

恐怖/惊悚



THE
BUTCHER

Chapter 1: The Eighteenth Victim

The street lamps cast long, distorted shadows across the cobblestone path as Elise Müller hurried through the quiet district of Kreuzberg. Berlin in autumn was beautiful during the day, but at night, when the wind whispered through the empty alleyways, it took on a different character entirely. Elise checked her watch: 11:43 PM. Her apartment was only three blocks away.

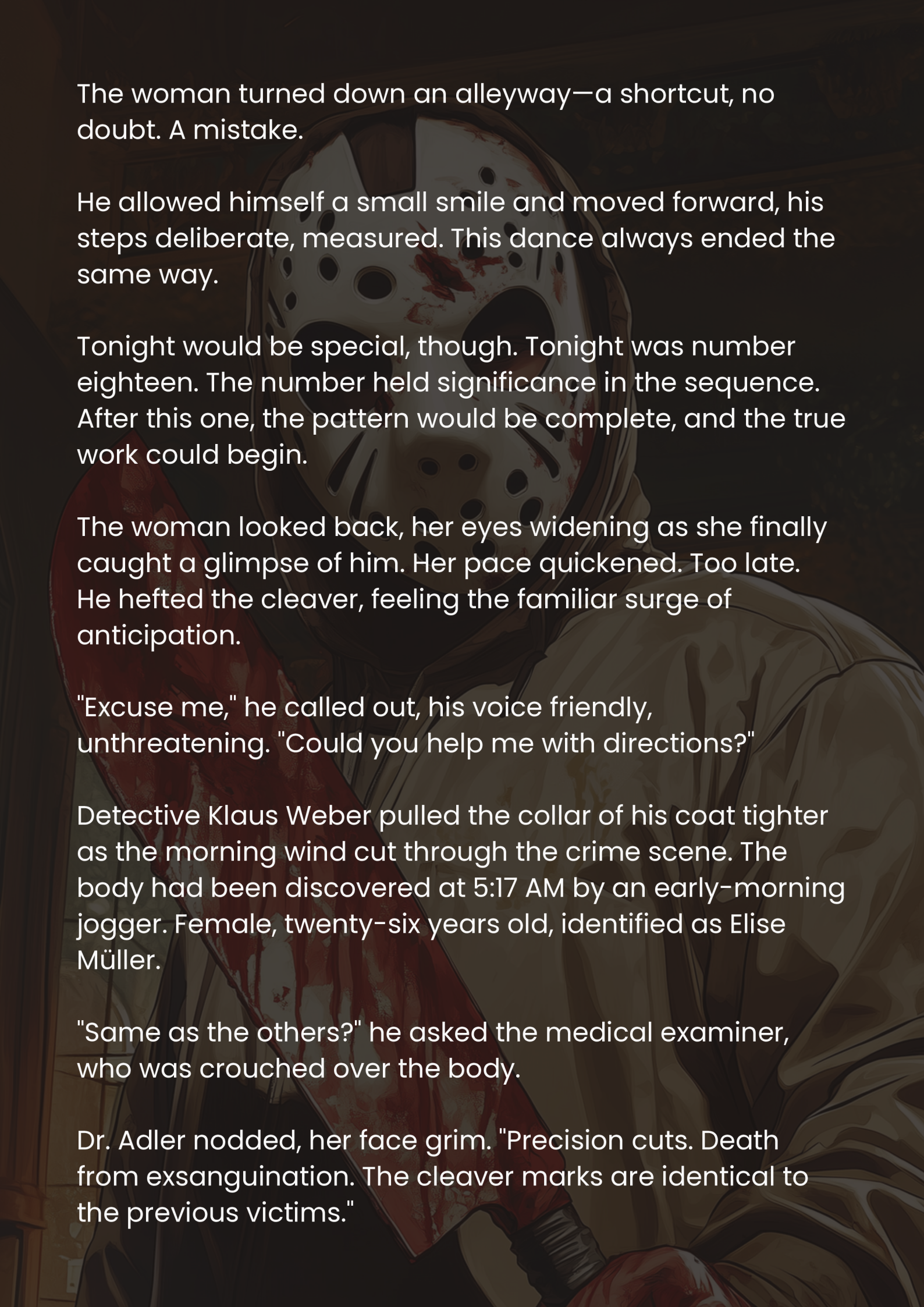
She first noticed the footsteps about five minutes ago. They matched her pace, never getting closer, never falling behind. Just... there. Persistent. Deliberate.

Elise's heart pounded in her chest. She remembered the news reports. Eighteen people dead in the last three months. All after dark. All alone.

"Don't be ridiculous," she whispered to herself, quickening her pace. "It's just another pedestrian."

From the shadows, he watched her. The woman was perfect—mid-twenties, slender, walking alone. Fear had already begun to take hold; he could see it in the tension of her shoulders, the way she clutched her purse.

His fingers tightened around the handle of the cleaver, the weight of it comforting in his palm. The metal gleamed dully under the street lamps. He'd cleaned it thoroughly after the last one, as he always did. Respect for the tools of the trade was important.

A person wearing a white hockey mask with black eye holes and a black chin strap. The mask is smeared with blood. They are holding a large, blood-soaked cleaver in their right hand. The background is dark and blurry.

The woman turned down an alleyway—a shortcut, no doubt. A mistake.

He allowed himself a small smile and moved forward, his steps deliberate, measured. This dance always ended the same way.

Tonight would be special, though. Tonight was number eighteen. The number held significance in the sequence. After this one, the pattern would be complete, and the true work could begin.

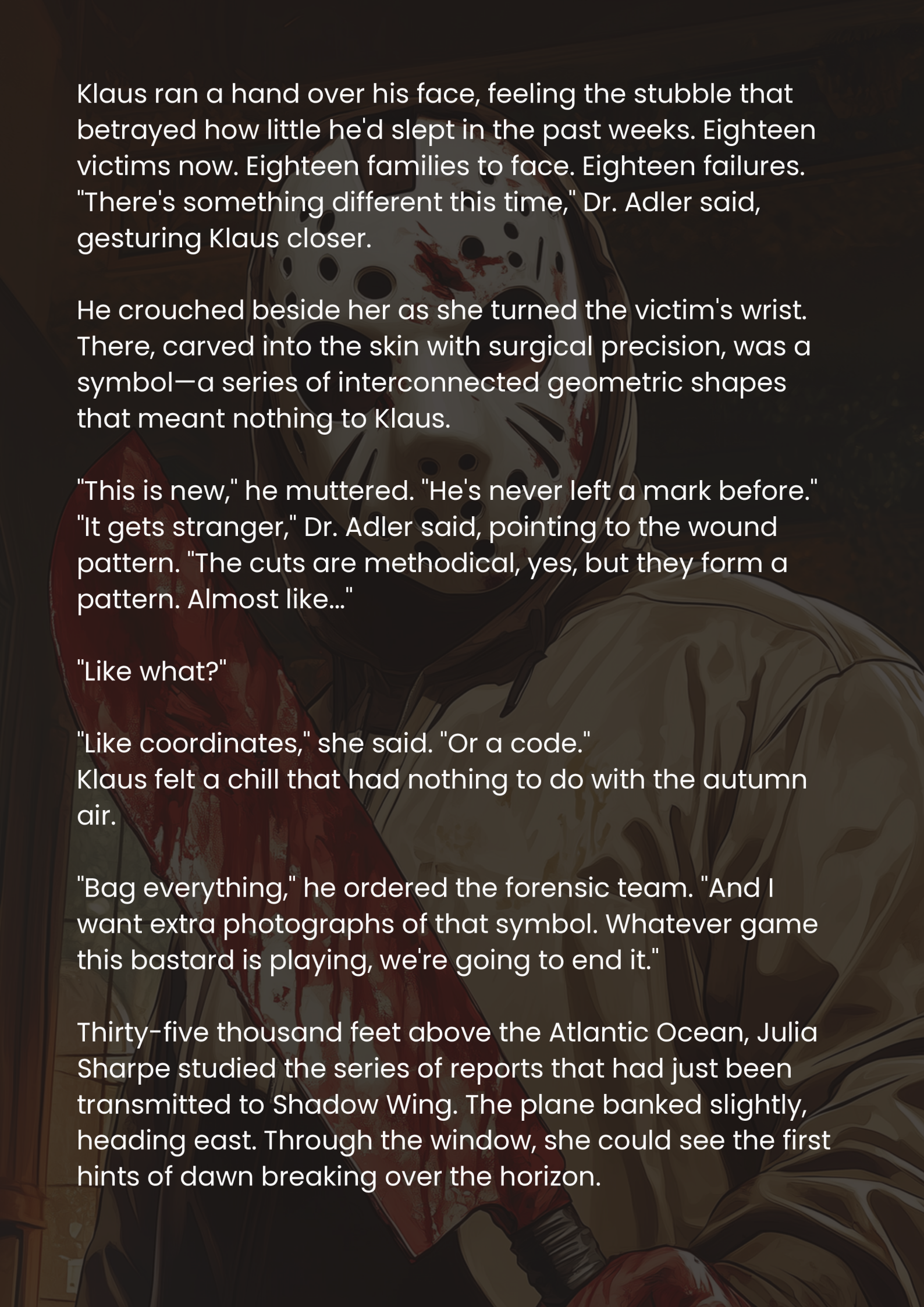
The woman looked back, her eyes widening as she finally caught a glimpse of him. Her pace quickened. Too late. He hefted the cleaver, feeling the familiar surge of anticipation.

"Excuse me," he called out, his voice friendly, unthreatening. "Could you help me with directions?"

Detective Klaus Weber pulled the collar of his coat tighter as the morning wind cut through the crime scene. The body had been discovered at 5:17 AM by an early-morning jogger. Female, twenty-six years old, identified as Elise Müller.

"Same as the others?" he asked the medical examiner, who was crouched over the body.

Dr. Adler nodded, her face grim. "Precision cuts. Death from exsanguination. The cleaver marks are identical to the previous victims."



Klaus ran a hand over his face, feeling the stubble that betrayed how little he'd slept in the past weeks. Eighteen victims now. Eighteen families to face. Eighteen failures. "There's something different this time," Dr. Adler said, gesturing Klaus closer.

