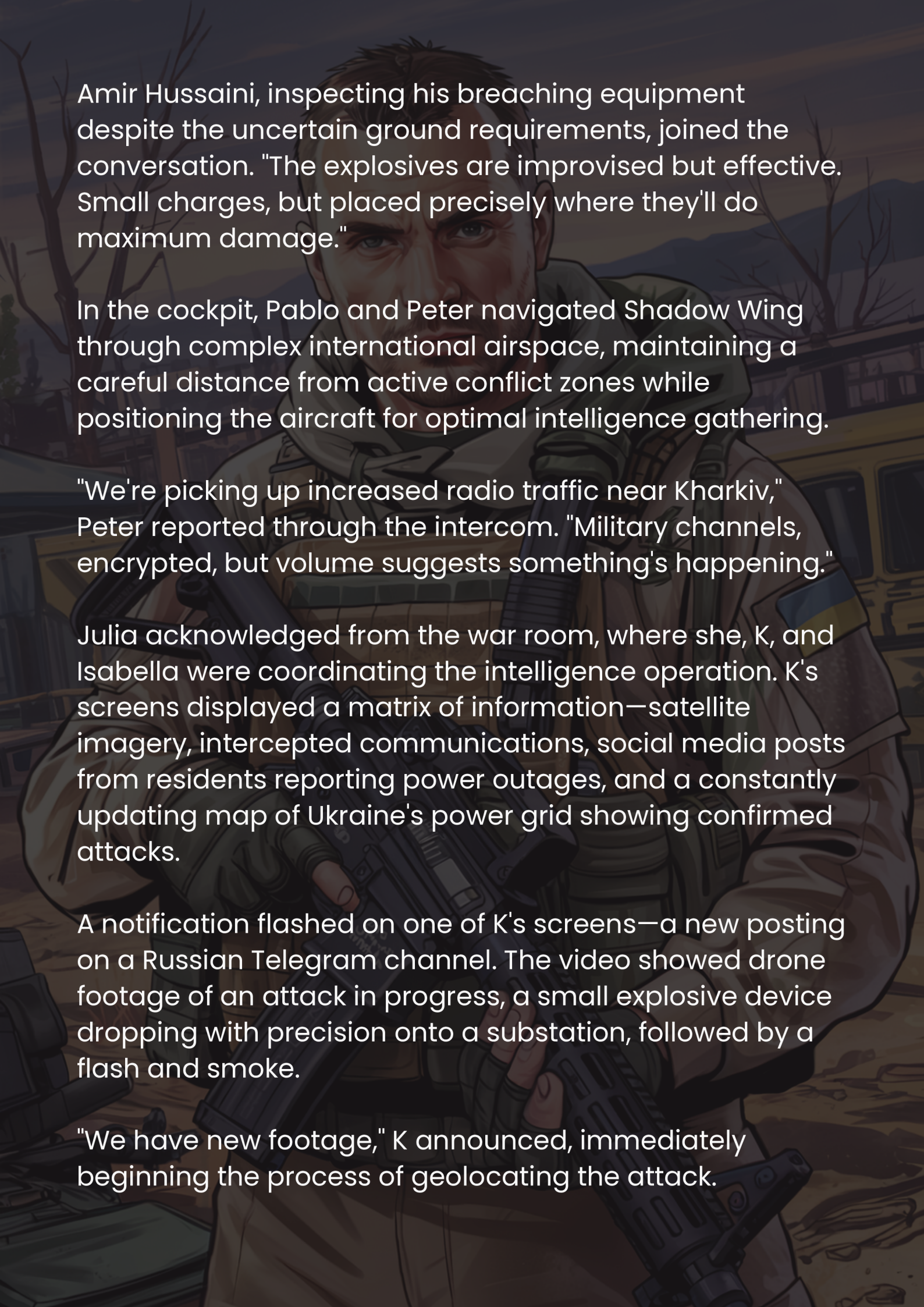
In the BTRU section of the aircraft, Gabriel Adams led his team through final equipment checks. Despite the possibility that this mission might remain purely intelligence-focused, the tactical team always prepared for ground deployment.

"Mikko, what's your assessment of the drone footage?" Gabriel asked, turning to the Finnish sniper who had been analyzing videos of the attacks.

Mikko Häyhä looked up from his tablet, his expression thoughtful. "The drones are using commercial frames with military modifications. Small enough to avoid most air defense systems, but stabilized for precision payload delivery." He pointed to a freeze-frame showing a drone hovering over a substation. "The operator knows exactly where to target—the transformers specifically."

At a nearby workstation, Dimitri had linked with Mikko to analyze the technical aspects of the footage. "These aren't random Telegram warriors," the Bulgarian tech expert noted. "The flight patterns show military precision. They're following optimal attack vectors, minimizing exposure time."



A man in military gear, including a helmet and a vest with a Ukrainian flag patch, is holding a rifle. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a dark, war-torn landscape with smoke and debris.

Amir Hussaini, inspecting his breaching equipment despite the uncertain ground requirements, joined the conversation. "The explosives are improvised but effective. Small charges, but placed precisely where they'll do maximum damage."

In the cockpit, Pablo and Peter navigated Shadow Wing through complex international airspace, maintaining a careful distance from active conflict zones while positioning the aircraft for optimal intelligence gathering.

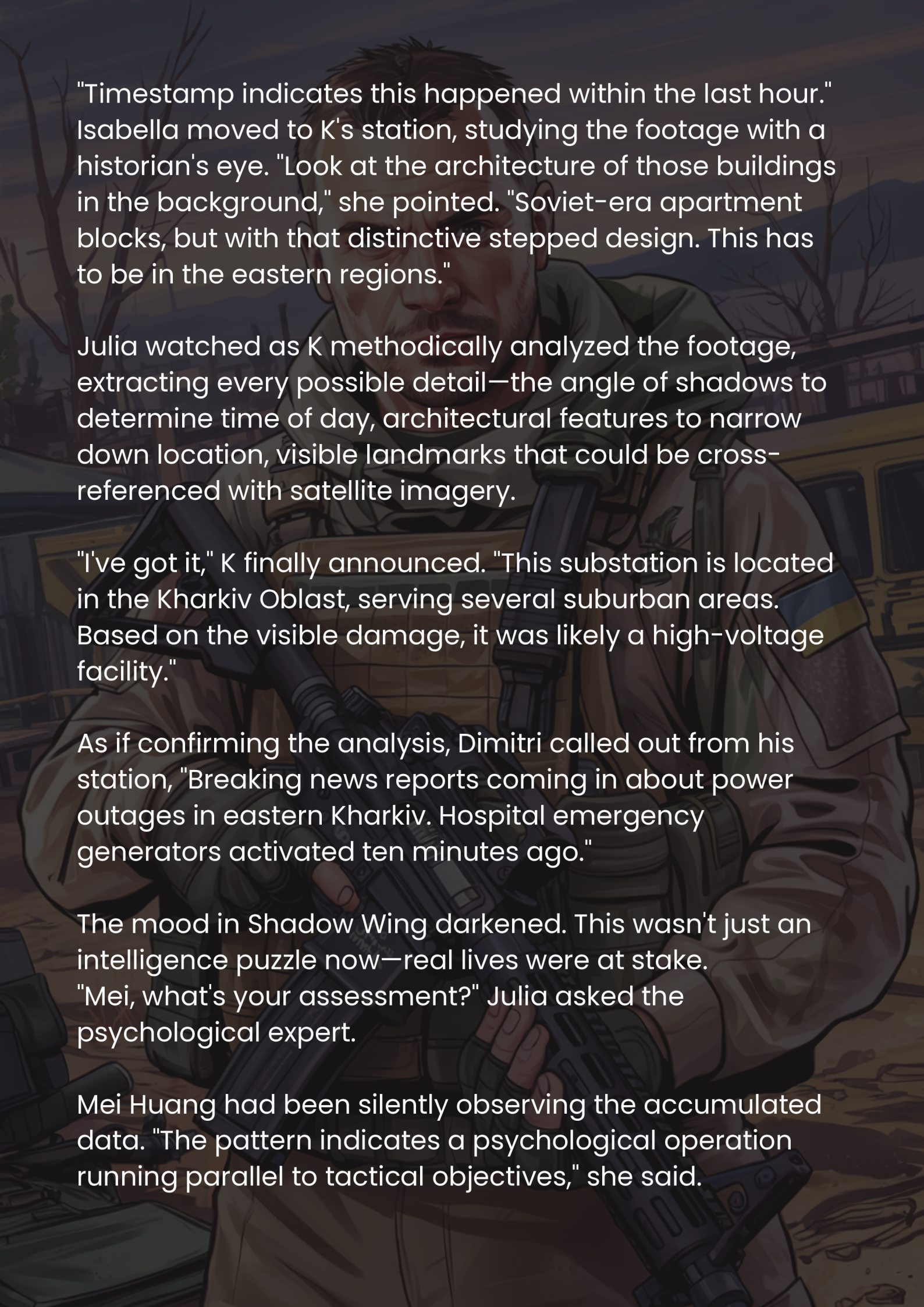
"We're picking up increased radio traffic near Kharkiv," Peter reported through the intercom. "Military channels, encrypted, but volume suggests something's happening."

Julia acknowledged from the war room, where she, K, and Isabella were coordinating the intelligence operation. K's screens displayed a matrix of information—satellite imagery, intercepted communications, social media posts from residents reporting power outages, and a constantly updating map of Ukraine's power grid showing confirmed attacks.

A notification flashed on one of K's screens—a new posting on a Russian Telegram channel. The video showed drone footage of an attack in progress, a small explosive device dropping with precision onto a substation, followed by a flash and smoke.

"We have new footage," K announced, immediately beginning the process of geolocating the attack.





"Timestamp indicates this happened within the last hour." Isabella moved to K's station, studying the footage with a historian's eye. "Look at the architecture of those buildings in the background," she pointed. "Soviet-era apartment blocks, but with that distinctive stepped design. This has to be in the eastern regions."

Julia watched as K methodically analyzed the footage, extracting every possible detail—the angle of shadows to determine time of day, architectural features to narrow down location, visible landmarks that could be cross-referenced with satellite imagery.

"I've got it," K finally announced. "This substation is located in the Kharkiv Oblast, serving several suburban areas. Based on the visible damage, it was likely a high-voltage facility."

