

历史与文明

THE ROAD TO

ROME

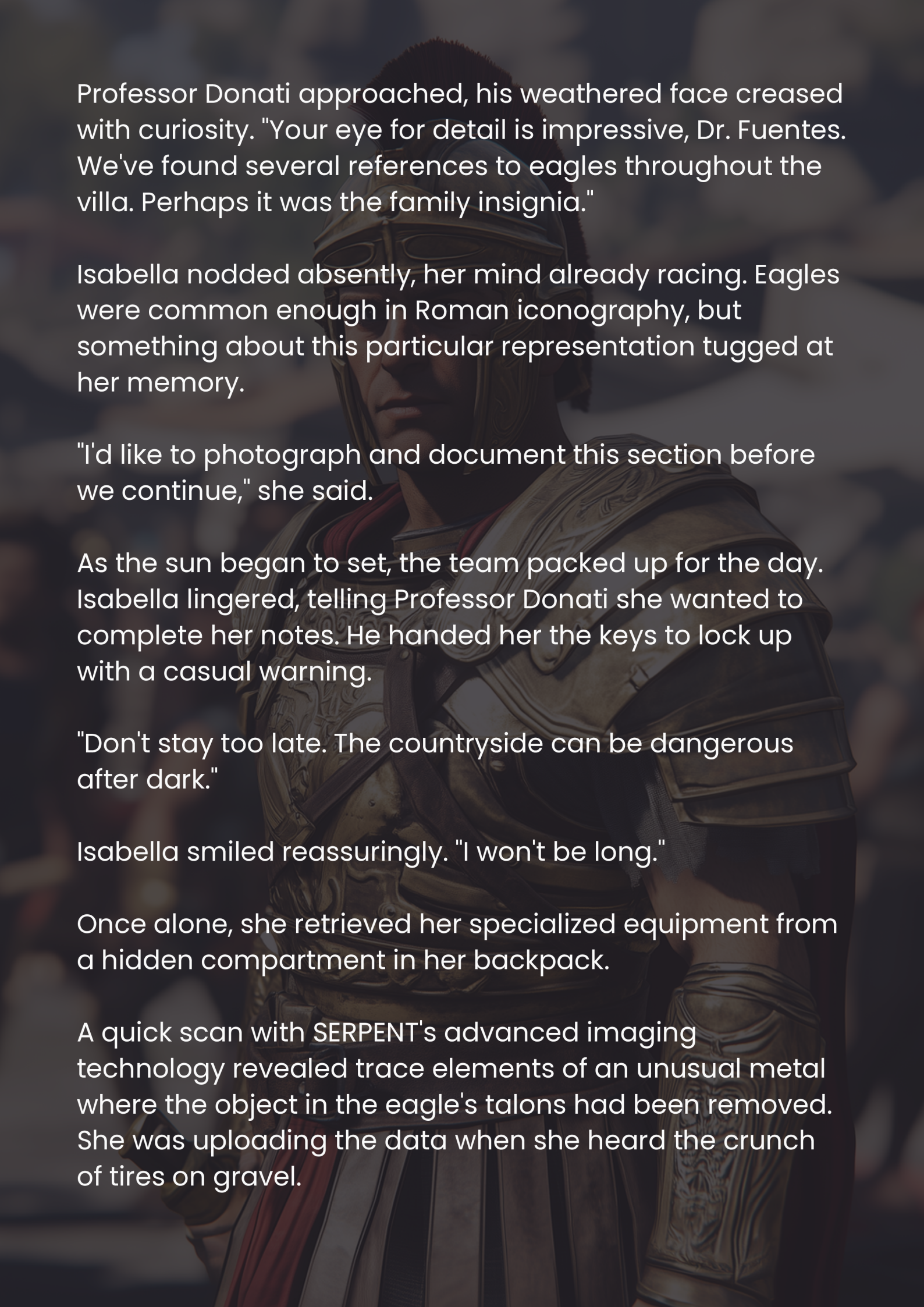
CHAPTER 1: Shadows of Antiquity

The Italian sun beat down mercilessly on the archaeological dig site outside Verona. Isabella Moreno adjusted her wide-brimmed hat and dabbed at the sweat on her forehead. To the dozen graduate students and senior archaeologists working around her, she was Dr. Elena Fuentes, a visiting scholar from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México specializing in Roman provincial settlements. None of them suspected she was SERPENT's top historian and cultural expert.

"Dr. Fuentes, you might want to see this," called one of the students, beckoning her toward a newly cleared section of mosaic flooring.

Isabella carefully made her way across the excavation, mindful of the delicate grid of string marking the different sectors. The student, Paolo, had uncovered a striking mosaic panel depicting an eagle with outstretched wings. "Beautiful work," Isabella commented, kneeling to examine it closer. "Mid-second century, judging by the style." "That's what Professor Donati said too," Paolo replied proudly.

Isabella traced her finger along the edge of the mosaic without touching it. "The eagle was carrying something in its talons originally," she noted. "See how the tesserae pattern breaks here? Something's been deliberately removed."



Professor Donati approached, his weathered face creased with curiosity. "Your eye for detail is impressive, Dr. Fuentes. We've found several references to eagles throughout the villa. Perhaps it was the family insignia."

Isabella nodded absently, her mind already racing. Eagles were common enough in Roman iconography, but something about this particular representation tugged at her memory.

"I'd like to photograph and document this section before we continue," she said.