He crouched beside her as she turned the victim's wrist. There, carved into the skin with surgical precision, was a symbol—a series of interconnected geometric shapes that meant nothing to Klaus.

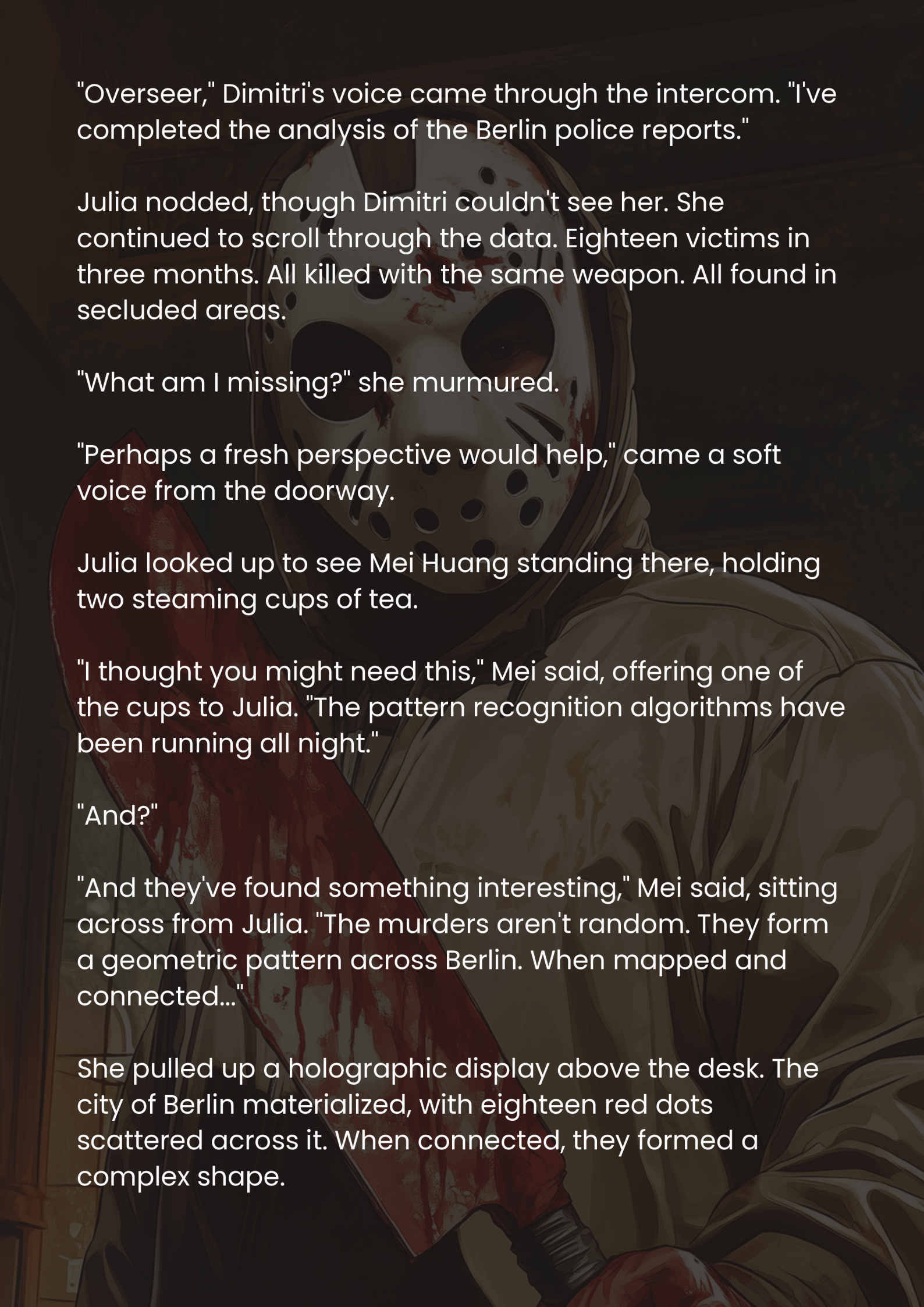
"This is new," he muttered. "He's never left a mark before." "It gets stranger," Dr. Adler said, pointing to the wound pattern. "The cuts are methodical, yes, but they form a pattern. Almost like..."

"Like what?"

"Like coordinates," she said. "Or a code." Klaus felt a chill that had nothing to do with the autumn air.

"Bag everything," he ordered the forensic team. "And I want extra photographs of that symbol. Whatever game this bastard is playing, we're going to end it."

Thirty-five thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean, Julia Sharpe studied the series of reports that had just been transmitted to Shadow Wing. The plane banked slightly, heading east. Through the window, she could see the first hints of dawn breaking over the horizon.



"Overseer," Dimitri's voice came through the intercom. "I've completed the analysis of the Berlin police reports."

Julia nodded, though Dimitri couldn't see her. She continued to scroll through the data. Eighteen victims in three months. All killed with the same weapon. All found in secluded areas.

"What am I missing?" she murmured.

"Perhaps a fresh perspective would help," came a soft voice from the doorway.

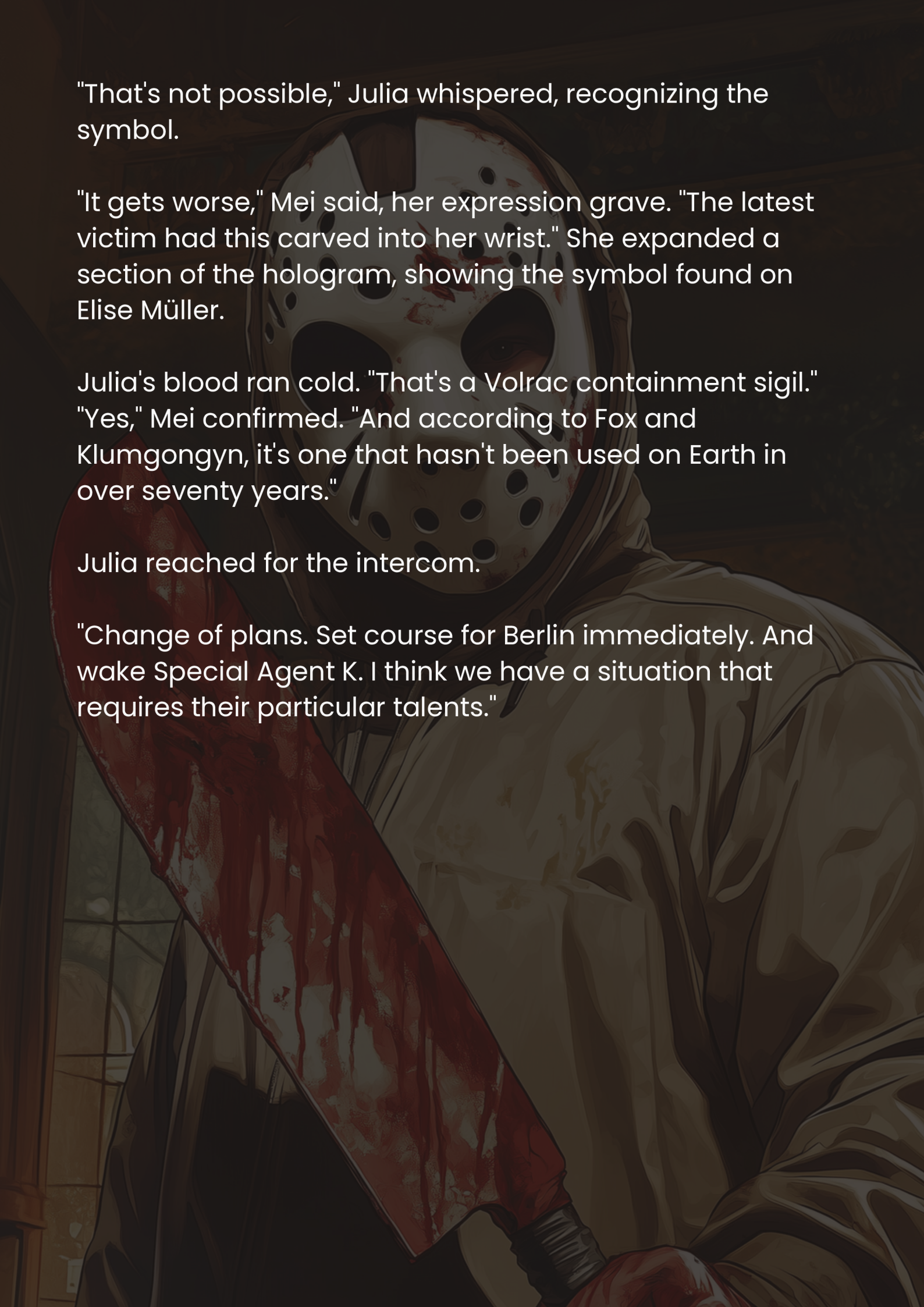
Julia looked up to see Mei Huang standing there, holding two steaming cups of tea.

"I thought you might need this," Mei said, offering one of the cups to Julia. "The pattern recognition algorithms have been running all night."

"And?"

"And they've found something interesting," Mei said, sitting across from Julia. "The murders aren't random. They form a geometric pattern across Berlin. When mapped and connected..."

She pulled up a holographic display above the desk. The city of Berlin materialized, with eighteen red dots scattered across it. When connected, they formed a complex shape.



"That's not possible," Julia whispered, recognizing the symbol.

"It gets worse," Mei said, her expression grave. "The latest victim had this carved into her wrist." She expanded a section of the hologram, showing the symbol found on Elise Müller.

Julia's blood ran cold. "That's a Volrac containment sigil." "Yes," Mei confirmed. "And according to Fox and Klumgongyn, it's one that hasn't been used on Earth in over seventy years."

Julia reached for the intercom.

"Change of plans. Set course for Berlin immediately. And wake Special Agent K. I think we have a situation that requires their particular talents."

Chapter 2: Connections

Detective Weber stood in front of the murder board, eighteen photographs staring back at him. Eighteen faces. Eighteen lives cut short by the same hand.

"The symbol is a dead end," his partner, Detective Schäfer, said from behind him. "We've run it through every database. Nothing."

Weber nodded absently, his attention caught by something else. He moved closer to the board, examining the map where they'd plotted the murders.