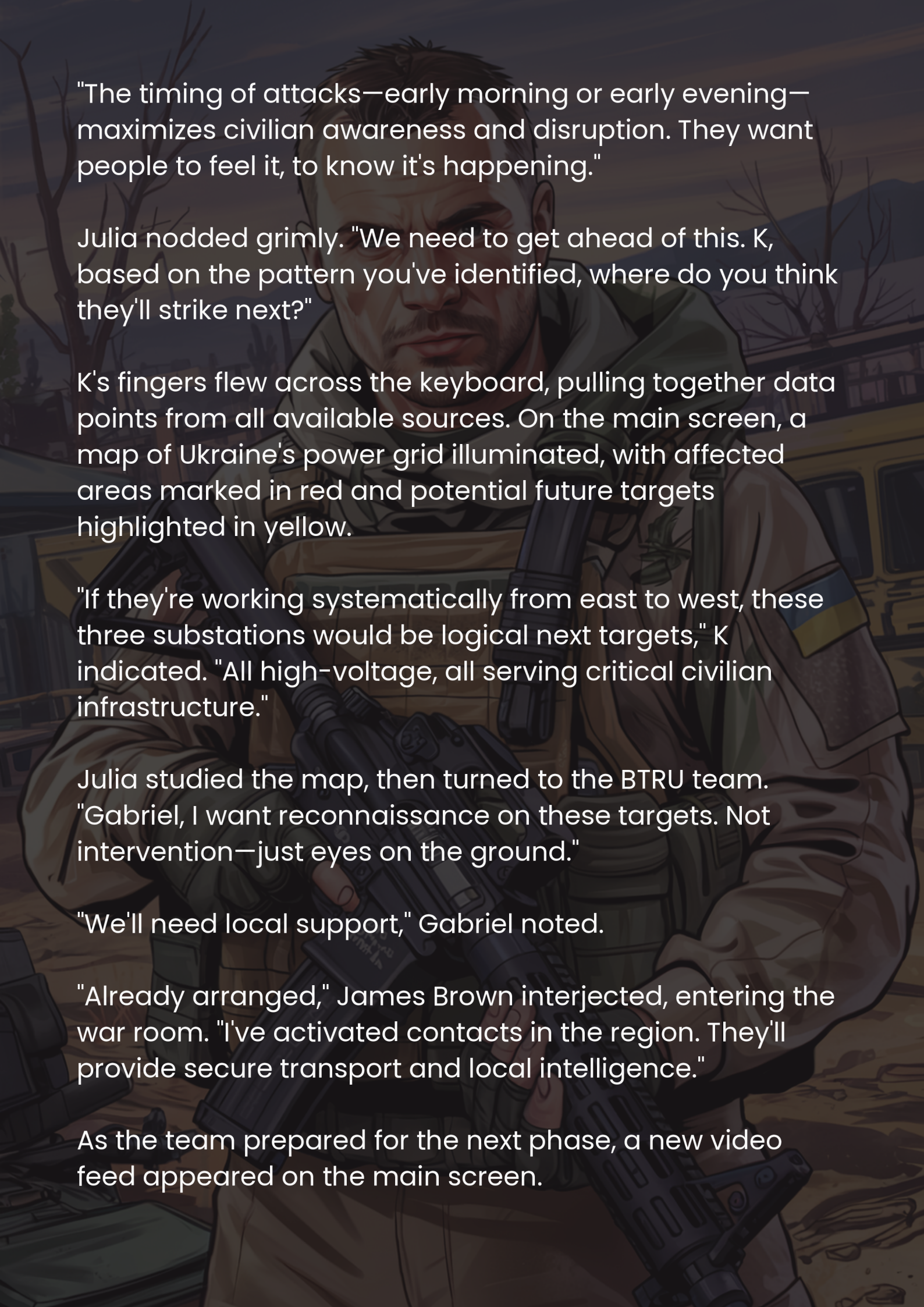
As if confirming the analysis, Dimitri called out from his station, "Breaking news reports coming in about power outages in eastern Kharkiv. Hospital emergency generators activated ten minutes ago."

The mood in Shadow Wing darkened. This wasn't just an intelligence puzzle now—real lives were at stake.

"Mei, what's your assessment?" Julia asked the psychological expert.

Mei Huang had been silently observing the accumulated data. "The pattern indicates a psychological operation running parallel to tactical objectives," she said.



A soldier in a combat uniform, holding a rifle, is the central figure. The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a war-torn landscape with a map of Ukraine visible. The text is overlaid on the image.

"The timing of attacks—early morning or early evening—maximizes civilian awareness and disruption. They want people to feel it, to know it's happening."

Julia nodded grimly. "We need to get ahead of this. K, based on the pattern you've identified, where do you think they'll strike next?"

K's fingers flew across the keyboard, pulling together data points from all available sources. On the main screen, a map of Ukraine's power grid illuminated, with affected areas marked in red and potential future targets highlighted in yellow.

"If they're working systematically from east to west, these three substations would be logical next targets," K indicated. "All high-voltage, all serving critical civilian infrastructure."

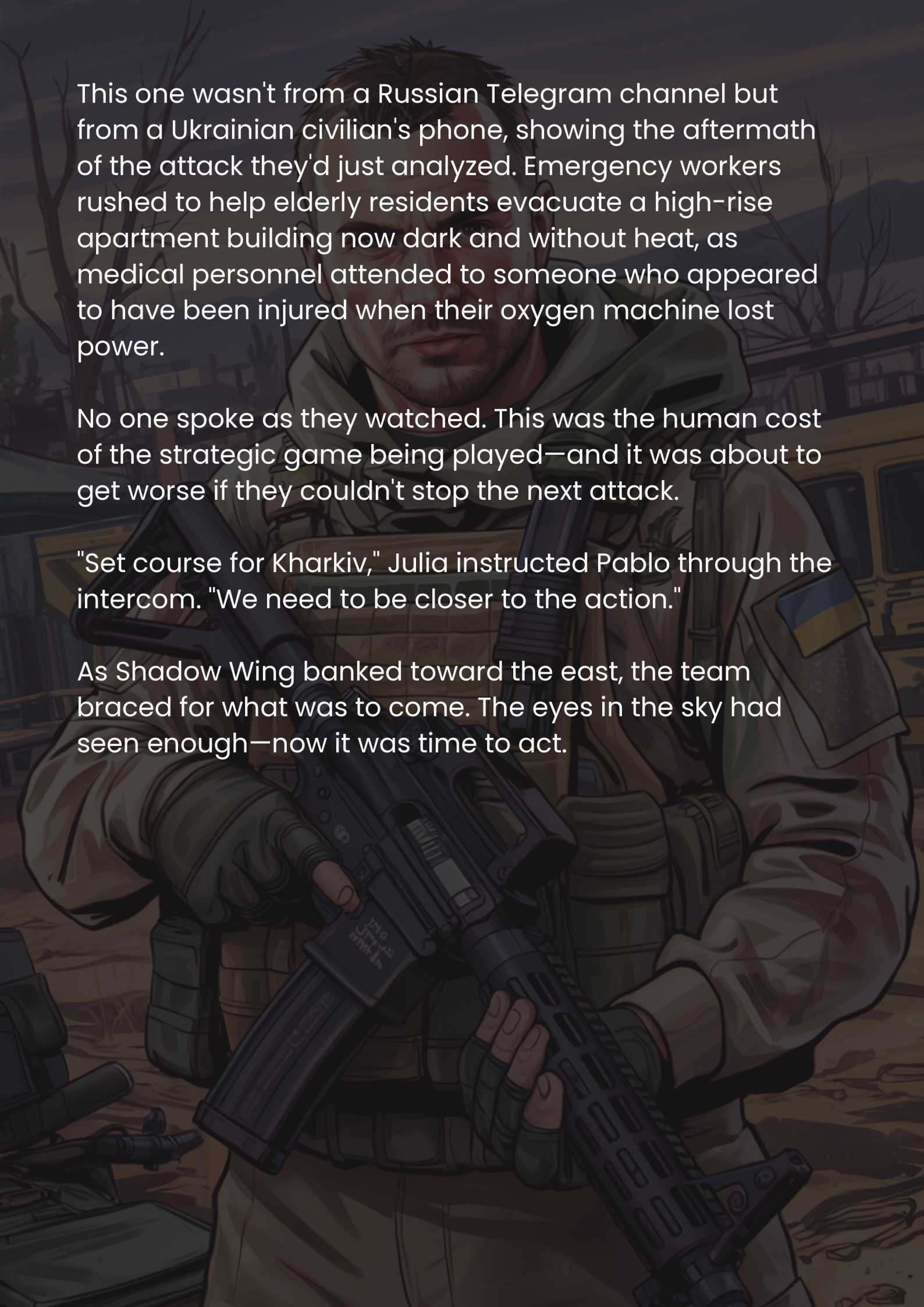
Julia studied the map, then turned to the BTRU team. "Gabriel, I want reconnaissance on these targets. Not intervention—just eyes on the ground."

"We'll need local support," Gabriel noted.

"Already arranged," James Brown interjected, entering the war room. "I've activated contacts in the region. They'll provide secure transport and local intelligence."

As the team prepared for the next phase, a new video feed appeared on the main screen.





This one wasn't from a Russian Telegram channel but from a Ukrainian civilian's phone, showing the aftermath of the attack they'd just analyzed. Emergency workers rushed to help elderly residents evacuate a high-rise apartment building now dark and without heat, as medical personnel attended to someone who appeared to have been injured when their oxygen machine lost power.

No one spoke as they watched. This was the human cost of the strategic game being played—and it was about to get worse if they couldn't stop the next attack.

"Set course for Kharkiv," Julia instructed Pablo through the intercom. "We need to be closer to the action."

As Shadow Wing banked toward the east, the team braced for what was to come. The eyes in the sky had seen enough—now it was time to act.



## Chapter 4: On the Ground

Oleksandr Kovalenko wiped sweat from his brow as he worked feverishly in the damaged substation. Around him, the acrid smell of burnt insulation and transformer oil filled the air. As chief engineer for the regional power authority, he had seen his share of equipment failures over his twenty-year career, but nothing like the systematic destruction he'd witnessed in the past weeks.

"How much longer for the bypass?" called his colleague Nataliya, her voice strained with urgency.

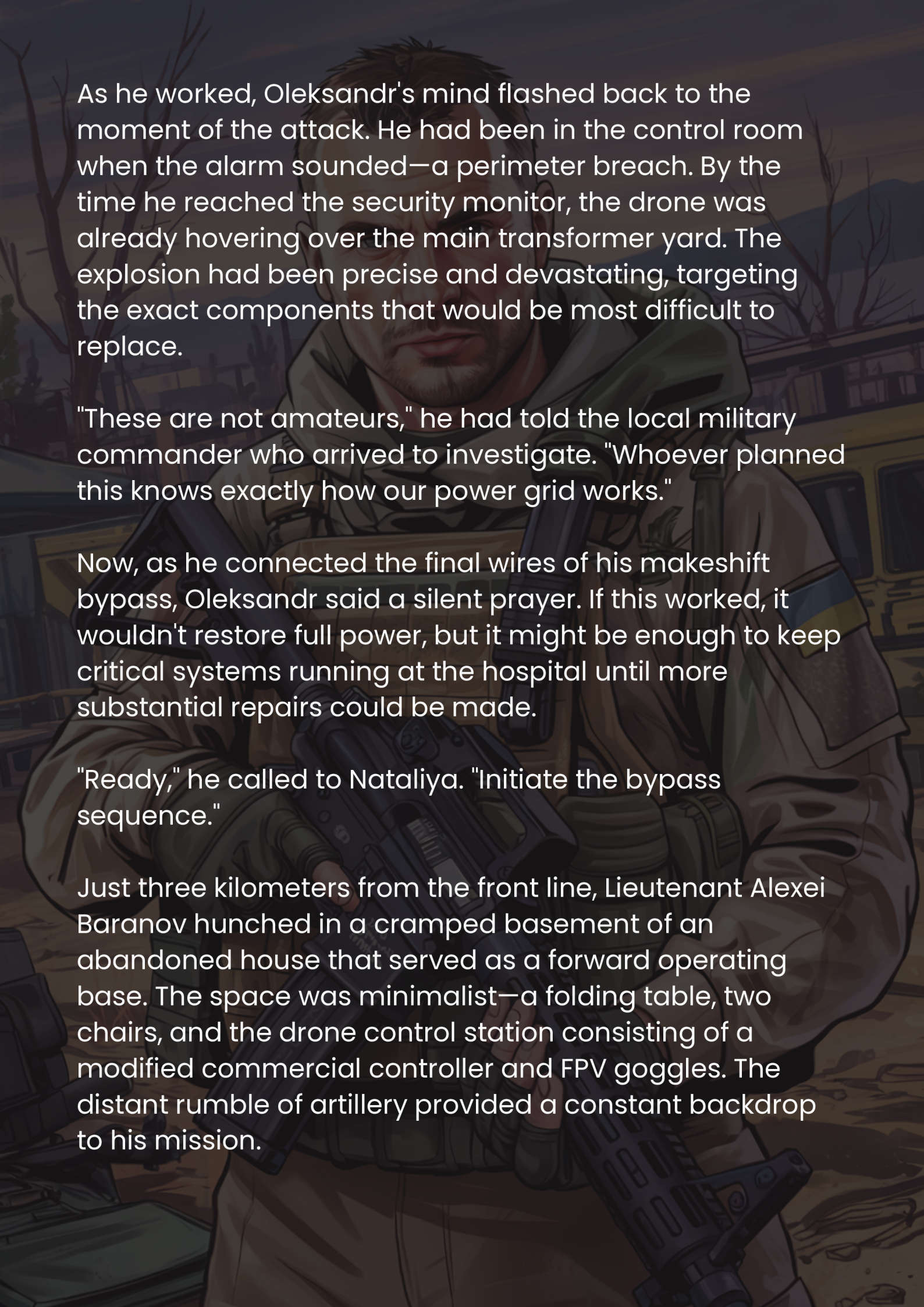
"Ten minutes, maybe fifteen," Oleksandr replied, not looking up from the complex wiring he was reconfiguring.