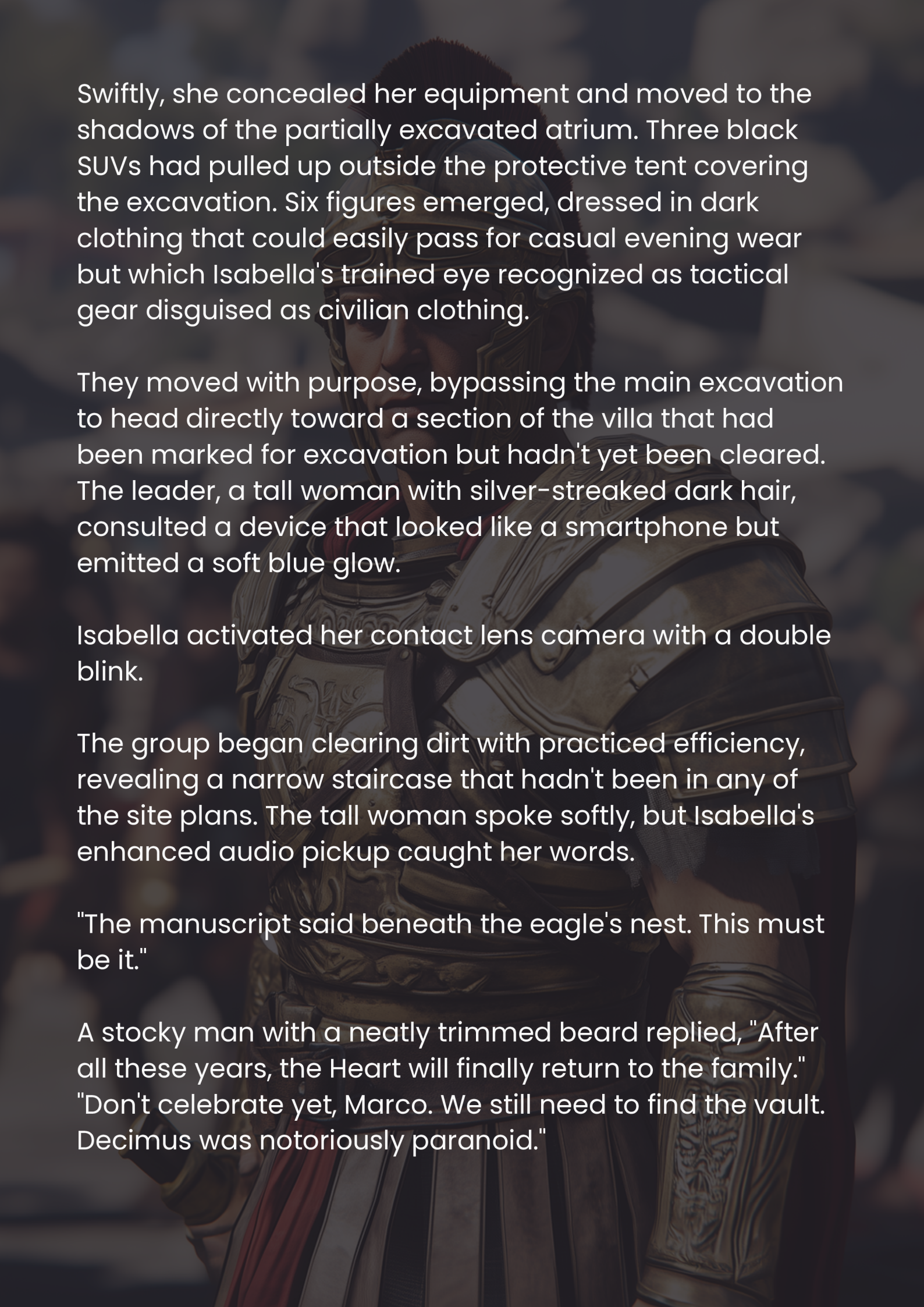
As the sun began to set, the team packed up for the day. Isabella lingered, telling Professor Donati she wanted to complete her notes. He handed her the keys to lock up with a casual warning.

"Don't stay too late. The countryside can be dangerous after dark."

Isabella smiled reassuringly. "I won't be long."

Once alone, she retrieved her specialized equipment from a hidden compartment in her backpack.

A quick scan with SERPENT's advanced imaging technology revealed trace elements of an unusual metal where the object in the eagle's talons had been removed. She was uploading the data when she heard the crunch of tires on gravel.



Swiftly, she concealed her equipment and moved to the shadows of the partially excavated atrium. Three black SUVs had pulled up outside the protective tent covering the excavation. Six figures emerged, dressed in dark clothing that could easily pass for casual evening wear but which Isabella's trained eye recognized as tactical gear disguised as civilian clothing.

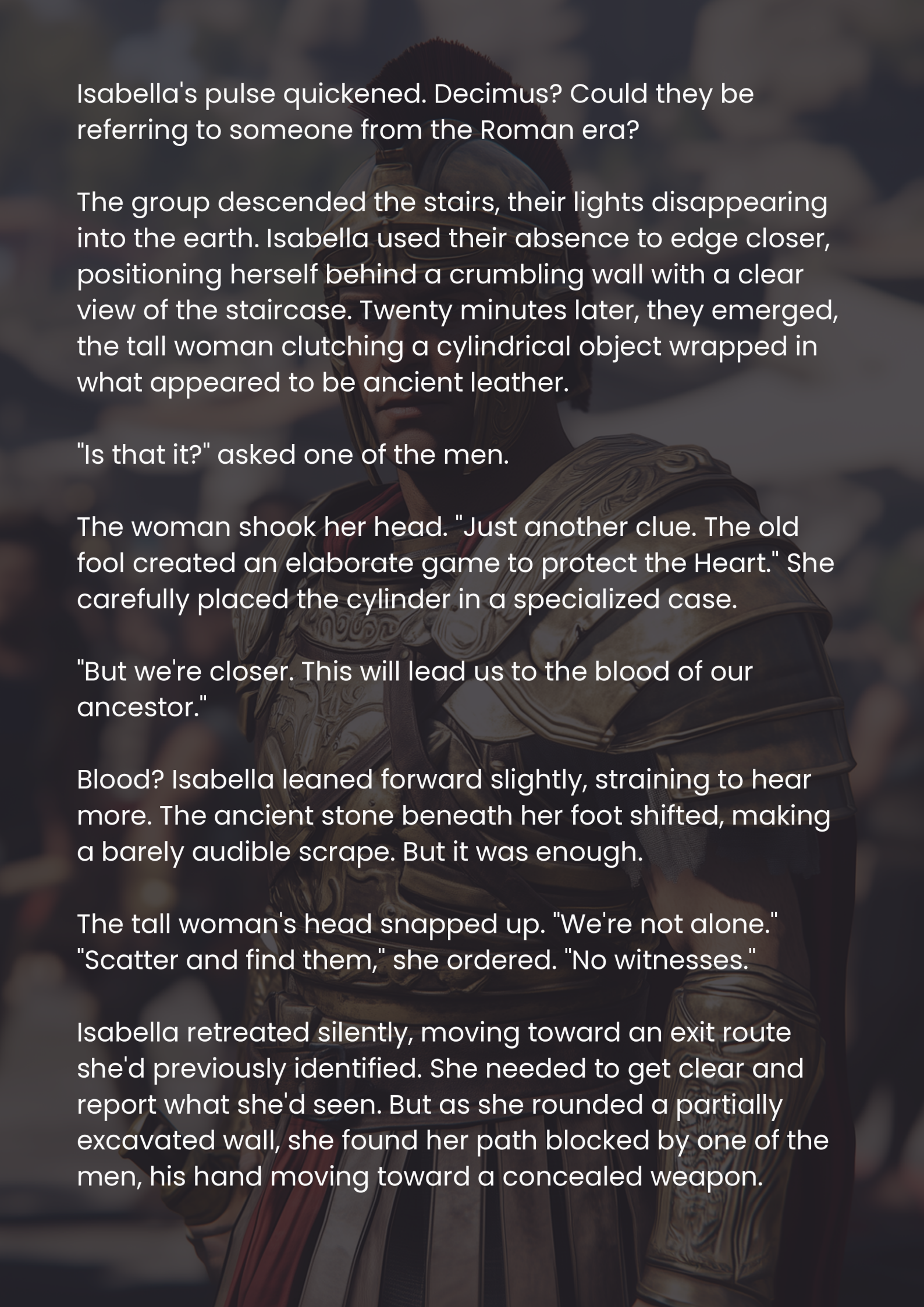
They moved with purpose, bypassing the main excavation to head directly toward a section of the villa that had been marked for excavation but hadn't yet been cleared. The leader, a tall woman with silver-streaked dark hair, consulted a device that looked like a smartphone but emitted a soft blue glow.