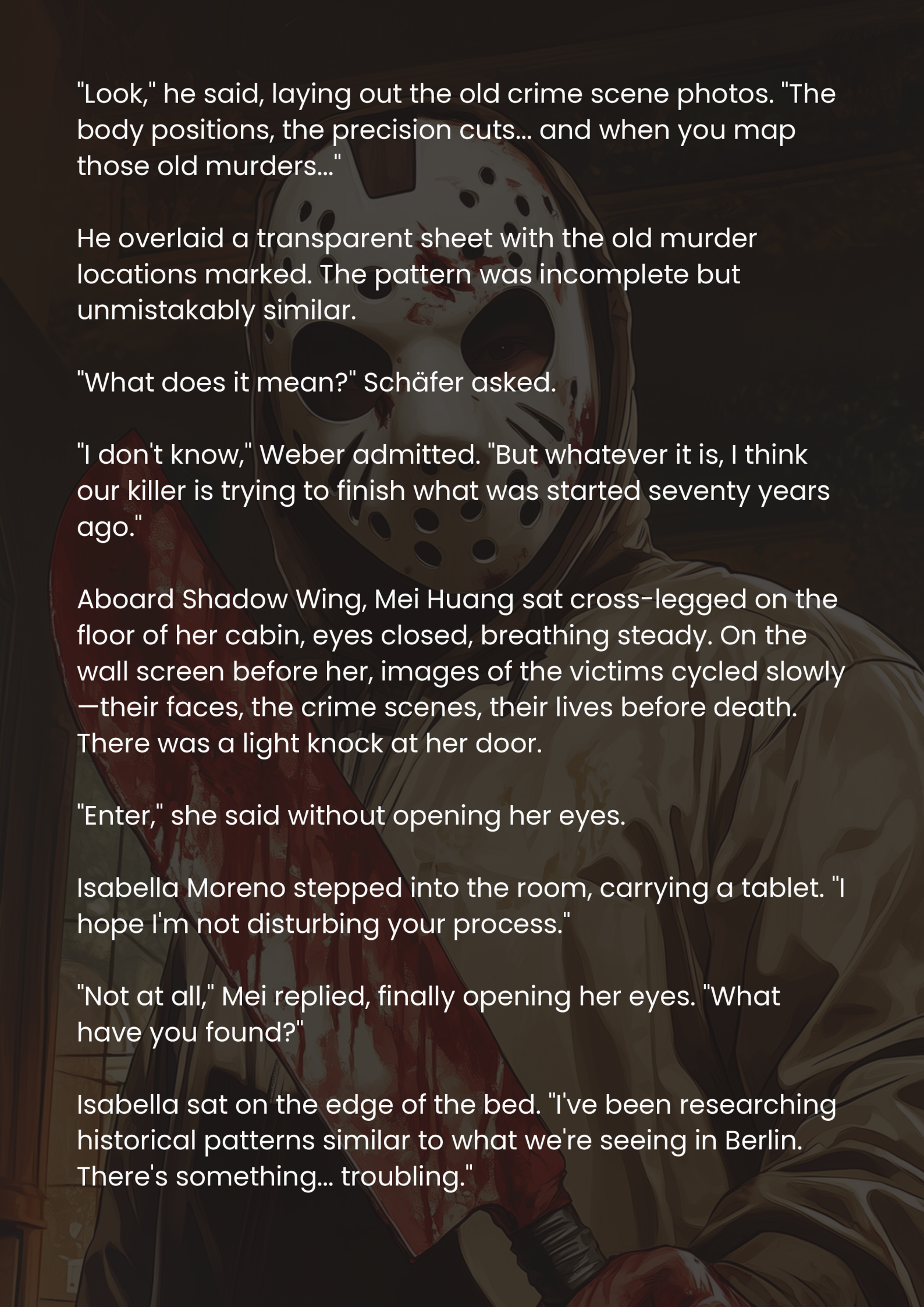
"Have you ever seen a pattern like this before?" he asked. Schäfer joined him at the board. "Looks random to me."

"No..." Weber traced the connections with his finger. "There's intention here. These aren't crimes of opportunity or passion. He's creating something."

"Creating what?"

Weber shook his head. "I don't know. But I've seen something similar before."

He crossed to his desk and pulled out an old case file—a series of ritualistic murders from the 1950s that had never been solved. The case had fascinated him at the academy.



"Look," he said, laying out the old crime scene photos. "The body positions, the precision cuts... and when you map those old murders..."

He overlaid a transparent sheet with the old murder locations marked. The pattern was incomplete but unmistakably similar.

"What does it mean?" Schäfer asked.

"I don't know," Weber admitted. "But whatever it is, I think our killer is trying to finish what was started seventy years ago."

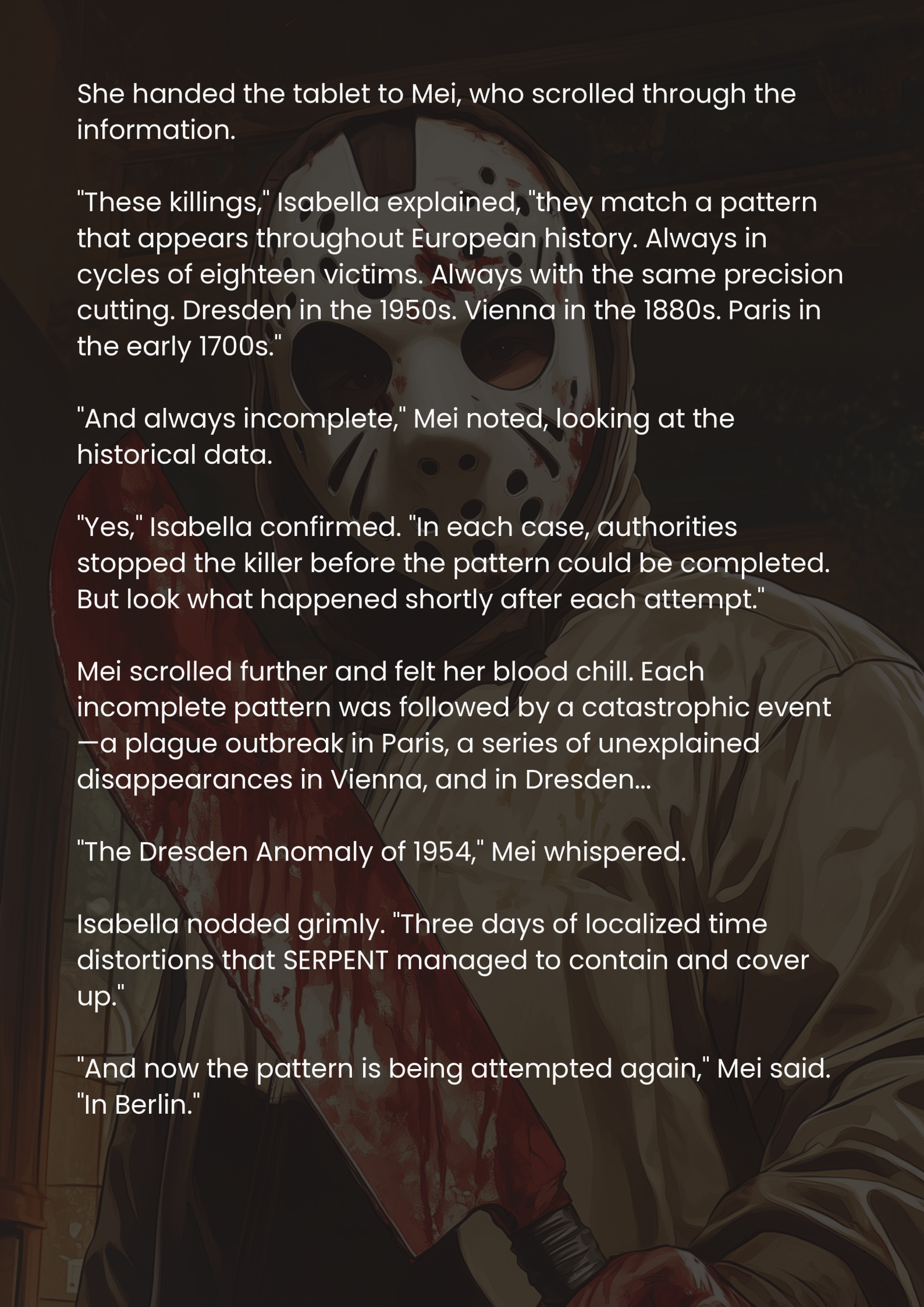
Aboard Shadow Wing, Mei Huang sat cross-legged on the floor of her cabin, eyes closed, breathing steady. On the wall screen before her, images of the victims cycled slowly—their faces, the crime scenes, their lives before death. There was a light knock at her door.

"Enter," she said without opening her eyes.

Isabella Moreno stepped into the room, carrying a tablet. "I hope I'm not disturbing your process."

"Not at all," Mei replied, finally opening her eyes. "What have you found?"

Isabella sat on the edge of the bed. "I've been researching historical patterns similar to what we're seeing in Berlin. There's something... troubling."



She handed the tablet to Mei, who scrolled through the information.

"These killings," Isabella explained, "they match a pattern that appears throughout European history. Always in cycles of eighteen victims. Always with the same precision cutting. Dresden in the 1950s. Vienna in the 1880s. Paris in the early 1700s."

"And always incomplete," Mei noted, looking at the historical data.