"The main transformer is beyond repair, but if I can reroute through the secondary systems, we might get partial power restored."

He didn't need to explain what was at stake. Less than two kilometers away, the Regional Children's Hospital was running on emergency generators that had fuel for perhaps another six hours.

Already, the most critical patients had been evacuated to facilities with more stable power, but dozens remained, including premature infants in the neonatal intensive care unit.



A man in military gear, including a helmet and a jacket with a Ukrainian flag patch, is holding a rifle. He is looking forward with a serious expression. The background is a dark, desaturated image of a war-torn area with smoke and debris.

As he worked, Oleksandr's mind flashed back to the moment of the attack. He had been in the control room when the alarm sounded—a perimeter breach. By the time he reached the security monitor, the drone was already hovering over the main transformer yard. The explosion had been precise and devastating, targeting the exact components that would be most difficult to replace.

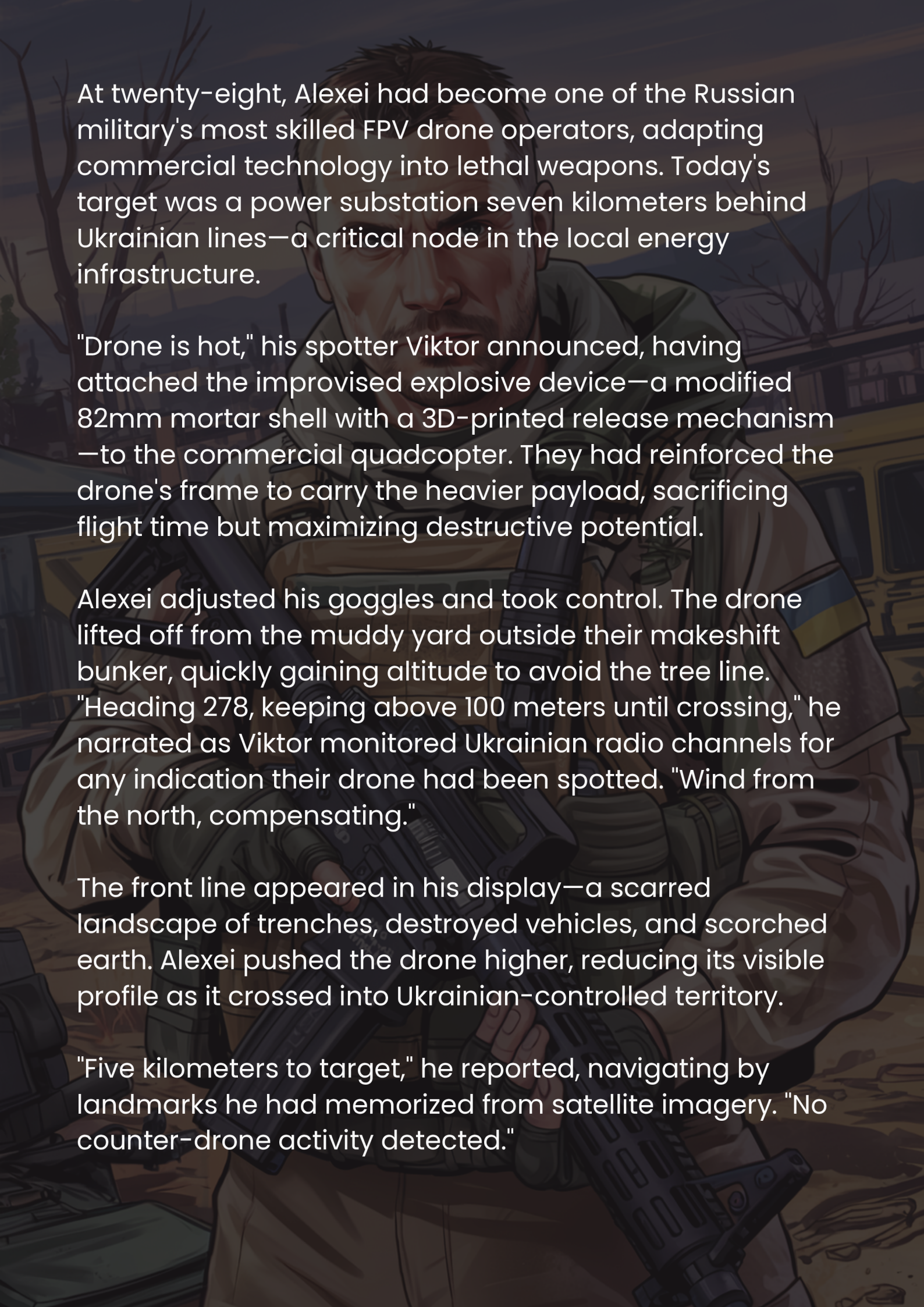
"These are not amateurs," he had told the local military commander who arrived to investigate. "Whoever planned this knows exactly how our power grid works."

Now, as he connected the final wires of his makeshift bypass, Oleksandr said a silent prayer. If this worked, it wouldn't restore full power, but it might be enough to keep critical systems running at the hospital until more substantial repairs could be made.

"Ready," he called to Nataliya. "Initiate the bypass sequence."

Just three kilometers from the front line, Lieutenant Alexei Baranov hunched in a cramped basement of an abandoned house that served as a forward operating base. The space was minimalist—a folding table, two chairs, and the drone control station consisting of a modified commercial controller and FPV goggles. The distant rumble of artillery provided a constant backdrop to his mission.



An illustration of a man, Alexei, in a military uniform, looking intently at a device he is holding. He is in a trench-like environment with a dark, overcast sky and some structures in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

At twenty-eight, Alexei had become one of the Russian military's most skilled FPV drone operators, adapting commercial technology into lethal weapons. Today's target was a power substation seven kilometers behind Ukrainian lines—a critical node in the local energy infrastructure.

"Drone is hot," his spotter Viktor announced, having attached the improvised explosive device—a modified 82mm mortar shell with a 3D-printed release mechanism—to the commercial quadcopter. They had reinforced the drone's frame to carry the heavier payload, sacrificing flight time but maximizing destructive potential.

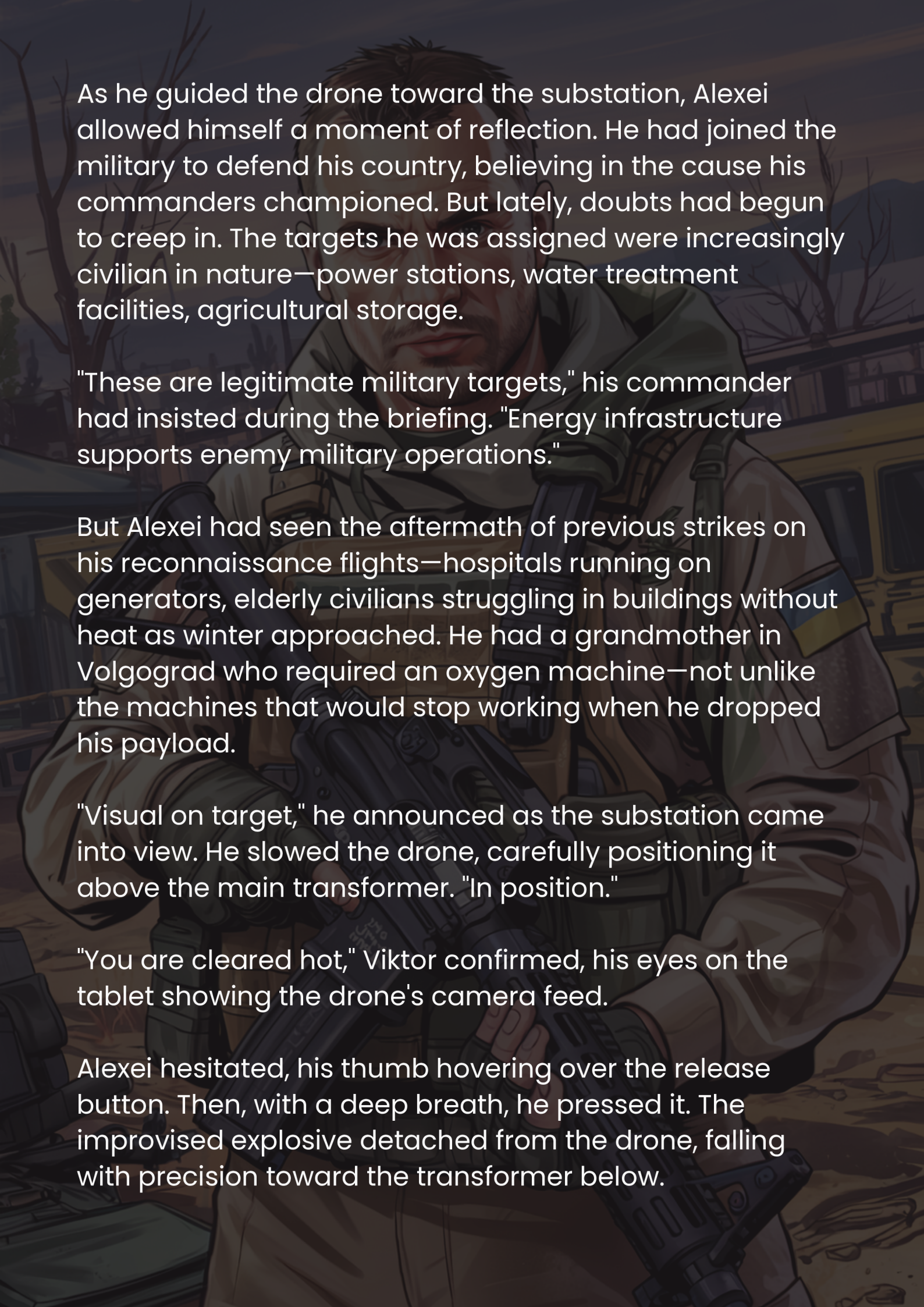
Alexei adjusted his goggles and took control. The drone lifted off from the muddy yard outside their makeshift bunker, quickly gaining altitude to avoid the tree line.

"Heading 278, keeping above 100 meters until crossing," he narrated as Viktor monitored Ukrainian radio channels for any indication their drone had been spotted. "Wind from the north, compensating."

The front line appeared in his display—a scarred landscape of trenches, destroyed vehicles, and scorched earth. Alexei pushed the drone higher, reducing its visible profile as it crossed into Ukrainian-controlled territory.

"Five kilometers to target," he reported, navigating by landmarks he had memorized from satellite imagery. "No counter-drone activity detected."



A soldier in a military uniform, likely Russian, is shown from the chest up. He is holding a rifle and looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a blurred, dark scene of a war-torn city with smoke and debris.

As he guided the drone toward the substation, Alexei allowed himself a moment of reflection. He had joined the military to defend his country, believing in the cause his commanders championed. But lately, doubts had begun to creep in. The targets he was assigned were increasingly civilian in nature—power stations, water treatment facilities, agricultural storage.

"These are legitimate military targets," his commander had insisted during the briefing. "Energy infrastructure supports enemy military operations."