Isabella activated her contact lens camera with a double blink.

The group began clearing dirt with practiced efficiency, revealing a narrow staircase that hadn't been in any of the site plans. The tall woman spoke softly, but Isabella's enhanced audio pickup caught her words.

"The manuscript said beneath the eagle's nest. This must be it."

A stocky man with a neatly trimmed beard replied, "After all these years, the Heart will finally return to the family."
"Don't celebrate yet, Marco. We still need to find the vault. Decimus was notoriously paranoid."



Isabella's pulse quickened. Decimus? Could they be referring to someone from the Roman era?

The group descended the stairs, their lights disappearing into the earth. Isabella used their absence to edge closer, positioning herself behind a crumbling wall with a clear view of the staircase. Twenty minutes later, they emerged, the tall woman clutching a cylindrical object wrapped in what appeared to be ancient leather.

"Is that it?" asked one of the men.

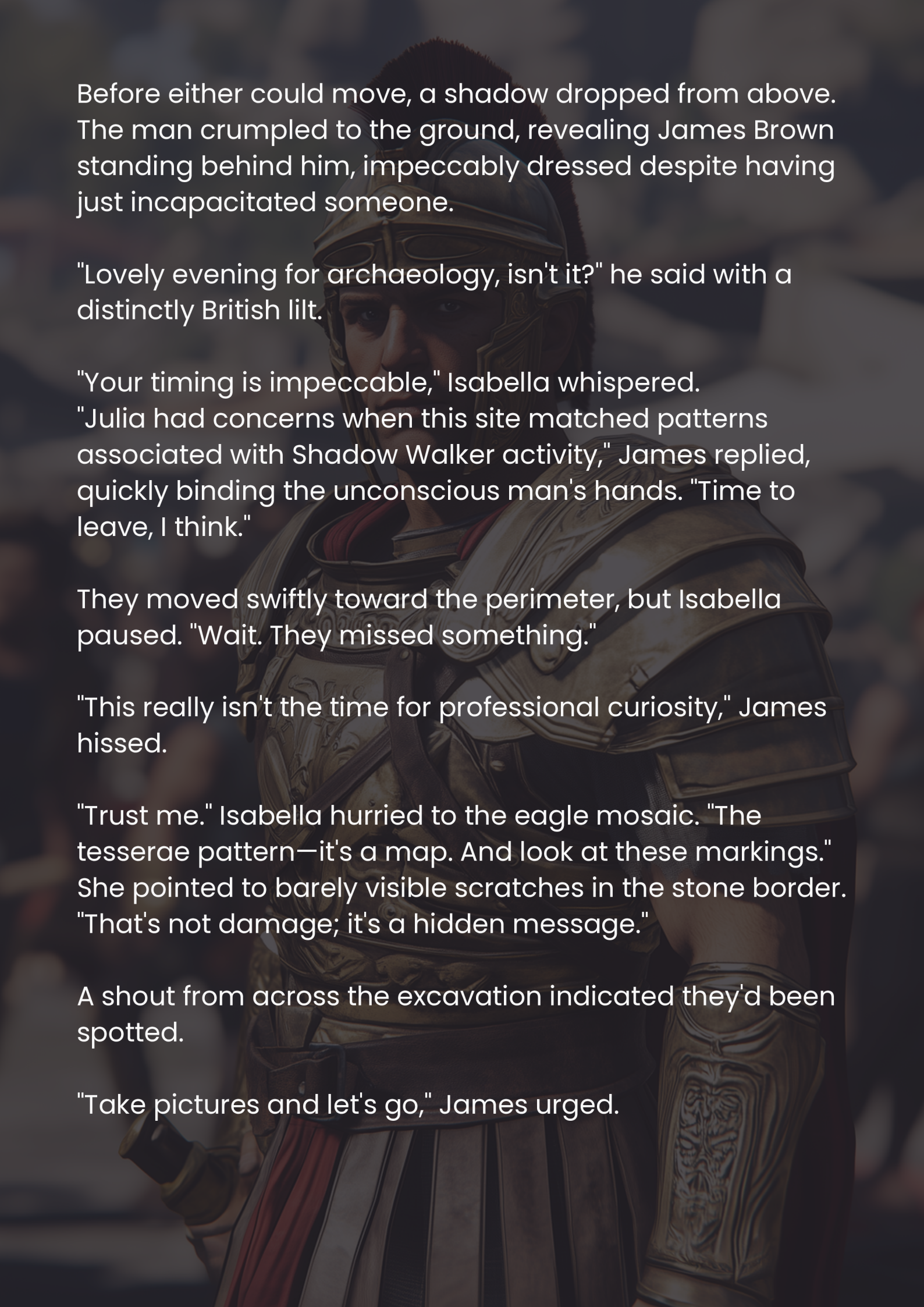
The woman shook her head. "Just another clue. The old fool created an elaborate game to protect the Heart." She carefully placed the cylinder in a specialized case.

"But we're closer. This will lead us to the blood of our ancestor."

Blood? Isabella leaned forward slightly, straining to hear more. The ancient stone beneath her foot shifted, making a barely audible scrape. But it was enough.