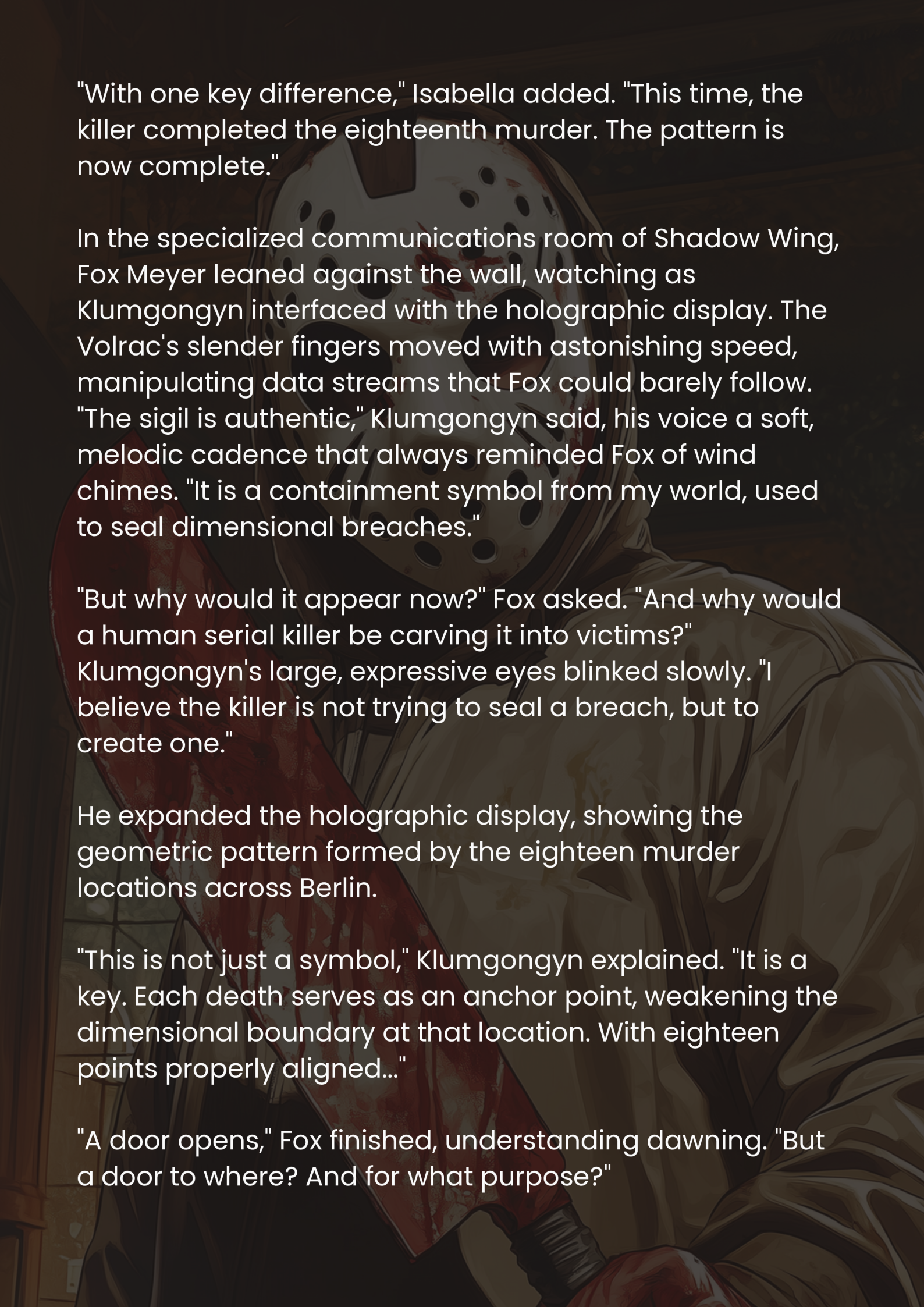
"Yes," Isabella confirmed. "In each case, authorities stopped the killer before the pattern could be completed. But look what happened shortly after each attempt."

Mei scrolled further and felt her blood chill. Each incomplete pattern was followed by a catastrophic event—a plague outbreak in Paris, a series of unexplained disappearances in Vienna, and in Dresden...

"The Dresden Anomaly of 1954," Mei whispered.

Isabella nodded grimly. "Three days of localized time distortions that SERPENT managed to contain and cover up."

"And now the pattern is being attempted again," Mei said. "In Berlin."

A person wearing a white hockey mask with black eye holes and a dark raincoat is holding a large, blood-soaked knife. The background is dark and indistinct.

"With one key difference," Isabella added. "This time, the killer completed the eighteenth murder. The pattern is now complete."

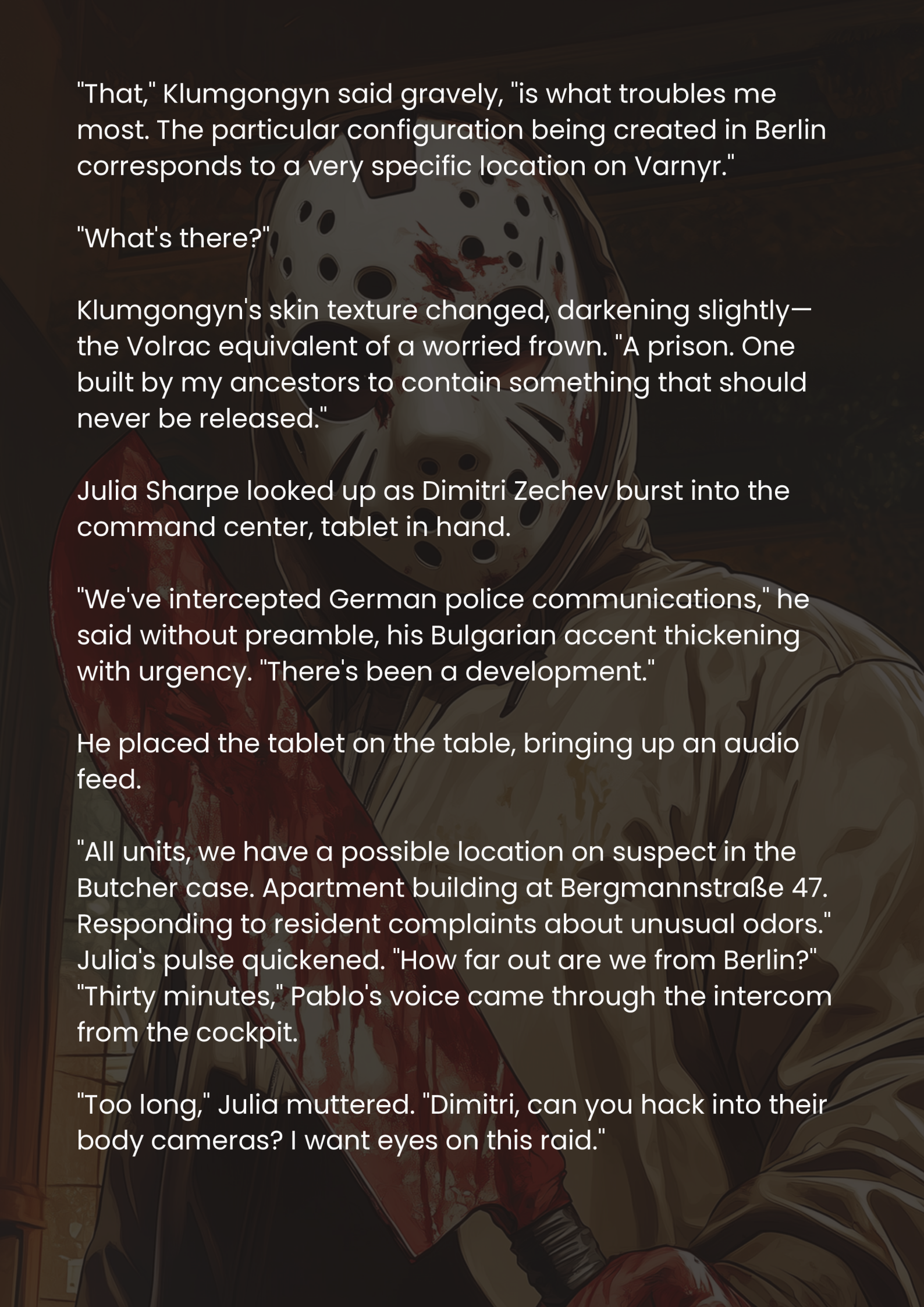
In the specialized communications room of Shadow Wing, Fox Meyer leaned against the wall, watching as Klumgongyn interfaced with the holographic display. The Volrac's slender fingers moved with astonishing speed, manipulating data streams that Fox could barely follow. "The sigil is authentic," Klumgongyn said, his voice a soft, melodic cadence that always reminded Fox of wind chimes. "It is a containment symbol from my world, used to seal dimensional breaches."

"But why would it appear now?" Fox asked. "And why would a human serial killer be carving it into victims?" Klumgongyn's large, expressive eyes blinked slowly. "I believe the killer is not trying to seal a breach, but to create one."

He expanded the holographic display, showing the geometric pattern formed by the eighteen murder locations across Berlin.

"This is not just a symbol," Klumgongyn explained. "It is a key. Each death serves as an anchor point, weakening the dimensional boundary at that location. With eighteen points properly aligned..."

"A door opens," Fox finished, understanding dawning. "But a door to where? And for what purpose?"



"That," Klumgongyn said gravely, "is what troubles me most. The particular configuration being created in Berlin corresponds to a very specific location on Varnyr."

"What's there?"

Klumgongyn's skin texture changed, darkening slightly—the Volrac equivalent of a worried frown. "A prison. One built by my ancestors to contain something that should never be released."

Julia Sharpe looked up as Dimitri Zechev burst into the command center, tablet in hand.

"We've intercepted German police communications," he said without preamble, his Bulgarian accent thickening with urgency. "There's been a development."

He placed the tablet on the table, bringing up an audio feed.

"All units, we have a possible location on suspect in the Butcher case. Apartment building at Bergmannstraße 47. Responding to resident complaints about unusual odors." Julia's pulse quickened. "How far out are we from Berlin?"

"Thirty minutes," Pablo's voice came through the intercom from the cockpit.

"Too long," Julia muttered. "Dimitri, can you hack into their body cameras? I want eyes on this raid."



Dimitri nodded, fingers already flying across his keyboard.
"Give me two minutes."

Julia turned to the communications panel. "Get the BTRU team prepped. I want them ready to move the moment we land."

As Dimitri worked, Julia couldn't shake the feeling that they were already too late. If the pattern was complete, if the door was already opening...

"I'm in," Dimitri announced, bringing up multiple video feeds on the main screen. "These are live from the police officers' body cameras at the scene."

Julia watched as the tactical team positioned themselves outside an apartment door, weapons drawn. The lead officer counted down silently, then nodded. The door splintered under the battering ram.

And then chaos erupted on the screens.

Chapter 3: The Raid

Detective Weber pressed himself against the wall beside the apartment door, weapon drawn, heart pounding in his chest. The tactical team was in position—six officers in full gear, ready to breach.

The complaints had come in early that morning. Multiple residents reporting a stale, metallic smell coming from apartment 5C. An apartment rented to a "Thomas Müller"—a name that preliminary checks suggested was false.