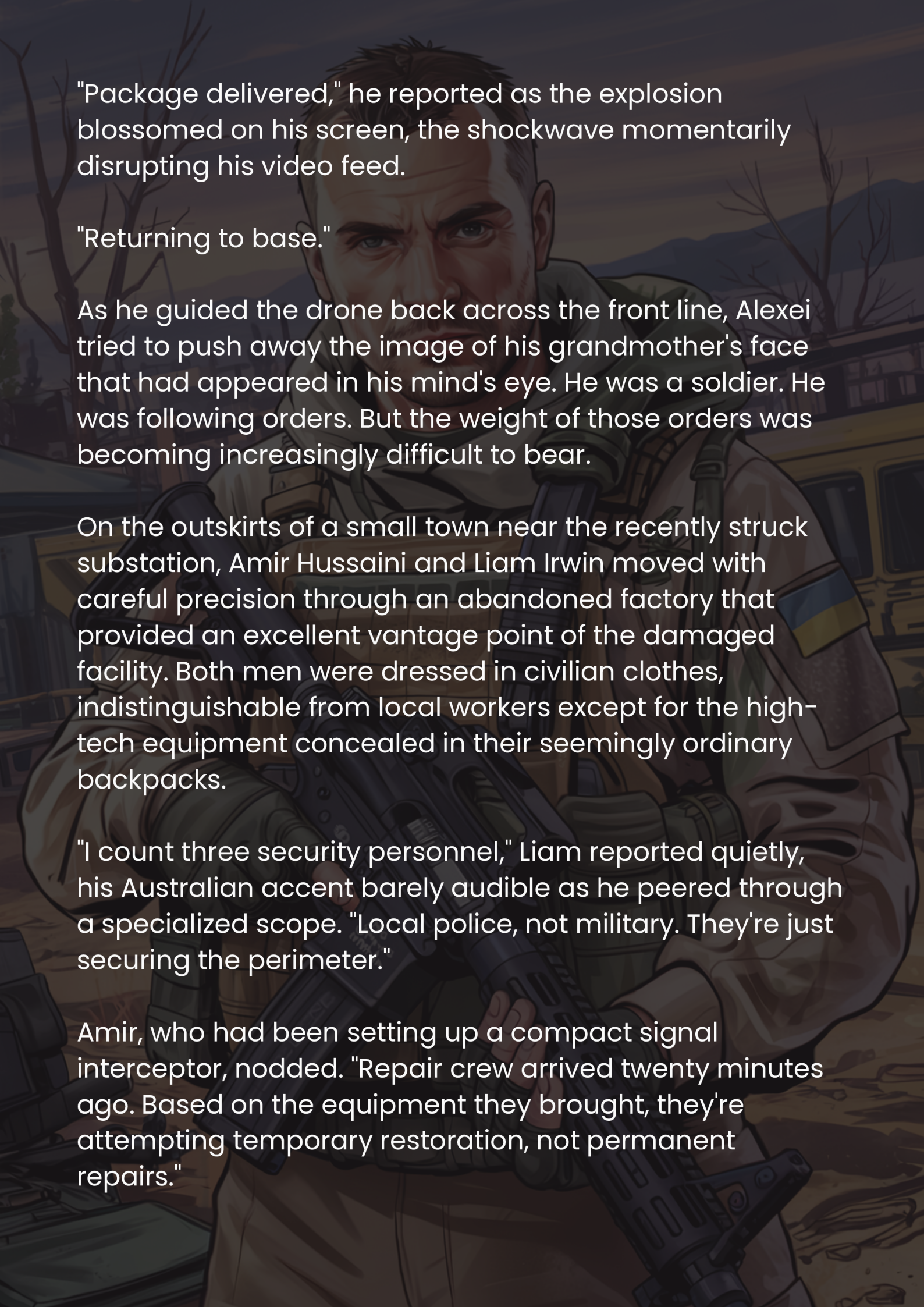
But Alexei had seen the aftermath of previous strikes on his reconnaissance flights—hospitals running on generators, elderly civilians struggling in buildings without heat as winter approached. He had a grandmother in Volgograd who required an oxygen machine—not unlike the machines that would stop working when he dropped his payload.

"Visual on target," he announced as the substation came into view. He slowed the drone, carefully positioning it above the main transformer. "In position."

"You are cleared hot," Viktor confirmed, his eyes on the tablet showing the drone's camera feed.

Alexei hesitated, his thumb hovering over the release button. Then, with a deep breath, he pressed it. The improvised explosive detached from the drone, falling with precision toward the transformer below.



A man in military gear, including a helmet and a rifle, is shown in a war-torn environment. The background features smoke, debris, and a damaged vehicle. The man has a serious expression and is looking directly at the viewer.

"Package delivered," he reported as the explosion blossomed on his screen, the shockwave momentarily disrupting his video feed.

"Returning to base."

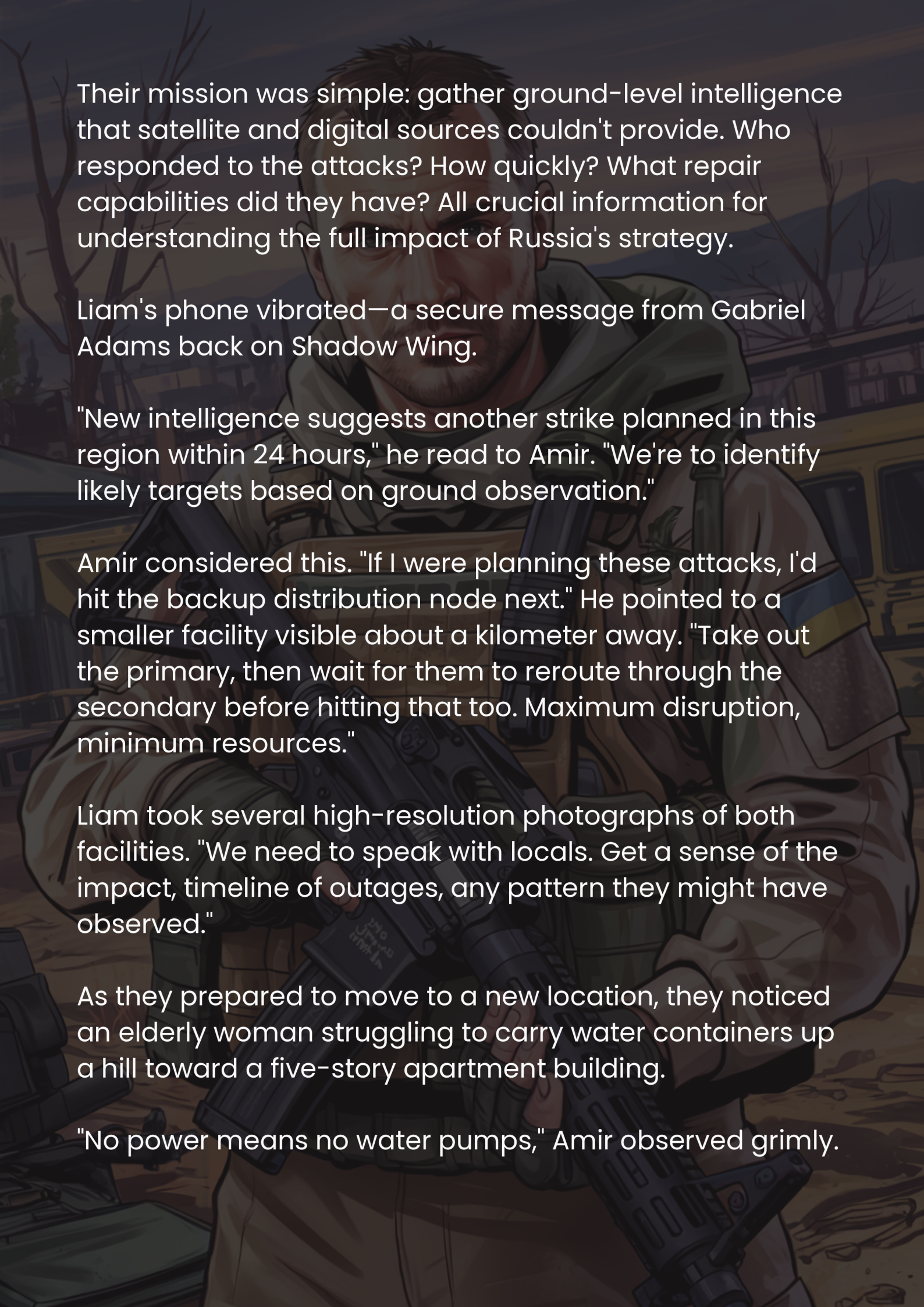
As he guided the drone back across the front line, Alexei tried to push away the image of his grandmother's face that had appeared in his mind's eye. He was a soldier. He was following orders. But the weight of those orders was becoming increasingly difficult to bear.

On the outskirts of a small town near the recently struck substation, Amir Hussaini and Liam Irwin moved with careful precision through an abandoned factory that provided an excellent vantage point of the damaged facility. Both men were dressed in civilian clothes, indistinguishable from local workers except for the high-tech equipment concealed in their seemingly ordinary backpacks.

"I count three security personnel," Liam reported quietly, his Australian accent barely audible as he peered through a specialized scope. "Local police, not military. They're just securing the perimeter."

Amir, who had been setting up a compact signal interceptor, nodded. "Repair crew arrived twenty minutes ago. Based on the equipment they brought, they're attempting temporary restoration, not permanent repairs."



A soldier in a combat uniform, possibly a Ukrainian one given the patch on the sleeve, is holding a rifle. The background is dark and shows signs of war, with smoke and damaged structures. The text is overlaid on the image.

Their mission was simple: gather ground-level intelligence that satellite and digital sources couldn't provide. Who responded to the attacks? How quickly? What repair capabilities did they have? All crucial information for understanding the full impact of Russia's strategy.

Liam's phone vibrated—a secure message from Gabriel Adams back on Shadow Wing.

"New intelligence suggests another strike planned in this region within 24 hours," he read to Amir. "We're to identify likely targets based on ground observation."

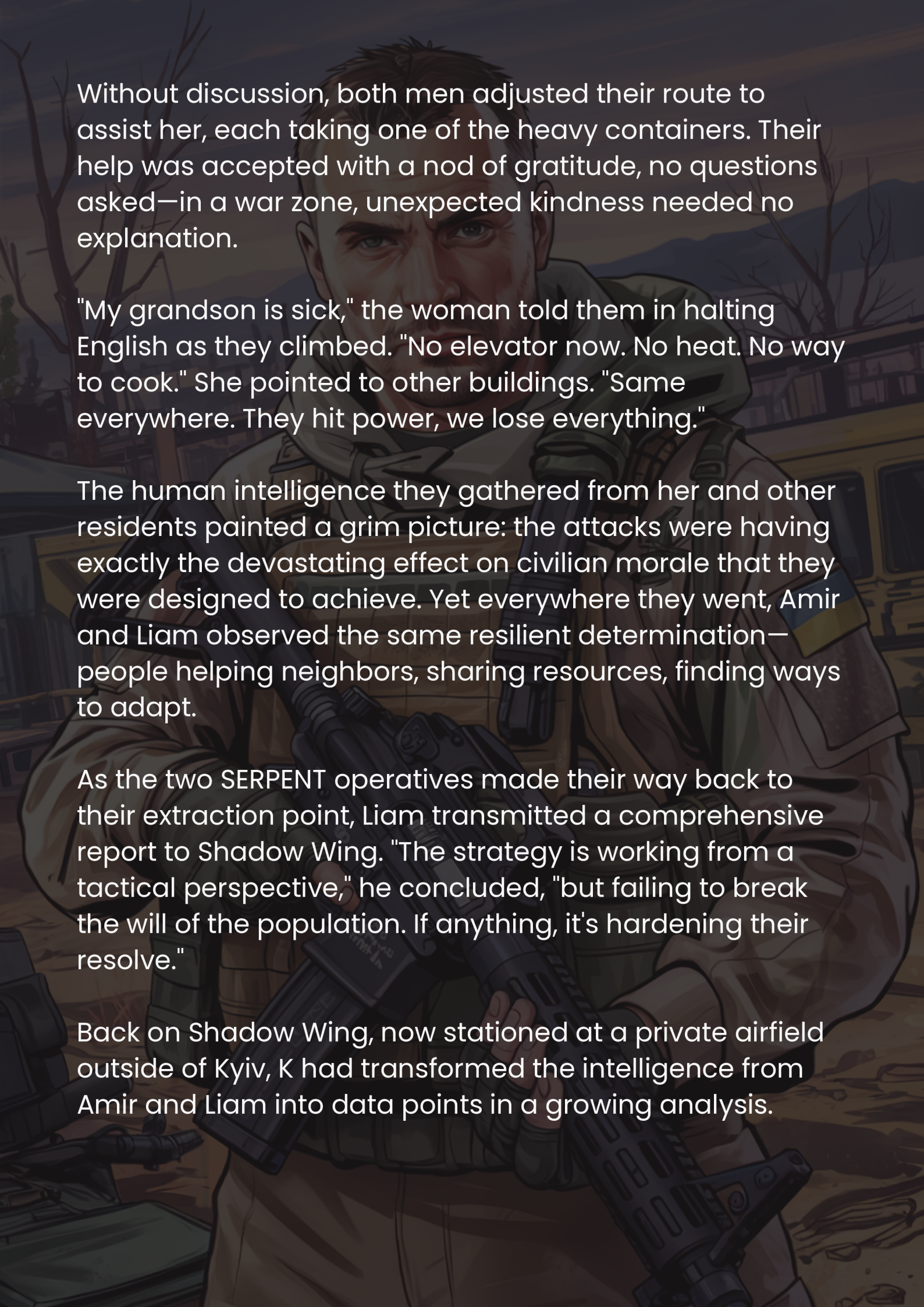
Amir considered this. "If I were planning these attacks, I'd hit the backup distribution node next." He pointed to a smaller facility visible about a kilometer away. "Take out the primary, then wait for them to reroute through the secondary before hitting that too. Maximum disruption, minimum resources."