The tall woman's head snapped up. "We're not alone." "Scatter and find them," she ordered. "No witnesses."

Isabella retreated silently, moving toward an exit route she'd previously identified. She needed to get clear and report what she'd seen. But as she rounded a partially excavated wall, she found her path blocked by one of the men, his hand moving toward a concealed weapon.



Before either could move, a shadow dropped from above. The man crumpled to the ground, revealing James Brown standing behind him, impeccably dressed despite having just incapacitated someone.

"Lovely evening for archaeology, isn't it?" he said with a distinctly British lilt.

"Your timing is impeccable," Isabella whispered.

"Julia had concerns when this site matched patterns associated with Shadow Walker activity," James replied, quickly binding the unconscious man's hands. "Time to leave, I think."

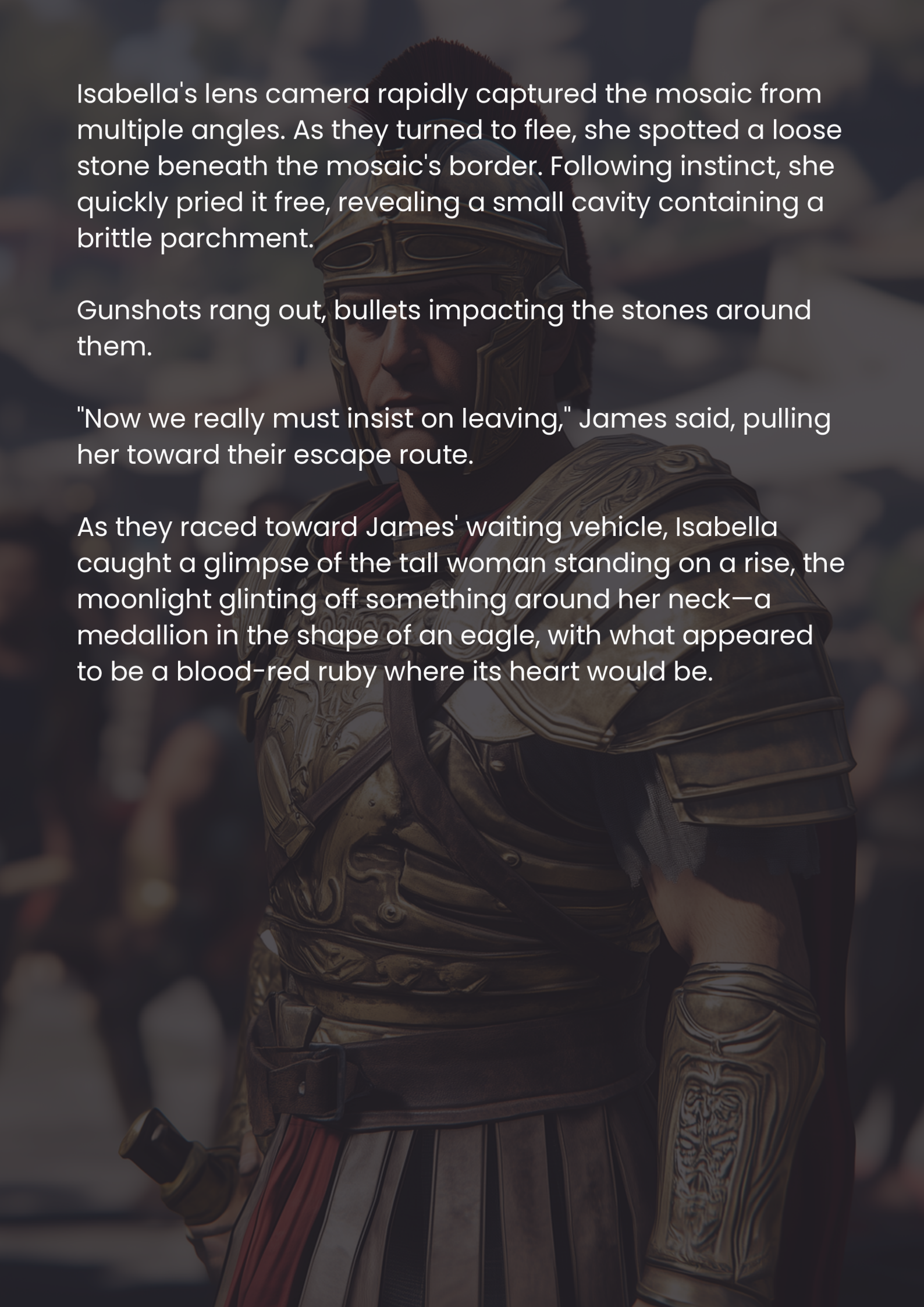
They moved swiftly toward the perimeter, but Isabella paused. "Wait. They missed something."

"This really isn't the time for professional curiosity," James hissed.

"Trust me." Isabella hurried to the eagle mosaic. "The tesserae pattern—it's a map. And look at these markings." She pointed to barely visible scratches in the stone border. "That's not damage; it's a hidden message."

A shout from across the excavation indicated they'd been spotted.

"Take pictures and let's go," James urged.



Isabella's lens camera rapidly captured the mosaic from multiple angles. As they turned to flee, she spotted a loose stone beneath the mosaic's border. Following instinct, she quickly pried it free, revealing a small cavity containing a brittle parchment.

Gunshots rang out, bullets impacting the stones around them.

"Now we really must insist on leaving," James said, pulling her toward their escape route.

As they raced toward James' waiting vehicle, Isabella caught a glimpse of the tall woman standing on a rise, the moonlight glinting off something around her neck—a medallion in the shape of an eagle, with what appeared to be a blood-red ruby where its heart would be.

CHAPTER 2: Whispers Of Time

The elegant cabin of Shadow Wing hummed with activity as the modified Bombardier Global 8000 cruised at 40,000 feet over the Mediterranean. Isabella sat at the holographic command table, manipulating the three-dimensional images of the mosaic her lens camera had captured.

Across from her, Mei Huang was carefully examining the parchment they'd recovered, her slender fingers moving with practiced precision as she used specialized tools to unfold the brittle material without damaging it.

"The language is definitely Latin," Mei confirmed, "but there are unusual characters interspersed throughout that don't match any classical Latin script I've seen."

Dimitri Zechev, hunched over multiple holographic screens floating above his workstation, glanced up. "Could be a cipher. Many ancient Roman politicians and military leaders used substitution ciphers for sensitive communications."