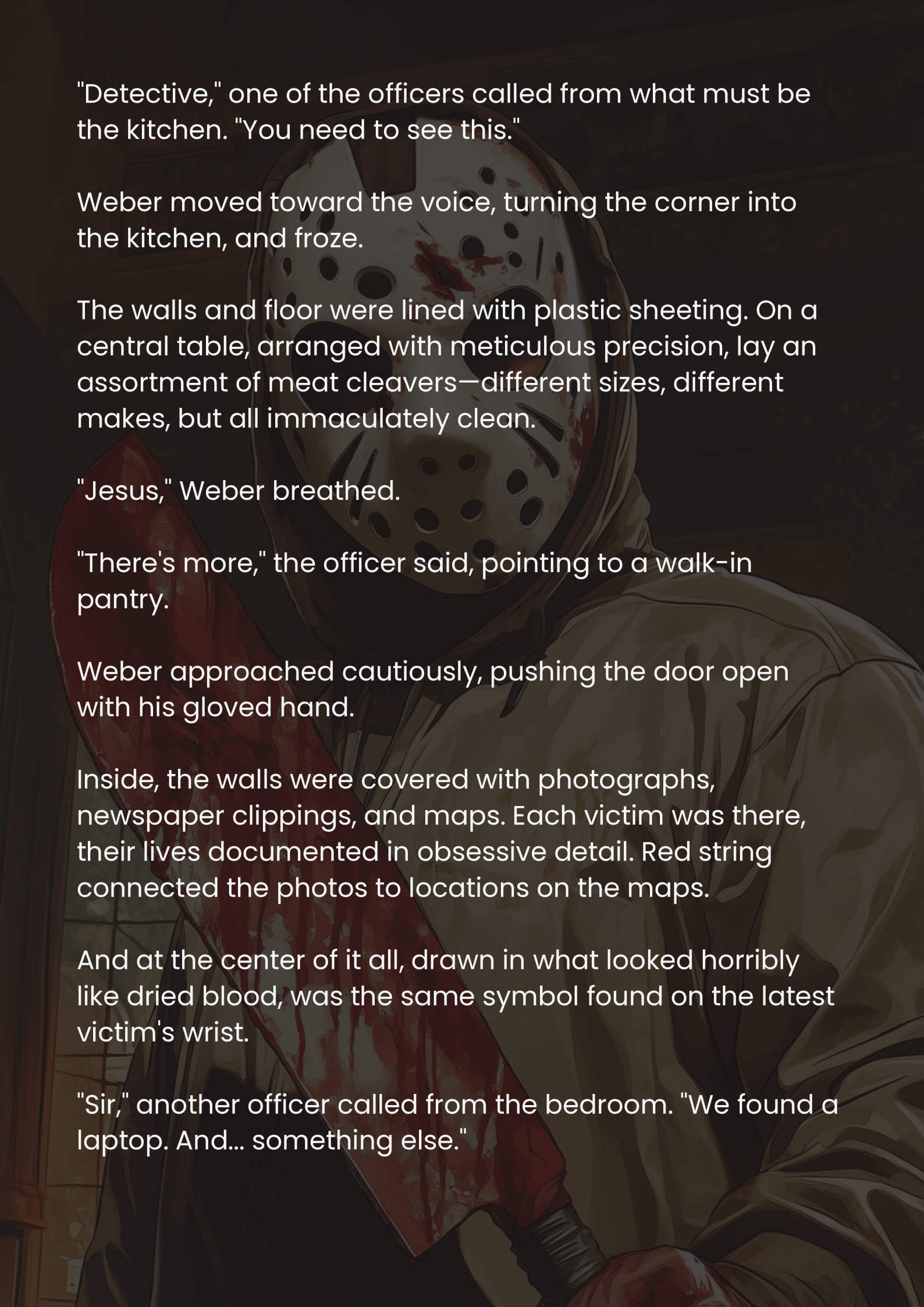
Weber nodded to the team leader, who raised three fingers, then two, then one.

The battering ram struck the door, wood splintering as it swung inward. "POLICE! DON'T MOVE!" Weber shouted as he entered, weapon raised.

The apartment was eerily silent. And then the smell hit him—copper and chemicals, decay and disinfectant battling for dominance.

"Clear the rooms," he ordered, moving carefully through the entryway.

The living room was sparse—a couch, a television, nothing personal. No photographs, no mail, nothing to identify the occupant.



"Detective," one of the officers called from what must be the kitchen. "You need to see this."

Weber moved toward the voice, turning the corner into the kitchen, and froze.

The walls and floor were lined with plastic sheeting. On a central table, arranged with meticulous precision, lay an assortment of meat cleavers—different sizes, different makes, but all immaculately clean.

"Jesus," Weber breathed.

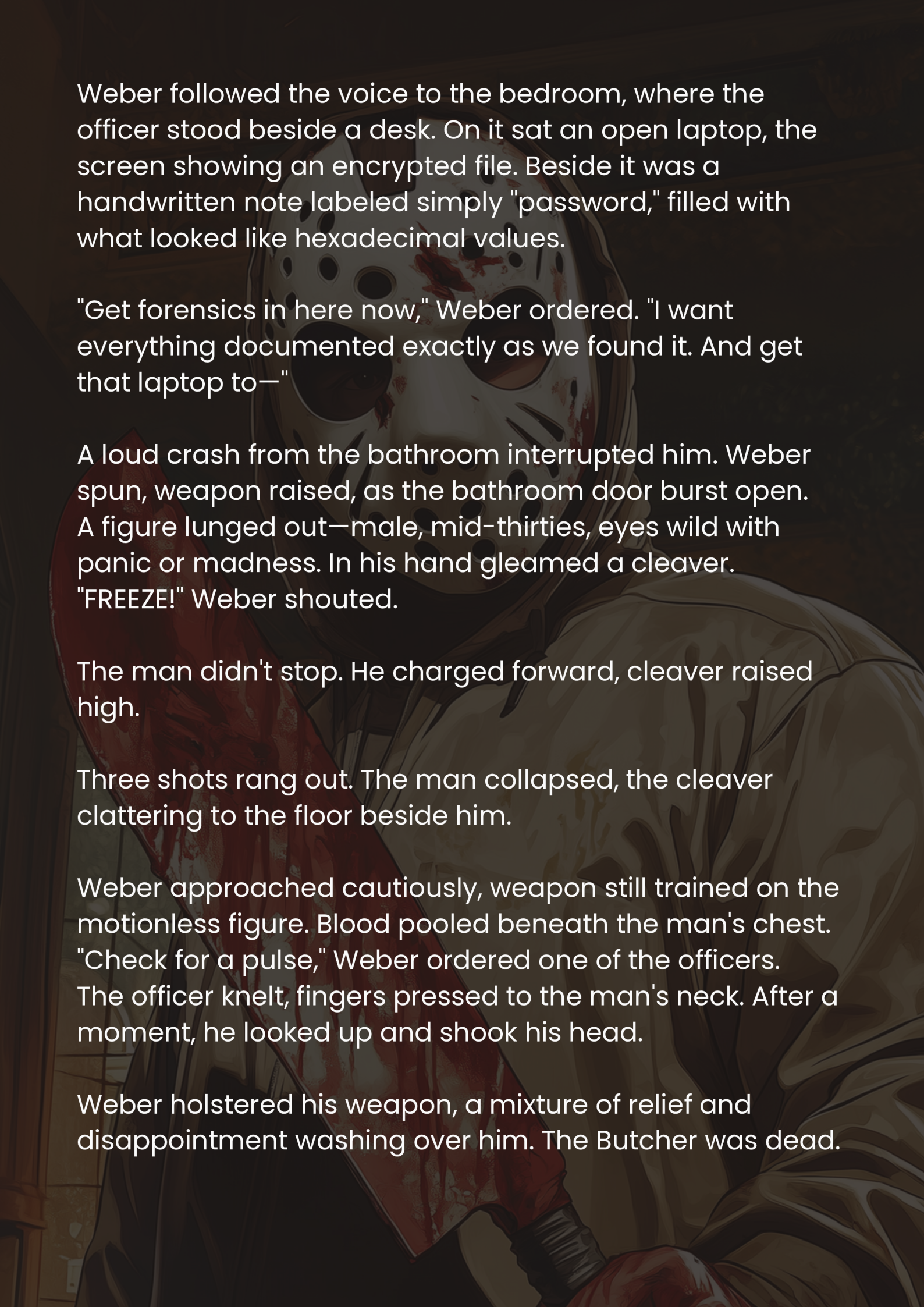
"There's more," the officer said, pointing to a walk-in pantry.

Weber approached cautiously, pushing the door open with his gloved hand.

Inside, the walls were covered with photographs, newspaper clippings, and maps. Each victim was there, their lives documented in obsessive detail. Red string connected the photos to locations on the maps.

And at the center of it all, drawn in what looked horribly like dried blood, was the same symbol found on the latest victim's wrist.

"Sir," another officer called from the bedroom. "We found a laptop. And... something else."



Weber followed the voice to the bedroom, where the officer stood beside a desk. On it sat an open laptop, the screen showing an encrypted file. Beside it was a handwritten note labeled simply "password," filled with what looked like hexadecimal values.