Liam took several high-resolution photographs of both facilities. "We need to speak with locals. Get a sense of the impact, timeline of outages, any pattern they might have observed."

As they prepared to move to a new location, they noticed an elderly woman struggling to carry water containers up a hill toward a five-story apartment building.

"No power means no water pumps," Amir observed grimly.



A soldier in a tan combat uniform and tactical vest is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking directly at the viewer. He is holding a black assault rifle with both hands. The background is a dark, desaturated illustration of a war-torn city with smoke, bare trees, and damaged buildings. The overall tone is somber and gritty.

Without discussion, both men adjusted their route to assist her, each taking one of the heavy containers. Their help was accepted with a nod of gratitude, no questions asked—in a war zone, unexpected kindness needed no explanation.

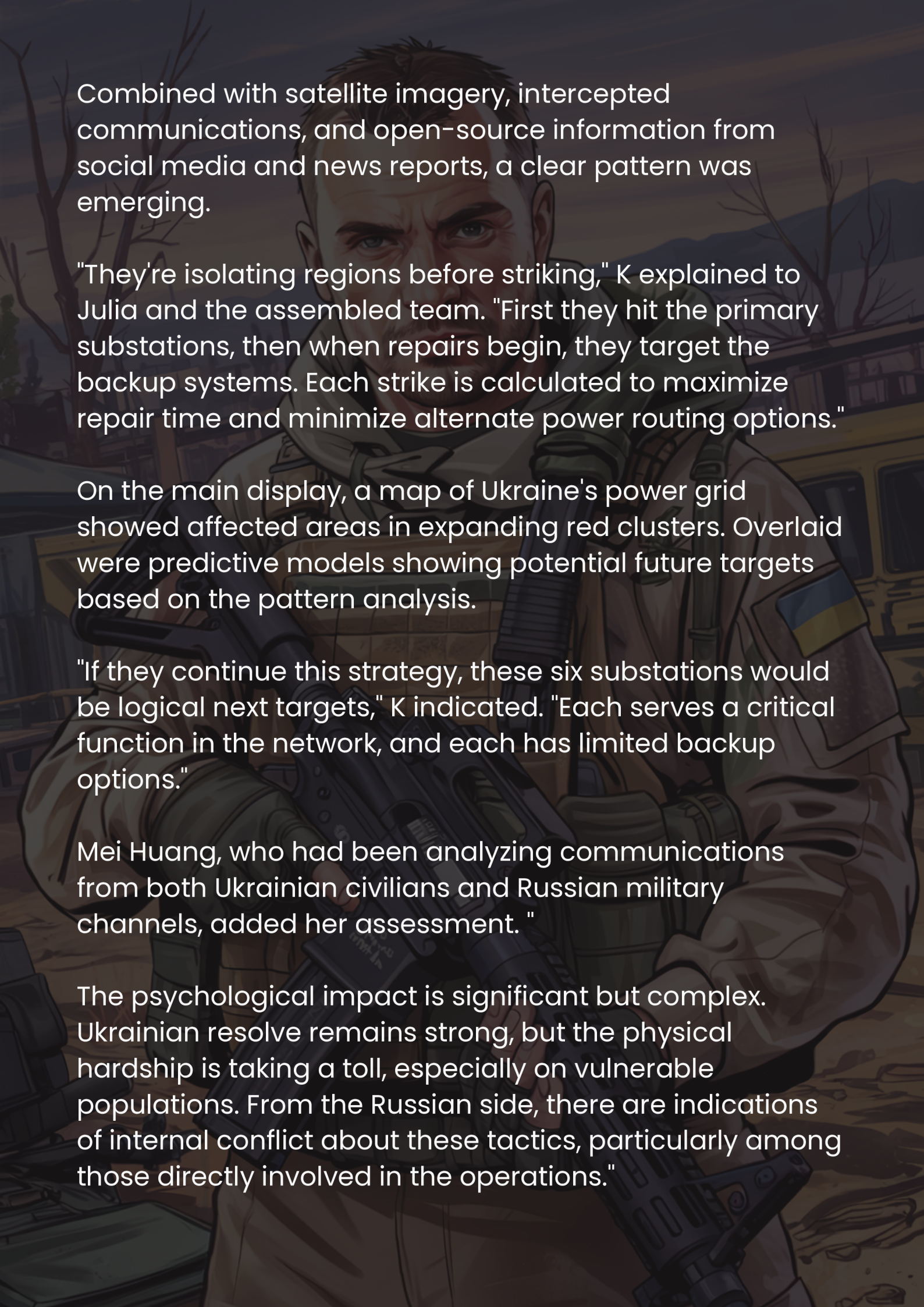
"My grandson is sick," the woman told them in halting English as they climbed. "No elevator now. No heat. No way to cook." She pointed to other buildings. "Same everywhere. They hit power, we lose everything."

The human intelligence they gathered from her and other residents painted a grim picture: the attacks were having exactly the devastating effect on civilian morale that they were designed to achieve. Yet everywhere they went, Amir and Liam observed the same resilient determination—people helping neighbors, sharing resources, finding ways to adapt.

As the two SERPENT operatives made their way back to their extraction point, Liam transmitted a comprehensive report to Shadow Wing. "The strategy is working from a tactical perspective," he concluded, "but failing to break the will of the population. If anything, it's hardening their resolve."

Back on Shadow Wing, now stationed at a private airfield outside of Kyiv, K had transformed the intelligence from Amir and Liam into data points in a growing analysis.





Combined with satellite imagery, intercepted communications, and open-source information from social media and news reports, a clear pattern was emerging.

"They're isolating regions before striking," K explained to Julia and the assembled team. "First they hit the primary substations, then when repairs begin, they target the backup systems. Each strike is calculated to maximize repair time and minimize alternate power routing options."

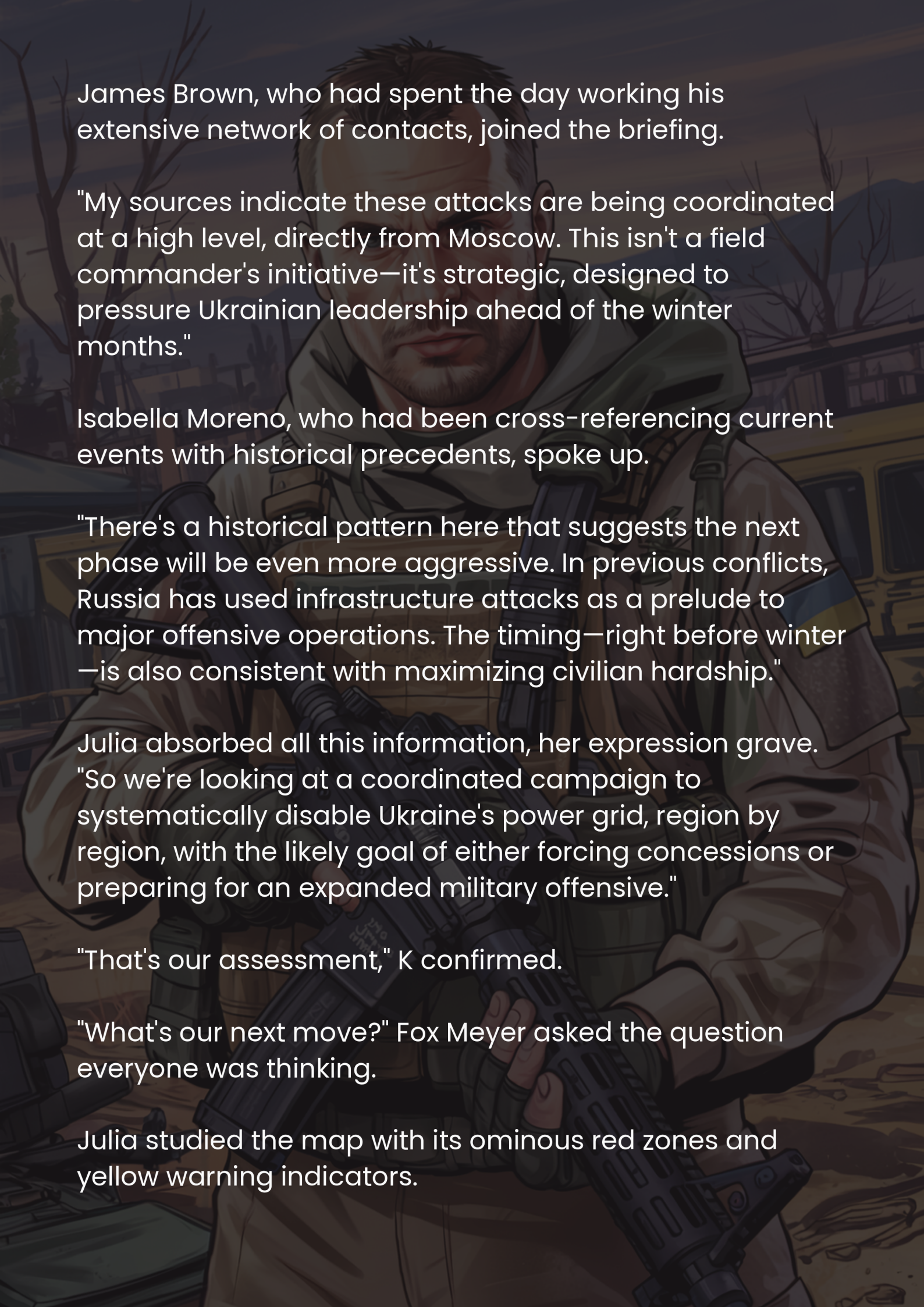
On the main display, a map of Ukraine's power grid showed affected areas in expanding red clusters. Overlaid were predictive models showing potential future targets based on the pattern analysis.

"If they continue this strategy, these six substations would be logical next targets," K indicated. "Each serves a critical function in the network, and each has limited backup options."

Mei Huang, who had been analyzing communications from both Ukrainian civilians and Russian military channels, added her assessment. "

The psychological impact is significant but complex. Ukrainian resolve remains strong, but the physical hardship is taking a toll, especially on vulnerable populations. From the Russian side, there are indications of internal conflict about these tactics, particularly among those directly involved in the operations."





James Brown, who had spent the day working his extensive network of contacts, joined the briefing.

"My sources indicate these attacks are being coordinated at a high level, directly from Moscow. This isn't a field commander's initiative—it's strategic, designed to pressure Ukrainian leadership ahead of the winter months."

Isabella Moreno, who had been cross-referencing current events with historical precedents, spoke up.

"There's a historical pattern here that suggests the next phase will be even more aggressive. In previous conflicts, Russia has used infrastructure attacks as a prelude to major offensive operations. The timing—right before winter—is also consistent with maximizing civilian hardship."