Isabella nodded, then winced, touching the small bandage on her temple where a flying piece of stone had caught her during their escape.

"How's the head?" James asked, appearing with a steaming cup of tea.



"I've had worse," she replied with a smile. "The manuscript is what matters. If the Shadow Walkers want it this badly, it must be significant."

The door to the rear cabin slid open, and Fox Meyer strode in, his usual easygoing expression replaced by uncharacteristic seriousness.

"I just finished communicating with Klumgongyn. We may have a bigger situation than we thought."

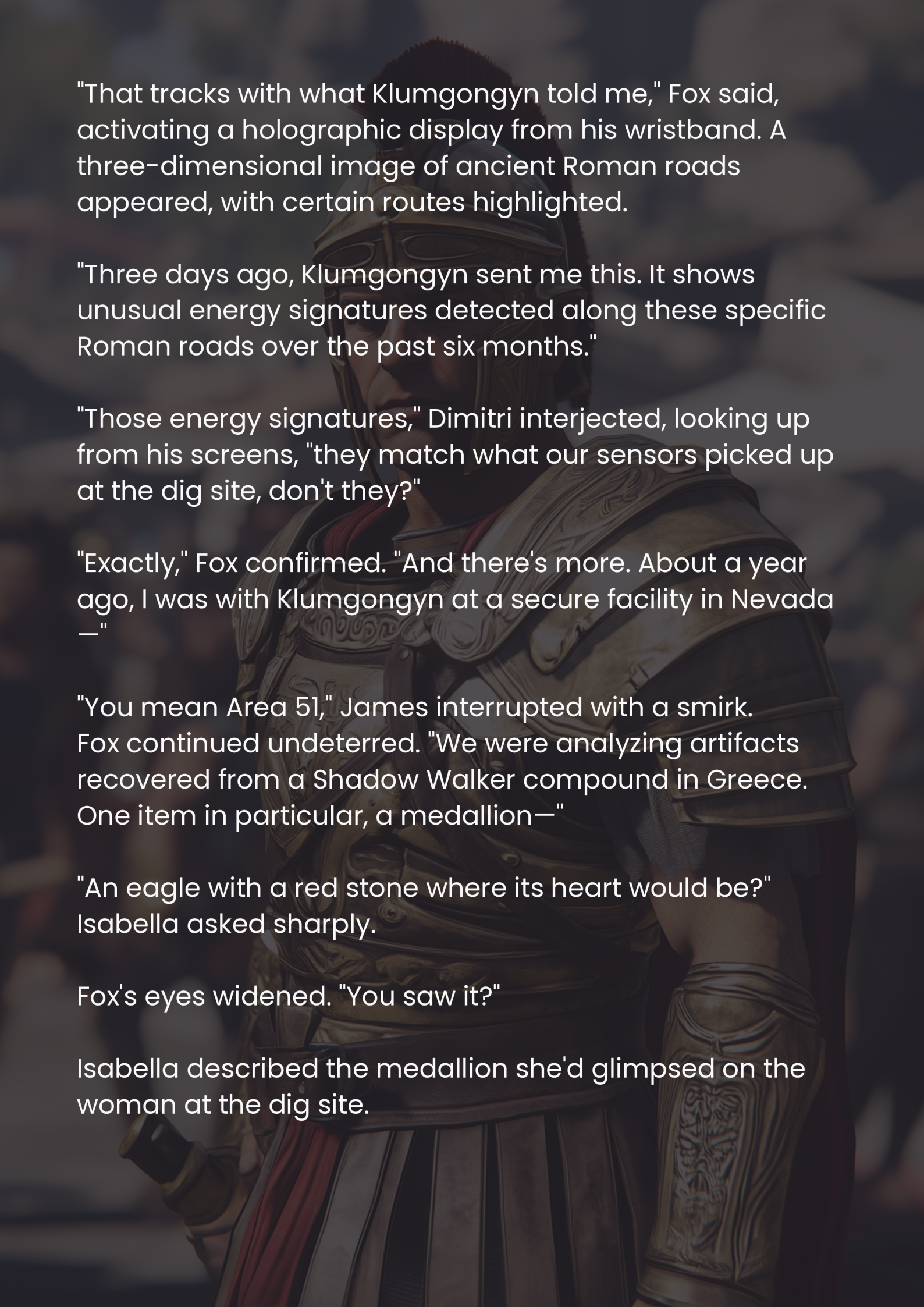
All eyes turned to him.

"The Volracs have been monitoring certain bloodlines on Earth for centuries," Fox explained, perching on the edge of the holotable. "Families that might have... let's call it 'unusual genetic markers.'"

"Unusual as in not entirely human?" James asked, raising an eyebrow.

Fox nodded. "About two months ago, Klumgongyn flagged unusual activity among a group the Volracs have been watching since they first made contact with Earth—the organization we know as the Shadow Walkers."

Isabella leaned forward. "When I was at the dig site, I heard them mention 'the blood of our ancestor' and someone named Decimus."

A man in Roman-style armor with a futuristic visor. The armor is dark and metallic, with a red sash. The visor is a dark, rectangular piece with a small, glowing light in the center. The man is looking down and to the right.

"That tracks with what Klumgongyn told me," Fox said, activating a holographic display from his wristband. A three-dimensional image of ancient Roman roads appeared, with certain routes highlighted.

"Three days ago, Klumgongyn sent me this. It shows unusual energy signatures detected along these specific Roman roads over the past six months."

"Those energy signatures," Dimitri interjected, looking up from his screens, "they match what our sensors picked up at the dig site, don't they?"