"Get forensics in here now," Weber ordered. "I want everything documented exactly as we found it. And get that laptop to—"

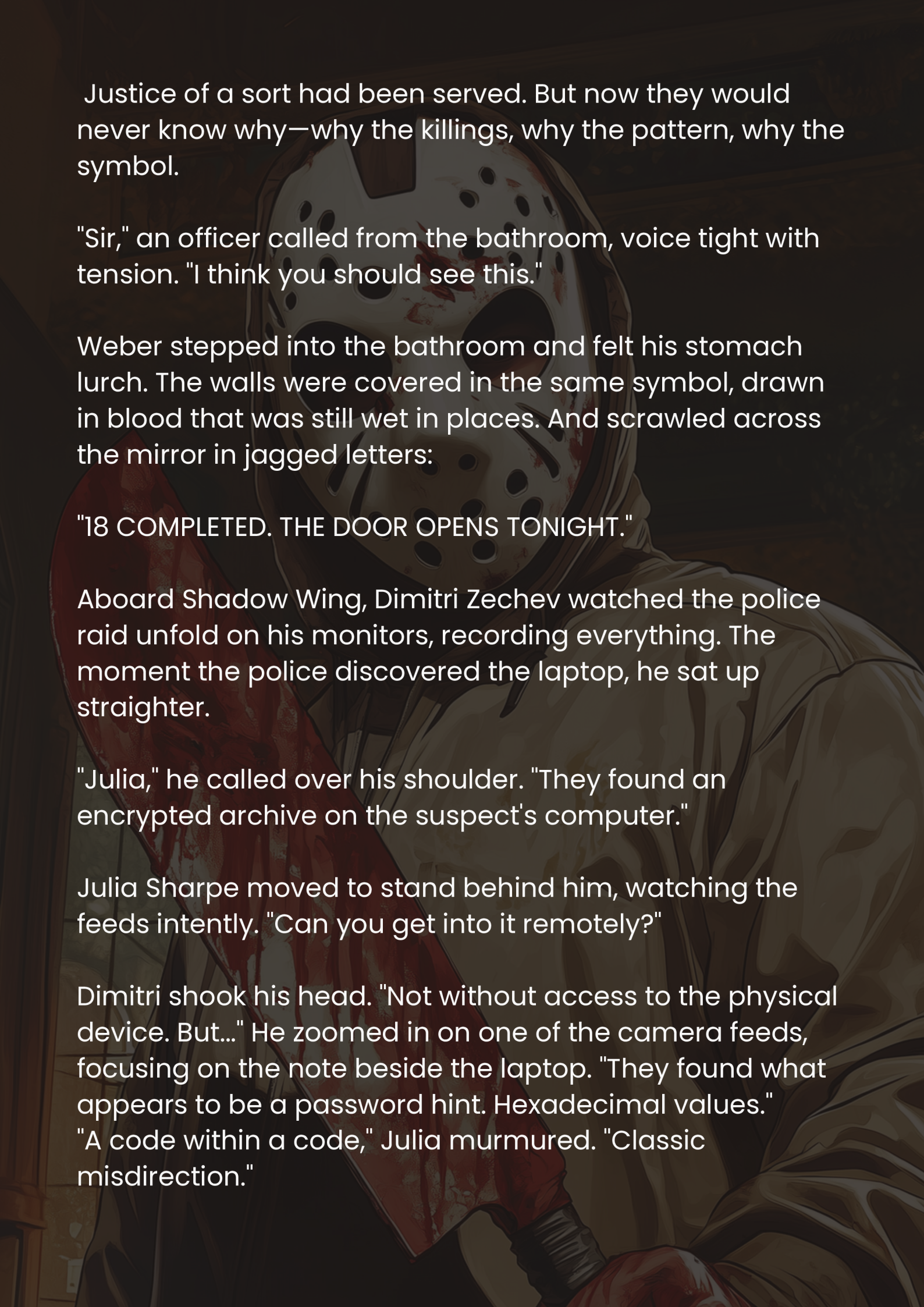
A loud crash from the bathroom interrupted him. Weber spun, weapon raised, as the bathroom door burst open. A figure lunged out—male, mid-thirties, eyes wild with panic or madness. In his hand gleamed a cleaver. "FREEZE!" Weber shouted.

The man didn't stop. He charged forward, cleaver raised high.

Three shots rang out. The man collapsed, the cleaver clattering to the floor beside him.

Weber approached cautiously, weapon still trained on the motionless figure. Blood pooled beneath the man's chest. "Check for a pulse," Weber ordered one of the officers. The officer knelt, fingers pressed to the man's neck. After a moment, he looked up and shook his head.

Weber holstered his weapon, a mixture of relief and disappointment washing over him. The Butcher was dead.

A person wearing a white hockey mask with black eye holes and a black strap across the forehead. The mask is smeared with red blood. They are holding a large, red, blood-covered machete. The background is dark and indistinct.

Justice of a sort had been served. But now they would never know why—why the killings, why the pattern, why the symbol.

"Sir," an officer called from the bathroom, voice tight with tension. "I think you should see this."

Weber stepped into the bathroom and felt his stomach lurch. The walls were covered in the same symbol, drawn in blood that was still wet in places. And scrawled across the mirror in jagged letters:

"18 COMPLETED. THE DOOR OPENS TONIGHT."

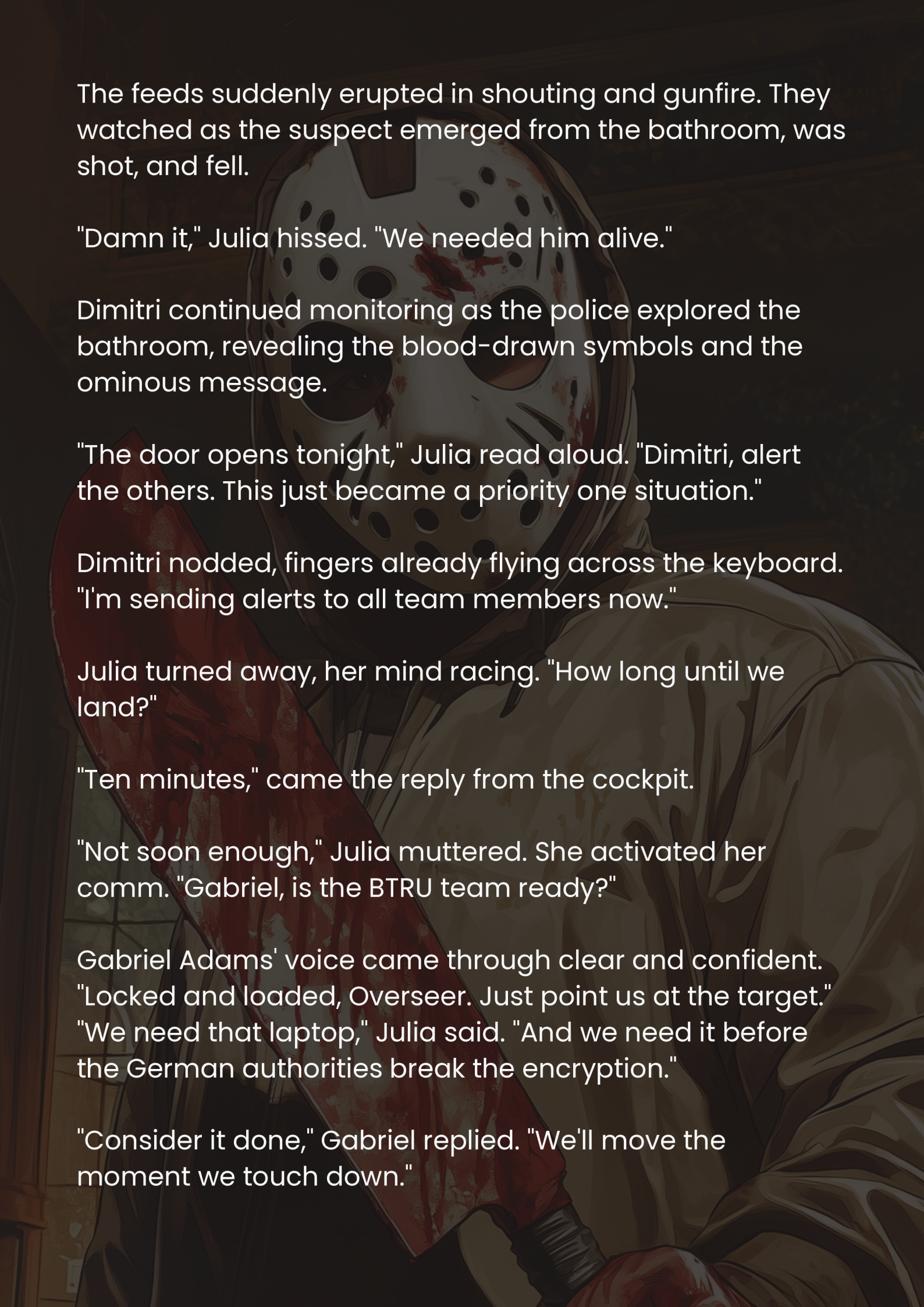
Aboard Shadow Wing, Dimitri Zechev watched the police raid unfold on his monitors, recording everything. The moment the police discovered the laptop, he sat up straighter.

"Julia," he called over his shoulder. "They found an encrypted archive on the suspect's computer."

Julia Sharpe moved to stand behind him, watching the feeds intently. "Can you get into it remotely?"

Dimitri shook his head. "Not without access to the physical device. But..." He zoomed in on one of the camera feeds, focusing on the note beside the laptop. "They found what appears to be a password hint. Hexadecimal values."

"A code within a code," Julia murmured. "Classic misdirection."

A person wearing a white hockey mask with black eye holes and a tactical vest is holding a large machete. The blade of the machete is covered in blood. The person's face is partially obscured by the mask, and their expression is not visible. The background is dark and indistinct.

The feeds suddenly erupted in shouting and gunfire. They watched as the suspect emerged from the bathroom, was shot, and fell.

"Damn it," Julia hissed. "We needed him alive."

Dimitri continued monitoring as the police explored the bathroom, revealing the blood-drawn symbols and the ominous message.

"The door opens tonight," Julia read aloud. "Dimitri, alert the others. This just became a priority one situation."

Dimitri nodded, fingers already flying across the keyboard. "I'm sending alerts to all team members now."