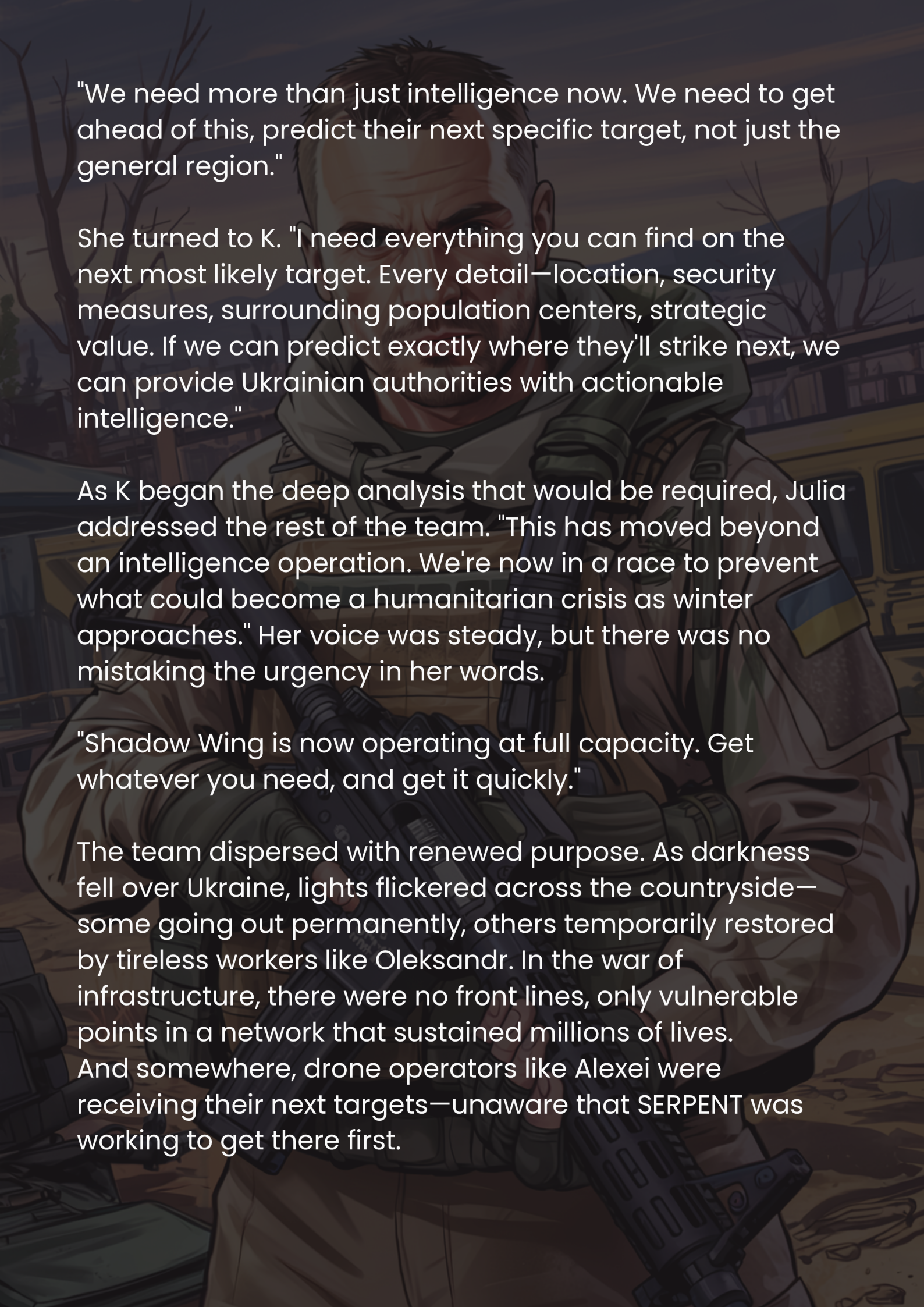
Julia absorbed all this information, her expression grave. "So we're looking at a coordinated campaign to systematically disable Ukraine's power grid, region by region, with the likely goal of either forcing concessions or preparing for an expanded military offensive."

"That's our assessment," K confirmed.

"What's our next move?" Fox Meyer asked the question everyone was thinking.

Julia studied the map with its ominous red zones and yellow warning indicators.





"We need more than just intelligence now. We need to get ahead of this, predict their next specific target, not just the general region."

She turned to K. "I need everything you can find on the next most likely target. Every detail—location, security measures, surrounding population centers, strategic value. If we can predict exactly where they'll strike next, we can provide Ukrainian authorities with actionable intelligence."

As K began the deep analysis that would be required, Julia addressed the rest of the team. "This has moved beyond an intelligence operation. We're now in a race to prevent what could become a humanitarian crisis as winter approaches." Her voice was steady, but there was no mistaking the urgency in her words.

"Shadow Wing is now operating at full capacity. Get whatever you need, and get it quickly."

The team dispersed with renewed purpose. As darkness fell over Ukraine, lights flickered across the countryside—some going out permanently, others temporarily restored by tireless workers like Oleksandr. In the war of infrastructure, there were no front lines, only vulnerable points in a network that sustained millions of lives. And somewhere, drone operators like Alexei were receiving their next targets—unaware that SERPENT was working to get there first.



## Chapter 5: The Gathering Storm

The unmarked airfield outside Kyiv was shrouded in pre-dawn mist as Shadow Wing touched down, its engines winding down to a hushed purr. The aircraft had been repositioned from its previous location to be closer to the epicenter of the unfolding crisis.

Ukraine's capital still functioned despite the war, but the growing attacks on the power infrastructure threatened to change that dramatically.

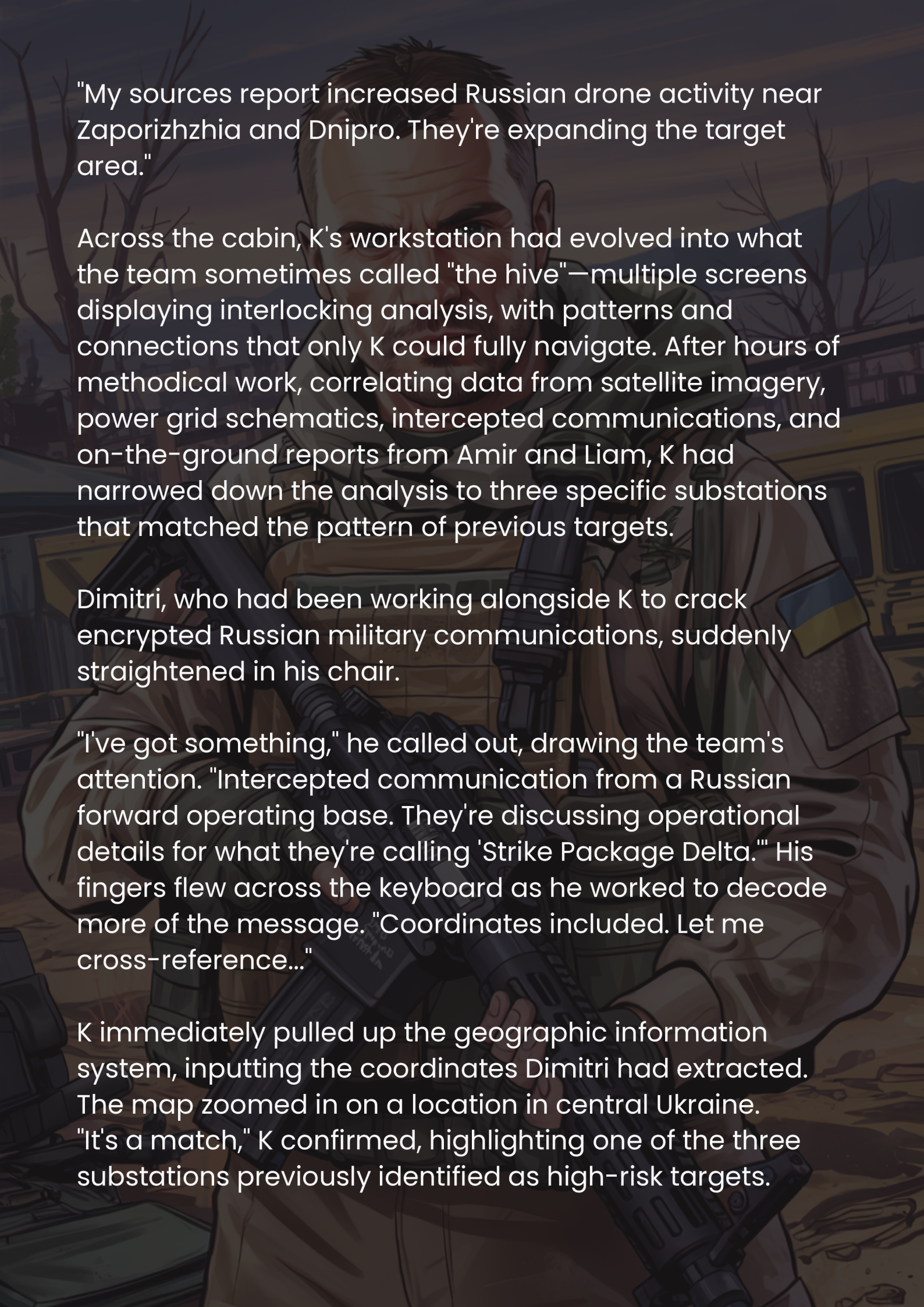
Inside the aircraft, no one had slept. The war room had transformed into a hub of intense activity as SERPENT's team worked through the night to process the flood of intelligence pouring in from multiple sources.

Julia Sharpe stood at the center of it all, reviewing the latest updates from French intelligence on a secure tablet. With American support withdrawn, the French had stepped up their involvement, but resources were stretched thin across multiple fronts.

"Paris confirms they've lost satellite coverage in the eastern regions," she announced to the team. "Russian electronic warfare systems are creating expanding dead zones. We're increasingly reliant on ground intelligence."

James Brown, who had spent the night coordinating with local contacts, looked up from his communications terminal.





"My sources report increased Russian drone activity near Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro. They're expanding the target area."

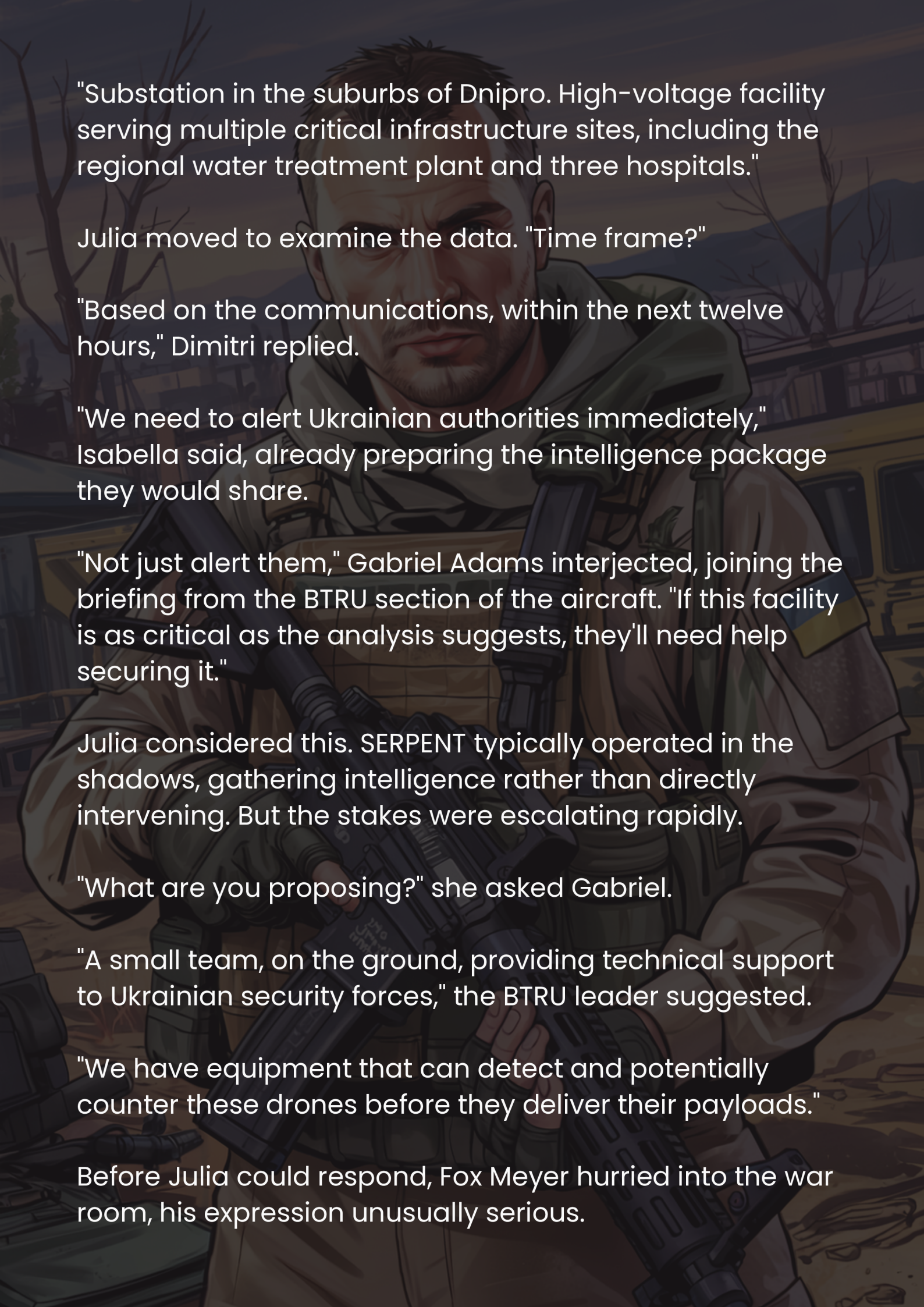
Across the cabin, K's workstation had evolved into what the team sometimes called "the hive"—multiple screens displaying interlocking analysis, with patterns and connections that only K could fully navigate. After hours of methodical work, correlating data from satellite imagery, power grid schematics, intercepted communications, and on-the-ground reports from Amir and Liam, K had narrowed down the analysis to three specific substations that matched the pattern of previous targets.