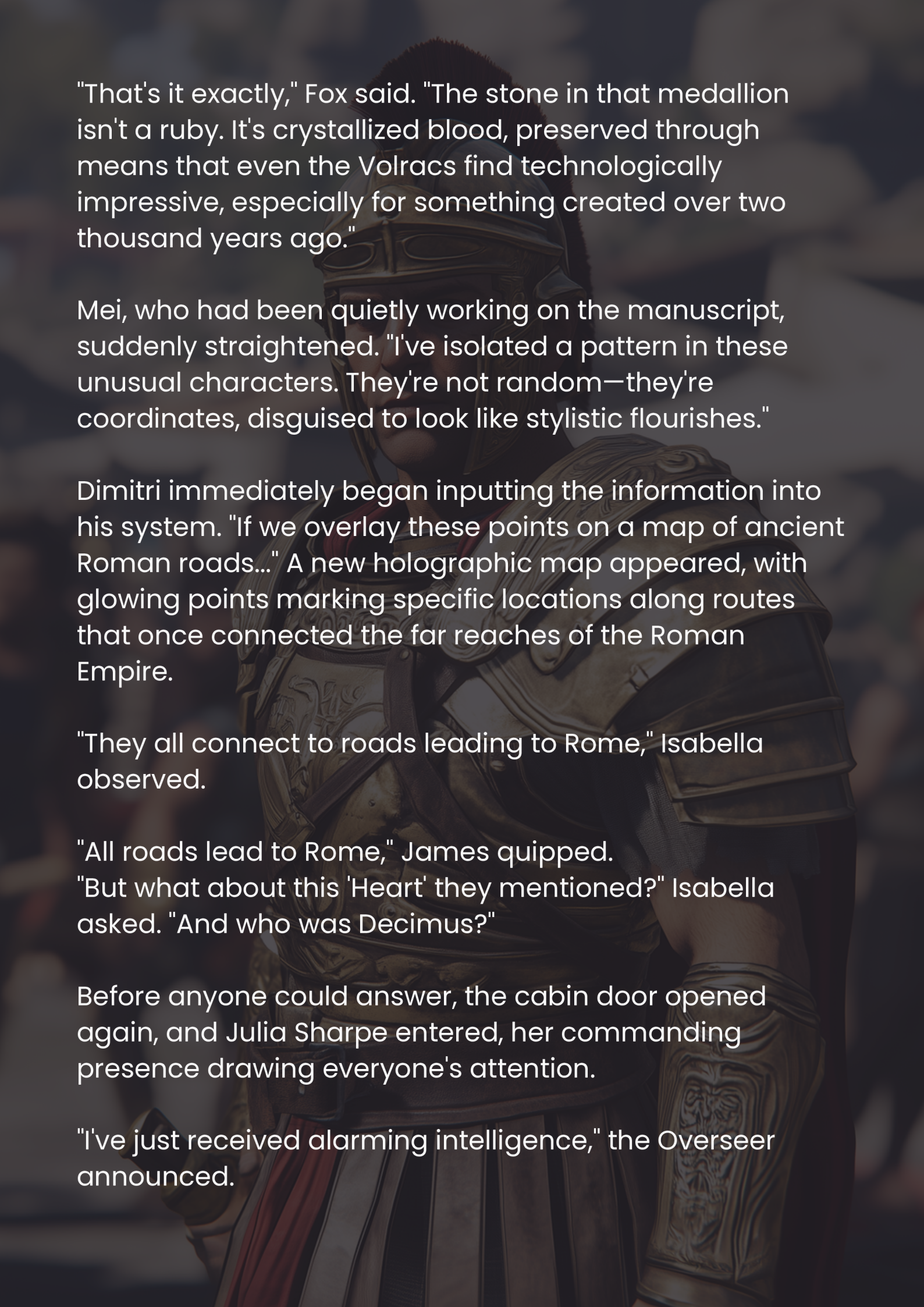
"Exactly," Fox confirmed. "And there's more. About a year ago, I was with Klumgongyn at a secure facility in Nevada —"

"You mean Area 51," James interrupted with a smirk. Fox continued undeterred. "We were analyzing artifacts recovered from a Shadow Walker compound in Greece. One item in particular, a medallion—"

"An eagle with a red stone where its heart would be?" Isabella asked sharply.

Fox's eyes widened. "You saw it?"

Isabella described the medallion she'd glimpsed on the woman at the dig site.



"That's it exactly," Fox said. "The stone in that medallion isn't a ruby. It's crystallized blood, preserved through means that even the Volracs find technologically impressive, especially for something created over two thousand years ago."

Mei, who had been quietly working on the manuscript, suddenly straightened. "I've isolated a pattern in these unusual characters. They're not random—they're coordinates, disguised to look like stylistic flourishes."

Dimitri immediately began inputting the information into his system. "If we overlay these points on a map of ancient Roman roads..." A new holographic map appeared, with glowing points marking specific locations along routes that once connected the far reaches of the Roman Empire.

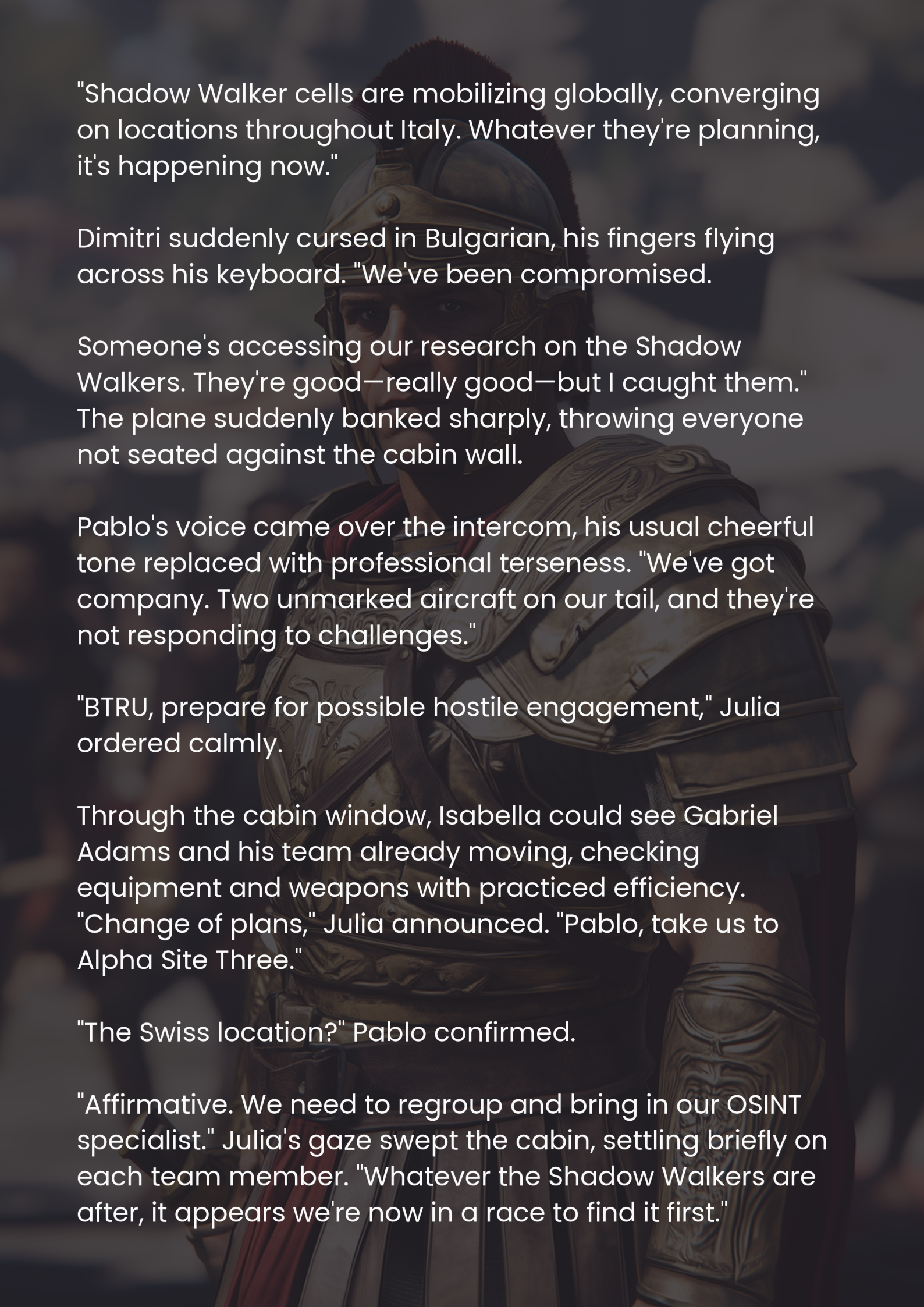
"They all connect to roads leading to Rome," Isabella observed.