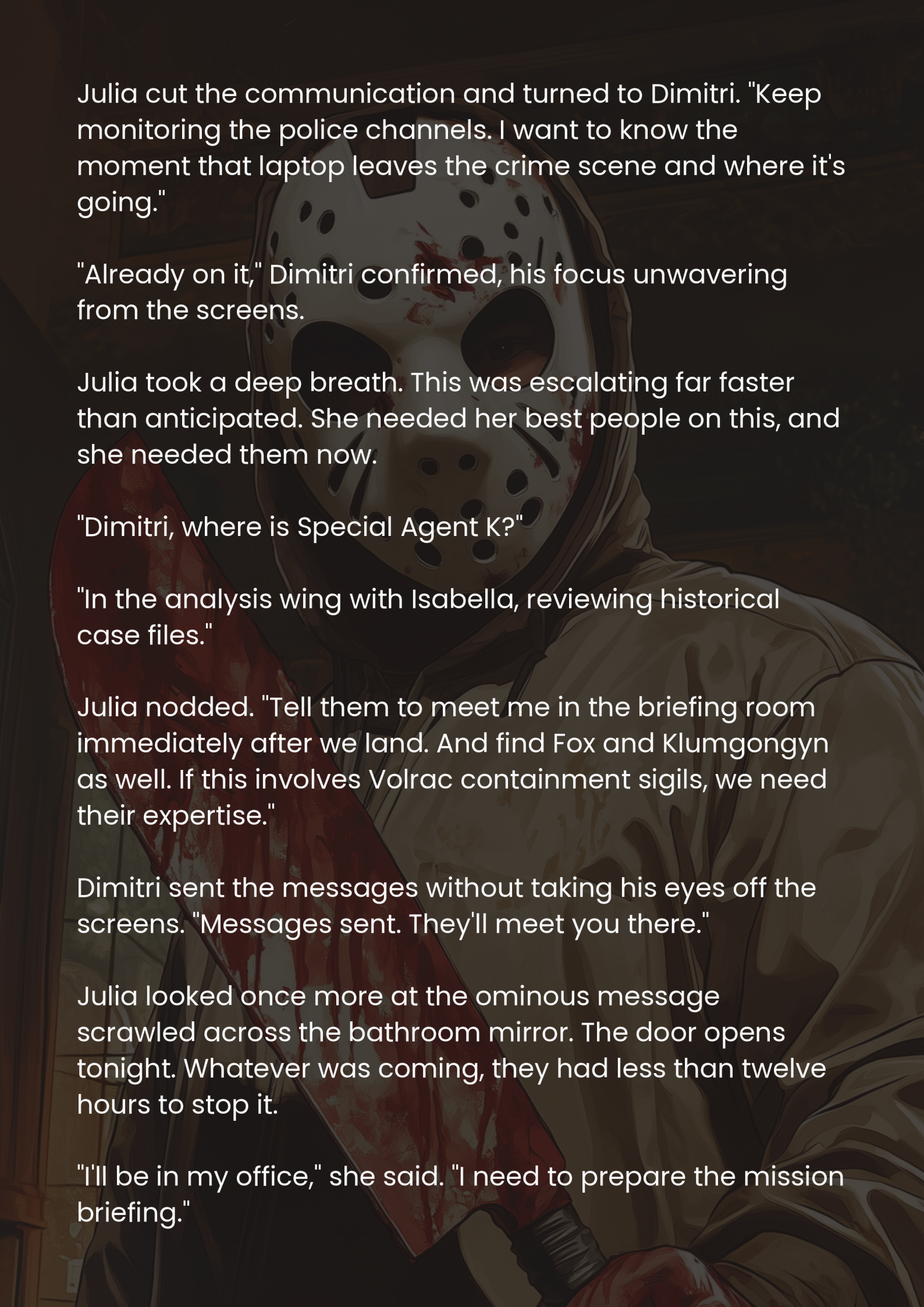
Julia turned away, her mind racing. "How long until we land?"

"Ten minutes," came the reply from the cockpit.

"Not soon enough," Julia muttered. She activated her comm. "Gabriel, is the BTRU team ready?"

Gabriel Adams' voice came through clear and confident. "Locked and loaded, Overseer. Just point us at the target." "We need that laptop," Julia said. "And we need it before the German authorities break the encryption."

"Consider it done," Gabriel replied. "We'll move the moment we touch down."



Julia cut the communication and turned to Dimitri. "Keep monitoring the police channels. I want to know the moment that laptop leaves the crime scene and where it's going."

"Already on it," Dimitri confirmed, his focus unwavering from the screens.

Julia took a deep breath. This was escalating far faster than anticipated. She needed her best people on this, and she needed them now.

"Dimitri, where is Special Agent K?"


"In the analysis wing with Isabella, reviewing historical case files."

Julia nodded. "Tell them to meet me in the briefing room immediately after we land. And find Fox and Klumgongyn as well. If this involves Volrac containment sigils, we need their expertise."

Dimitri sent the messages without taking his eyes off the screens. "Messages sent. They'll meet you there."

Julia looked once more at the ominous message scrawled across the bathroom mirror. The door opens tonight. Whatever was coming, they had less than twelve hours to stop it.

"I'll be in my office," she said. "I need to prepare the mission briefing."

A person wearing a white hockey mask with black eye holes and a black strap across the forehead. The mask is covered in blood. They are holding a large, bloody machete. The background is dark and indistinct.

The BTRU team gathered in the equipment bay of Shadow Wing, checking weapons and gear with practiced efficiency. Gabriel Adams, the team leader, watched his people work, pride evident in his stance.

Mikko Häyhä, the Finnish sniper, methodically inspected his rifle, his movements precise and unhurried. Beside him, Amir Hussaini checked explosives and breaching equipment, his hands steady despite the plane's slight turbulence as it began its descent toward Berlin.

Liam Irwin looked up from where he was securing tactical vests. "So, what's the story? Another serial killer gone weird?"

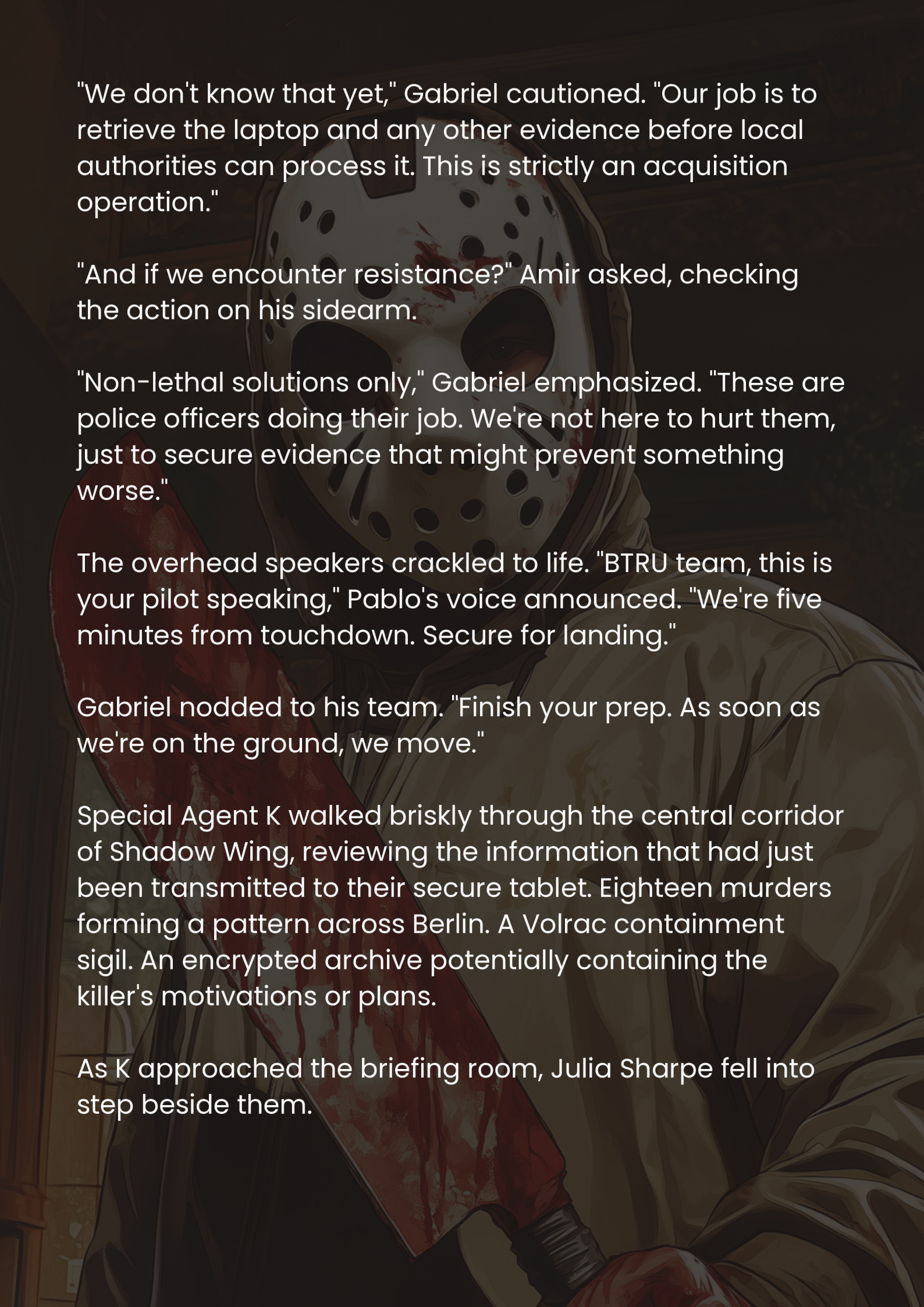
Gabriel shrugged. "Details are still coming in, but from what I gather, this isn't your typical murderer. The Overseer seems concerned about some kind of pattern the killer completed."

"Eighteen victims," Mikko said quietly, not looking up from his rifle. "All killed with a meat cleaver. Precise cuts, methodical. This was not about passion or hatred."

"How do you know that?" Amir asked.

"I read the preliminary report," Mikko replied. "And I've seen similar work before. This is ritual killing."

"Great," Liam muttered. "Another cultist nutjob trying to summon something nasty."

A person wearing a white hockey mask with black eye holes and a black chin strap. They are wearing a dark tactical jacket. They are holding a large, blood-soaked knife in their right hand. The background is dark and blurry.

"We don't know that yet," Gabriel cautioned. "Our job is to retrieve the laptop and any other evidence before local authorities can process it. This is strictly an acquisition operation."

"And if we encounter resistance?" Amir asked, checking the action on his sidearm.