Dimitri, who had been working alongside K to crack encrypted Russian military communications, suddenly straightened in his chair.

"I've got something," he called out, drawing the team's attention. "Intercepted communication from a Russian forward operating base. They're discussing operational details for what they're calling 'Strike Package Delta.'" His fingers flew across the keyboard as he worked to decode more of the message. "Coordinates included. Let me cross-reference..."

K immediately pulled up the geographic information system, inputting the coordinates Dimitri had extracted. The map zoomed in on a location in central Ukraine. "It's a match," K confirmed, highlighting one of the three substations previously identified as high-risk targets.



A man in military gear, including a helmet and a rifle, is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. The background is a dark, desaturated illustration of a war-torn landscape with smoke and debris.

"Substation in the suburbs of Dnipro. High-voltage facility serving multiple critical infrastructure sites, including the regional water treatment plant and three hospitals."

Julia moved to examine the data. "Time frame?"

"Based on the communications, within the next twelve hours," Dimitri replied.

"We need to alert Ukrainian authorities immediately," Isabella said, already preparing the intelligence package they would share.

"Not just alert them," Gabriel Adams interjected, joining the briefing from the BTRU section of the aircraft. "If this facility is as critical as the analysis suggests, they'll need help securing it."

Julia considered this. SERPENT typically operated in the shadows, gathering intelligence rather than directly intervening. But the stakes were escalating rapidly.

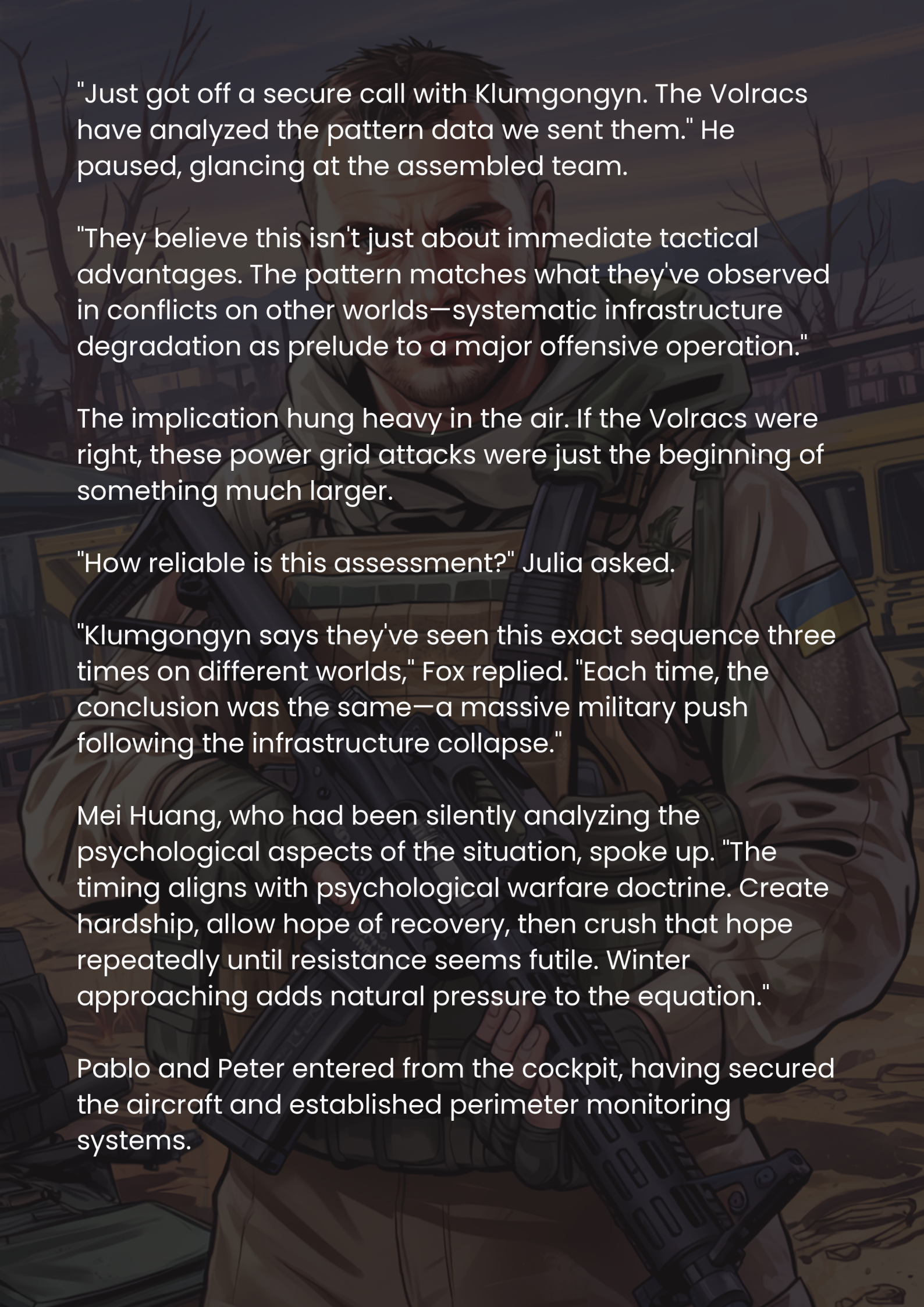
"What are you proposing?" she asked Gabriel.

"A small team, on the ground, providing technical support to Ukrainian security forces," the BTRU leader suggested.

"We have equipment that can detect and potentially counter these drones before they deliver their payloads."

Before Julia could respond, Fox Meyer hurried into the war room, his expression unusually serious.



A man in military gear, including a tactical vest and a rifle, is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. The background is a dark, desaturated illustration of a war-torn environment with bare trees and a building.

"Just got off a secure call with Klumgongyn. The Volracs have analyzed the pattern data we sent them." He paused, glancing at the assembled team.

"They believe this isn't just about immediate tactical advantages. The pattern matches what they've observed in conflicts on other worlds—systematic infrastructure degradation as prelude to a major offensive operation."

The implication hung heavy in the air. If the Volracs were right, these power grid attacks were just the beginning of something much larger.

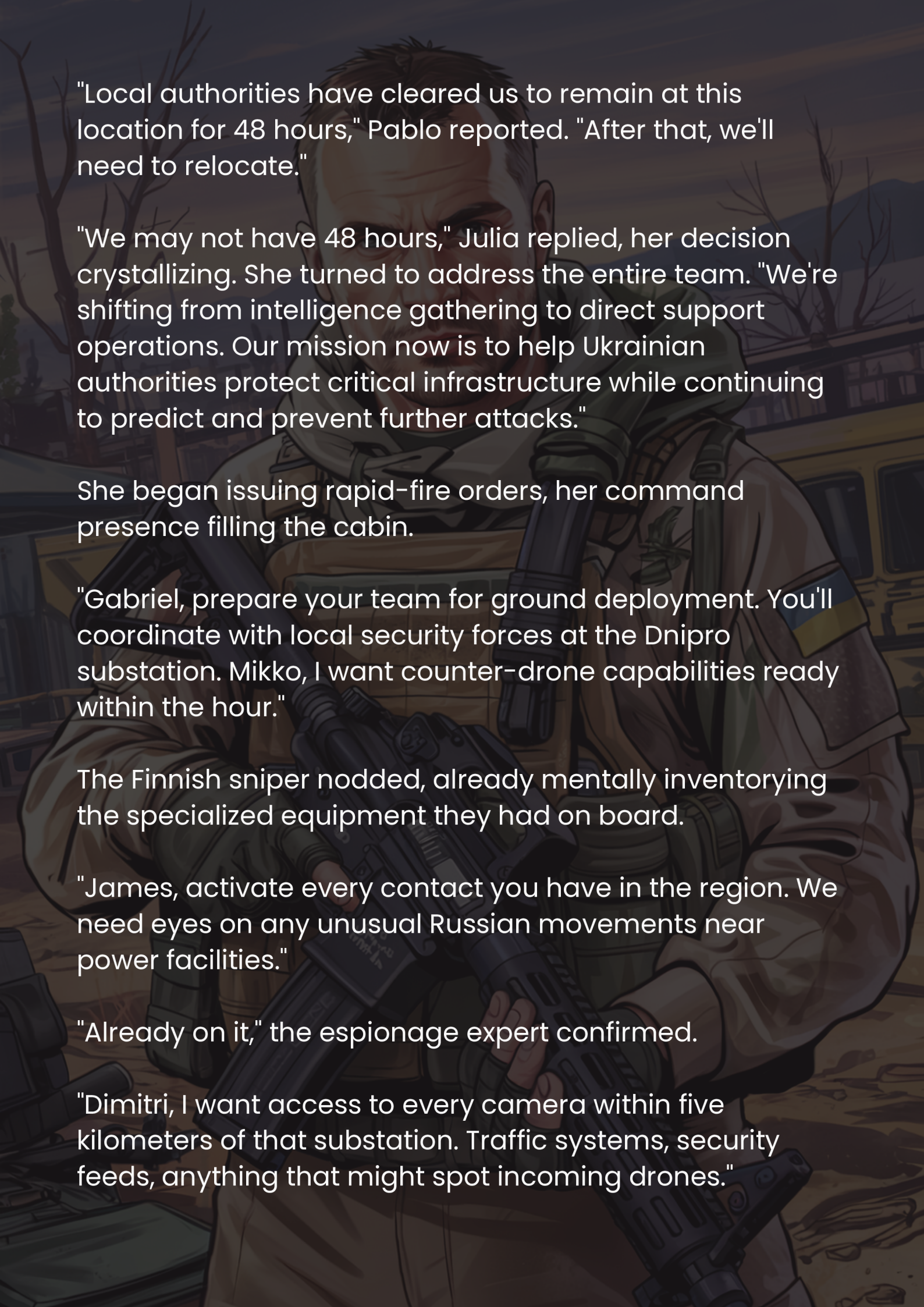
"How reliable is this assessment?" Julia asked.

"Klumgongyn says they've seen this exact sequence three times on different worlds," Fox replied. "Each time, the conclusion was the same—a massive military push following the infrastructure collapse."

Mei Huang, who had been silently analyzing the psychological aspects of the situation, spoke up. "The timing aligns with psychological warfare doctrine. Create hardship, allow hope of recovery, then crush that hope repeatedly until resistance seems futile. Winter approaching adds natural pressure to the equation."

Pablo and Peter entered from the cockpit, having secured the aircraft and established perimeter monitoring systems.



A man in military gear, including a helmet and a rifle, is the central figure. He is looking forward with a serious expression. The background is a dark, desaturated illustration of a war-torn environment with bare trees and a building.

"Local authorities have cleared us to remain at this location for 48 hours," Pablo reported. "After that, we'll need to relocate."