"All roads lead to Rome," James quipped.

"But what about this 'Heart' they mentioned?" Isabella asked. "And who was Decimus?"

Before anyone could answer, the cabin door opened again, and Julia Sharpe entered, her commanding presence drawing everyone's attention.

"I've just received alarming intelligence," the Overseer announced.



"Shadow Walker cells are mobilizing globally, converging on locations throughout Italy. Whatever they're planning, it's happening now."

Dimitri suddenly cursed in Bulgarian, his fingers flying across his keyboard. "We've been compromised."

Someone's accessing our research on the Shadow Walkers. They're good—really good—but I caught them." The plane suddenly banked sharply, throwing everyone not seated against the cabin wall.

Pablo's voice came over the intercom, his usual cheerful tone replaced with professional terseness. "We've got company. Two unmarked aircraft on our tail, and they're not responding to challenges."

"BTRU, prepare for possible hostile engagement," Julia ordered calmly.

Through the cabin window, Isabella could see Gabriel Adams and his team already moving, checking equipment and weapons with practiced efficiency. "Change of plans," Julia announced. "Pablo, take us to Alpha Site Three."

"The Swiss location?" Pablo confirmed.

"Affirmative. We need to regroup and bring in our OSINT specialist." Julia's gaze swept the cabin, settling briefly on each team member. "Whatever the Shadow Walkers are after, it appears we're now in a race to find it first."

CHAPTER 3: The Ancient Game

Snow drifted gently past the windows of the chalet nestled high in the Swiss Alps. To casual observers, it appeared to be nothing more than an exclusive retreat for the wealthy. In reality, Alpha Site Three was one of SERPENT's most secure European safe houses, equipped with state-of-the-art technology disguised as rustic luxury.

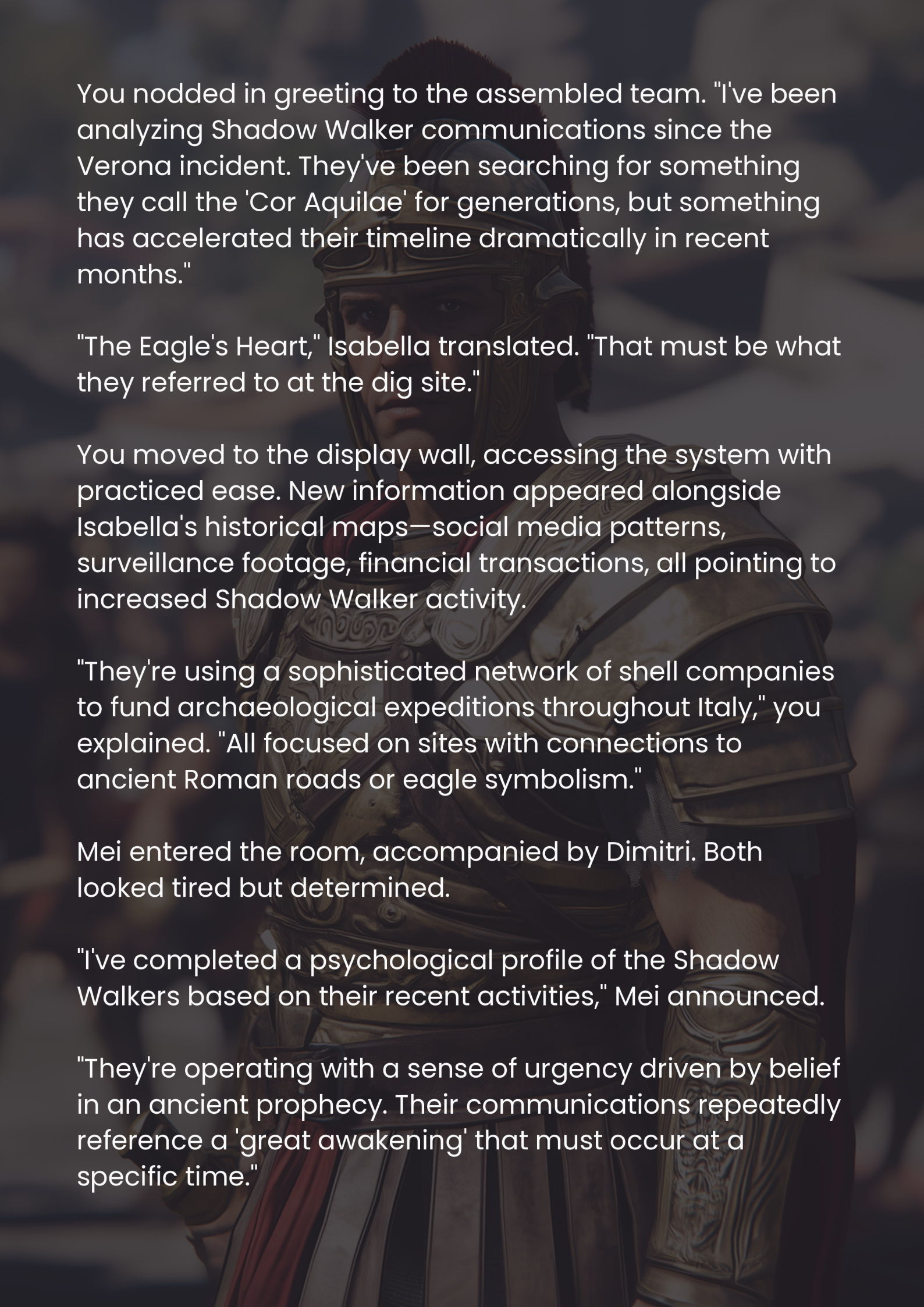
In the main living area, Isabella stood before a wall-mounted display showing various historical maps overlaid with the coordinates they'd extracted from the manuscript. James lounged in an armchair nearby, looking relaxed but remaining vigilant as always.