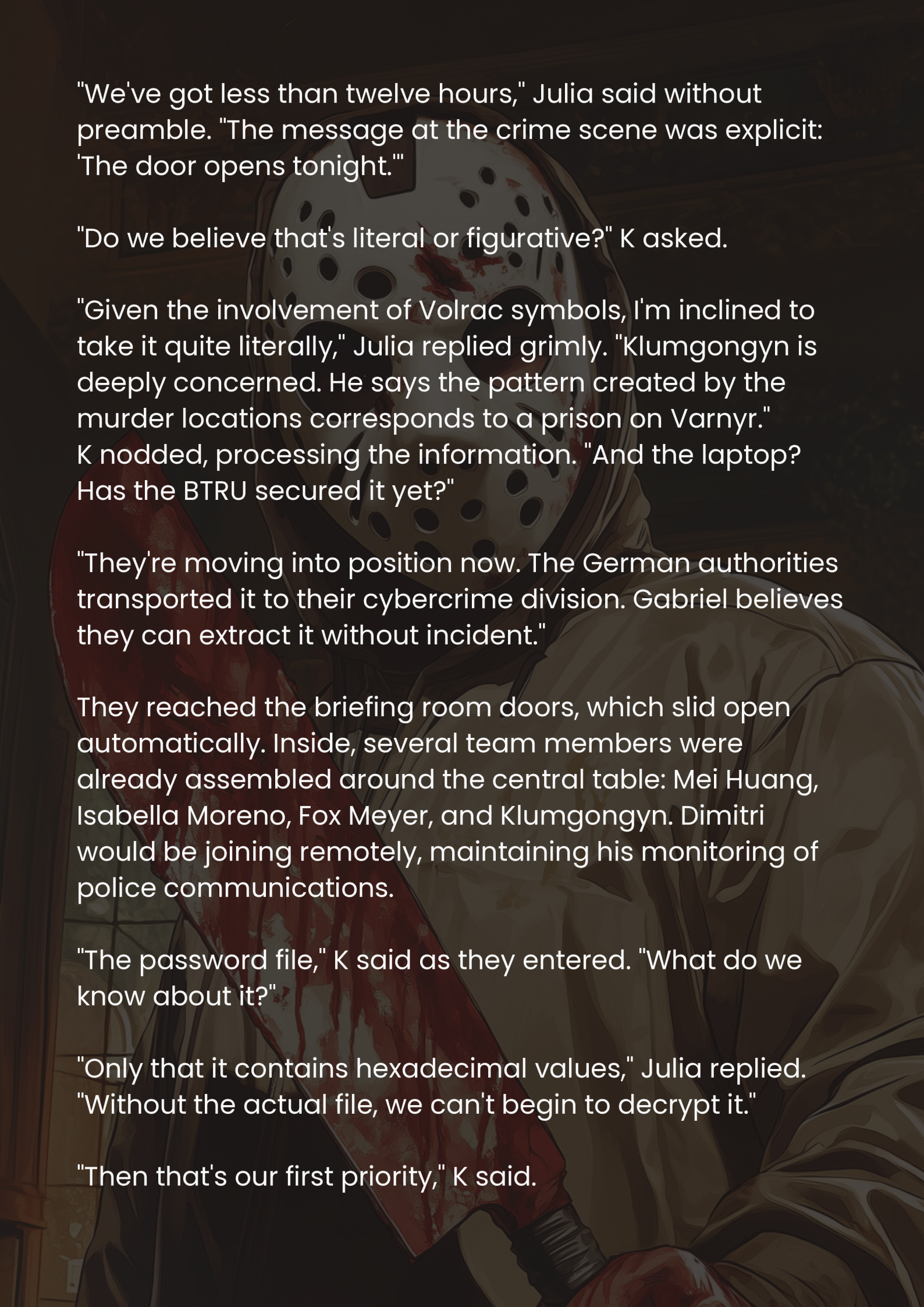
"Non-lethal solutions only," Gabriel emphasized. "These are police officers doing their job. We're not here to hurt them, just to secure evidence that might prevent something worse."

The overhead speakers crackled to life. "BTRU team, this is your pilot speaking," Pablo's voice announced. "We're five minutes from touchdown. Secure for landing."

Gabriel nodded to his team. "Finish your prep. As soon as we're on the ground, we move."

Special Agent K walked briskly through the central corridor of Shadow Wing, reviewing the information that had just been transmitted to their secure tablet. Eighteen murders forming a pattern across Berlin. A Volrac containment sigil. An encrypted archive potentially containing the killer's motivations or plans.

As K approached the briefing room, Julia Sharpe fell into step beside them.



"We've got less than twelve hours," Julia said without preamble. "The message at the crime scene was explicit: 'The door opens tonight.'"

"Do we believe that's literal or figurative?" K asked.

"Given the involvement of Volrac symbols, I'm inclined to take it quite literally," Julia replied grimly. "Klumgongyn is deeply concerned. He says the pattern created by the murder locations corresponds to a prison on Varnyr." K nodded, processing the information. "And the laptop? Has the BTRU secured it yet?"

"They're moving into position now. The German authorities transported it to their cybercrime division. Gabriel believes they can extract it without incident."

They reached the briefing room doors, which slid open automatically. Inside, several team members were already assembled around the central table: Mei Huang, Isabella Moreno, Fox Meyer, and Klumgongyn. Dimitri would be joining remotely, maintaining his monitoring of police communications.

"The password file," K said as they entered. "What do we know about it?"

"Only that it contains hexadecimal values," Julia replied. "Without the actual file, we can't begin to decrypt it."

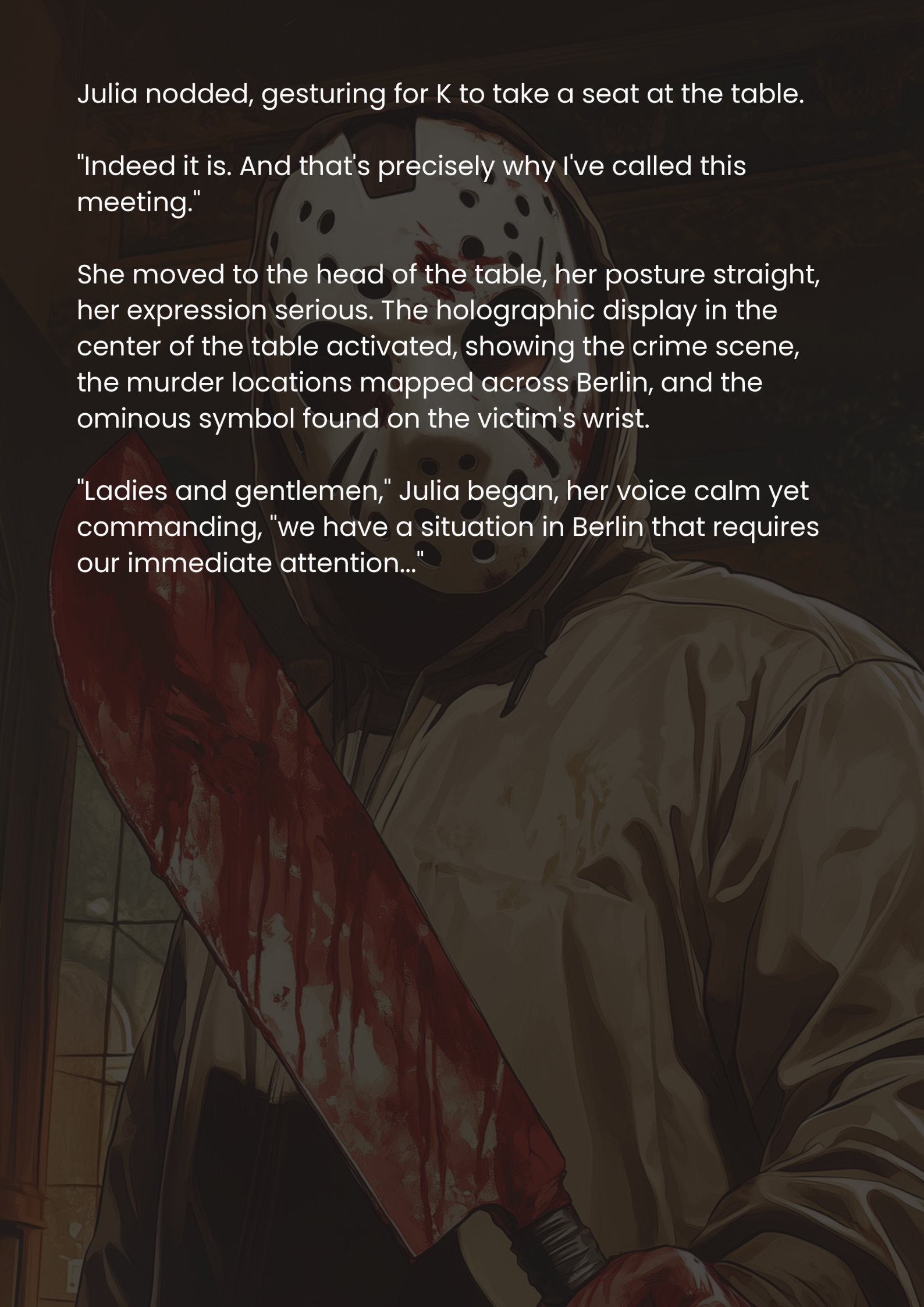
"Then that's our first priority," K said.

Julia nodded, gesturing for K to take a seat at the table.

"Indeed it is. And that's precisely why I've called this meeting."

She moved to the head of the table, her posture straight, her expression serious. The holographic display in the center of the table activated, showing the crime scene, the murder locations mapped across Berlin, and the ominous symbol found on the victim's wrist.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Julia began, her voice calm yet commanding, "we have a situation in Berlin that requires our immediate attention..."



Briefing



Greetings, Special Agent.

The city of Berlin in Germany is plagued by a serial killer, nicknamed "The Butcher". Autopsy reports conclude that the weapon for disposal is most likely a meat cleaver. The total body count currently sits at 18 people, mostly women and younger men. All victims were traveling alone at night, mostly through quiet areas.

Fortunately, yesterday the German police raided an apartment in the city center of Berlin. Neighbors had complained about a stale, metal like smell coming from the apartment. Upon closer inspection, the police found large quantities of plastic sheets, blood traces of several victims and an assortment of meat cleavers.

Since the apartment was rented out to an individual who had used a fake ID, the police has hit a dead end in trying to find the killer. They did however retrieve several files from a personal laptop, including a large, encrypted archive. In the same location as the archive was stored, a file named "password" was found. However, this just contained a bunch of HEX values. We need you to make sense of this file, perhaps it leads to the password for the archive.

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

Materials

data-the-butcher.zip

Answer Instruction

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

HINT: You will need to listen carefully...

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.