"We may not have 48 hours," Julia replied, her decision crystallizing. She turned to address the entire team. "We're shifting from intelligence gathering to direct support operations. Our mission now is to help Ukrainian authorities protect critical infrastructure while continuing to predict and prevent further attacks."

She began issuing rapid-fire orders, her command presence filling the cabin.

"Gabriel, prepare your team for ground deployment. You'll coordinate with local security forces at the Dnipro substation. Mikko, I want counter-drone capabilities ready within the hour."

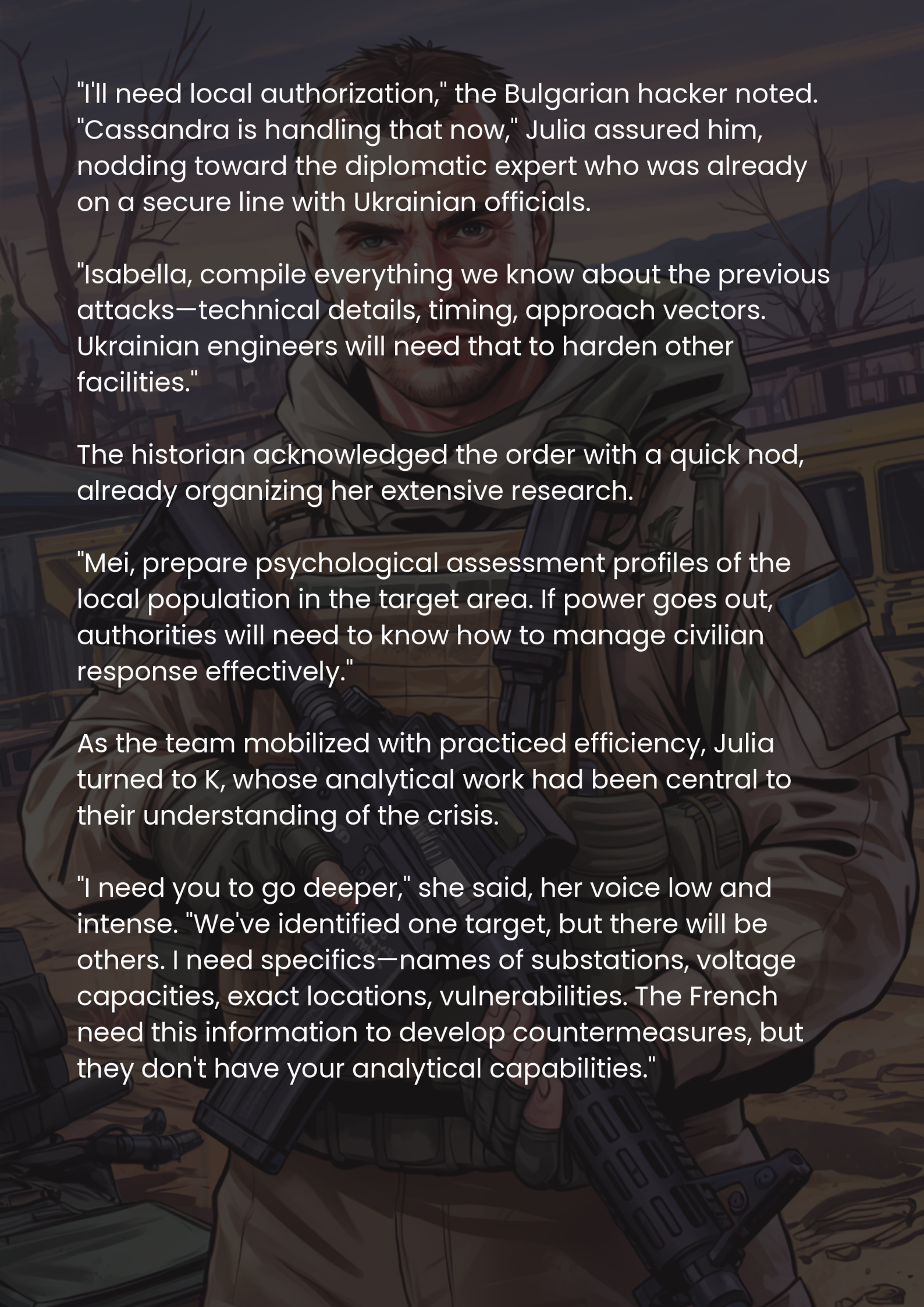
The Finnish sniper nodded, already mentally inventorying the specialized equipment they had on board.

"James, activate every contact you have in the region. We need eyes on any unusual Russian movements near power facilities."

"Already on it," the espionage expert confirmed.

"Dimitri, I want access to every camera within five kilometers of that substation. Traffic systems, security feeds, anything that might spot incoming drones."





"I'll need local authorization," the Bulgarian hacker noted. "Cassandra is handling that now," Julia assured him, nodding toward the diplomatic expert who was already on a secure line with Ukrainian officials.

"Isabella, compile everything we know about the previous attacks—technical details, timing, approach vectors. Ukrainian engineers will need that to harden other facilities."

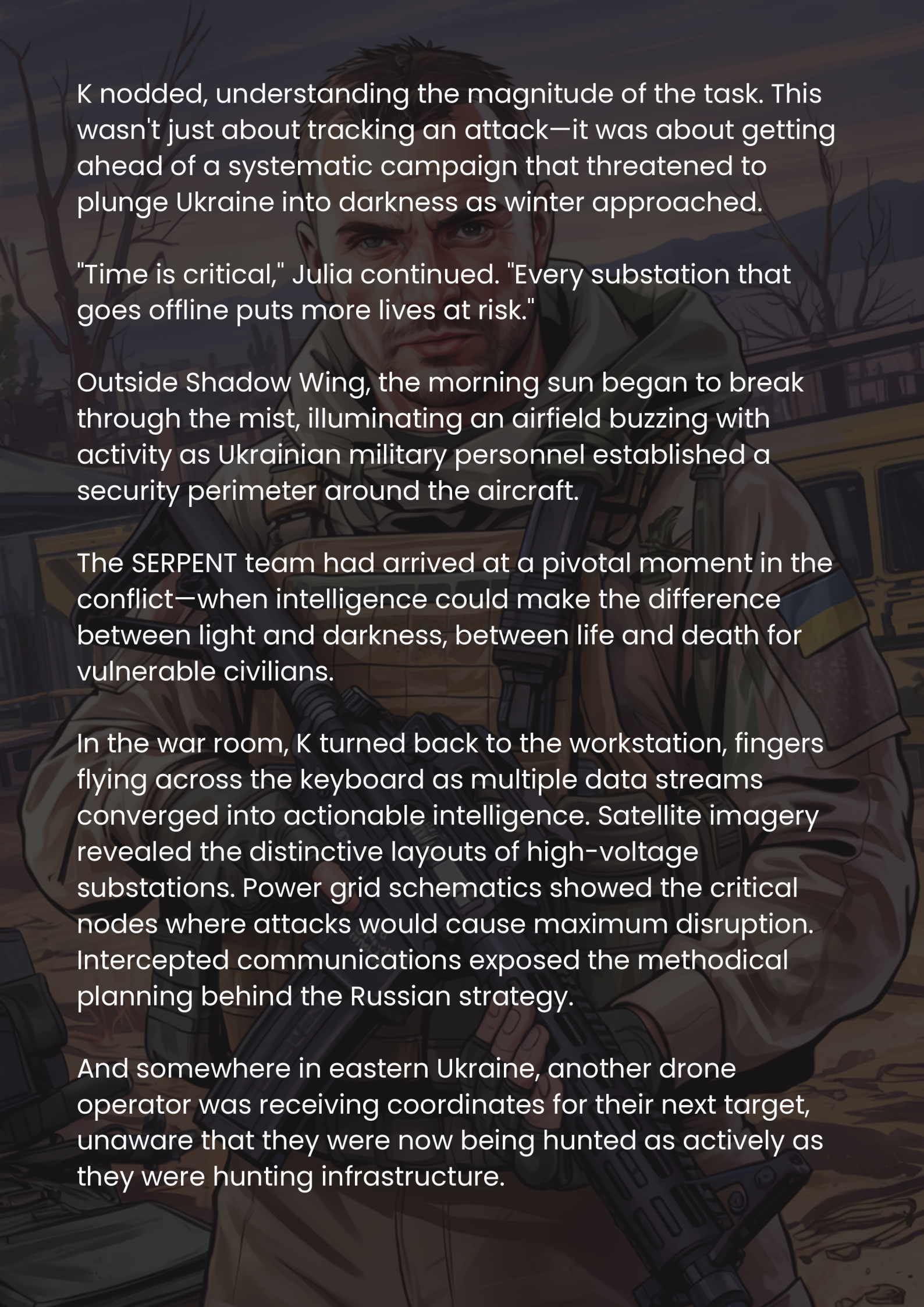
The historian acknowledged the order with a quick nod, already organizing her extensive research.

"Mei, prepare psychological assessment profiles of the local population in the target area. If power goes out, authorities will need to know how to manage civilian response effectively."

As the team mobilized with practiced efficiency, Julia turned to K, whose analytical work had been central to their understanding of the crisis.

"I need you to go deeper," she said, her voice low and intense. "We've identified one target, but there will be others. I need specifics—names of substations, voltage capacities, exact locations, vulnerabilities. The French need this information to develop countermeasures, but they don't have your analytical capabilities."





K nodded, understanding the magnitude of the task. This wasn't just about tracking an attack—it was about getting ahead of a systematic campaign that threatened to plunge Ukraine into darkness as winter approached.

"Time is critical," Julia continued. "Every substation that goes offline puts more lives at risk."

Outside Shadow Wing, the morning sun began to break through the mist, illuminating an airfield buzzing with activity as Ukrainian military personnel established a security perimeter around the aircraft.

The SERPENT team had arrived at a pivotal moment in the conflict—when intelligence could make the difference between light and darkness, between life and death for vulnerable civilians.

In the war room, K turned back to the workstation, fingers flying across the keyboard as multiple data streams converged into actionable intelligence. Satellite imagery revealed the distinctive layouts of high-voltage substations. Power grid schematics showed the critical nodes where attacks would cause maximum disruption. Intercepted communications exposed the methodical planning behind the Russian strategy.

And somewhere in eastern Ukraine, another drone operator was receiving coordinates for their next target, unaware that they were now being hunted as actively as they were hunting infrastructure.



A soldier in a combat uniform, possibly a Ukrainian soldier given the patch on the sleeve, is holding a rifle. The background is dark and stormy, with bare trees and a building visible in the distance. The text is overlaid on the image.

The storm was gathering, and SERPENT was now standing directly in its path.

As the team prepared for what would be one of their most challenging missions, Julia paused by K's workstation, watching as patterns emerged from the seeming chaos of data. With a nod of determination, she turned and walked purposefully toward her private office.

It was time to prepare the official mission briefing. Special Agent K would need to identify crucial details about the targeted substation—its name, location, and specific voltage class—information that could help protect similar facilities across Ukraine.

The digital clock on the wall of Shadow Wing's war room continued its relentless countdown, marking the time until the next attack.

But now, at least, they had a chance to get there first.



# Briefing

Greetings Special Agent,

As you're aware, the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine continues relentlessly. With the United States pulling funding and intelligence sharing, the French have stepped up and started providing this crucial aid. They're currently at capacity and looking for additional hands with a variety of intelligence tasks.

One such task is identifying attacks on critical infrastructure for records keeping, and to develop effective counter measures. Today, I have the first assignment in this series for you. It involves a drone attack on a substation in Ukraine. We'll need to get the following information for our French counterparts:

1. Identify the names of the suburb and the province where the targeted substation is located.
2. Determine the name of the substation.
3. Verify the voltage class of the substation (in kV).

I trust this Contract is right up your alley, Special Agent K. Time is of the essence, so I'll leave you to prepare.

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



# Materials

substation-bombing-starting-image.png

## Answer Instruction

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

Answer format, in local language:

SuburbName-ProvinceName-SubstationName-XX/XX

If any name consists of multiple words, omit the spaces between them.

## 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 Luiz Fernando Freitas-Gutierrez (aka: substationworm). Artwork by Frank Diepmaat.