"Our friends made quite an effort to follow us," he remarked. "Pablo and Peter earned their pay with that evasive flying."

"The question is, how did they know to look for us in the first place?" Isabella replied, not taking her eyes off the maps.

The room's hidden door slid open, and Julia entered, accompanied by a figure familiar to everyone present—Special Agent K.

"I believe our OSINT specialist might help us answer that question," Julia said.



You nodded in greeting to the assembled team. "I've been analyzing Shadow Walker communications since the Verona incident. They've been searching for something they call the 'Cor Aquilae' for generations, but something has accelerated their timeline dramatically in recent months."

"The Eagle's Heart," Isabella translated. "That must be what they referred to at the dig site."

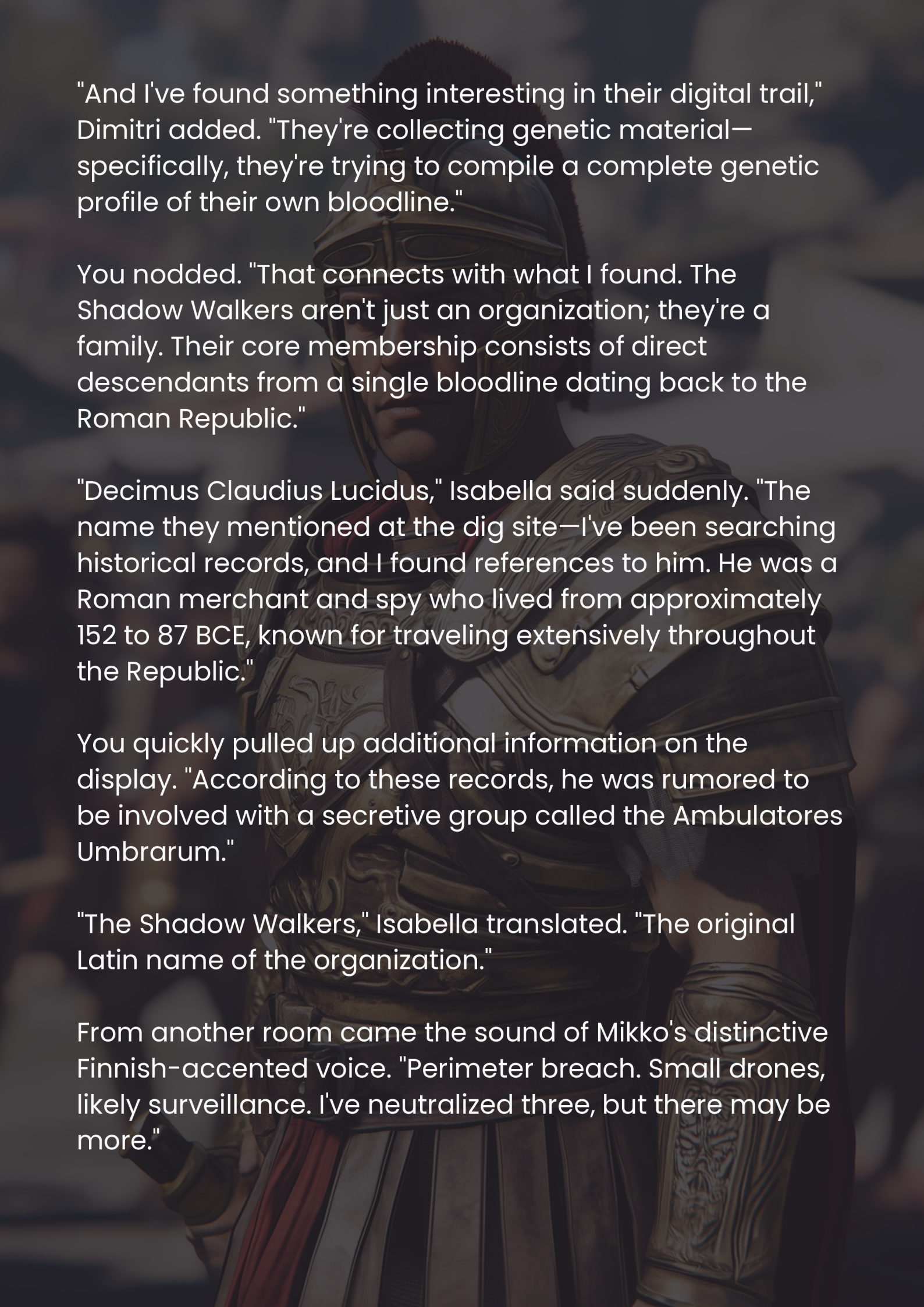
You moved to the display wall, accessing the system with practiced ease. New information appeared alongside Isabella's historical maps—social media patterns, surveillance footage, financial transactions, all pointing to increased Shadow Walker activity.

"They're using a sophisticated network of shell companies to fund archaeological expeditions throughout Italy," you explained. "All focused on sites with connections to ancient Roman roads or eagle symbolism."

Mei entered the room, accompanied by Dimitri. Both looked tired but determined.

"I've completed a psychological profile of the Shadow Walkers based on their recent activities," Mei announced.

"They're operating with a sense of urgency driven by belief in an ancient prophecy. Their communications repeatedly reference a 'great awakening' that must occur at a specific time."



"And I've found something interesting in their digital trail," Dimitri added. "They're collecting genetic material—specifically, they're trying to compile a complete genetic profile of their own bloodline."

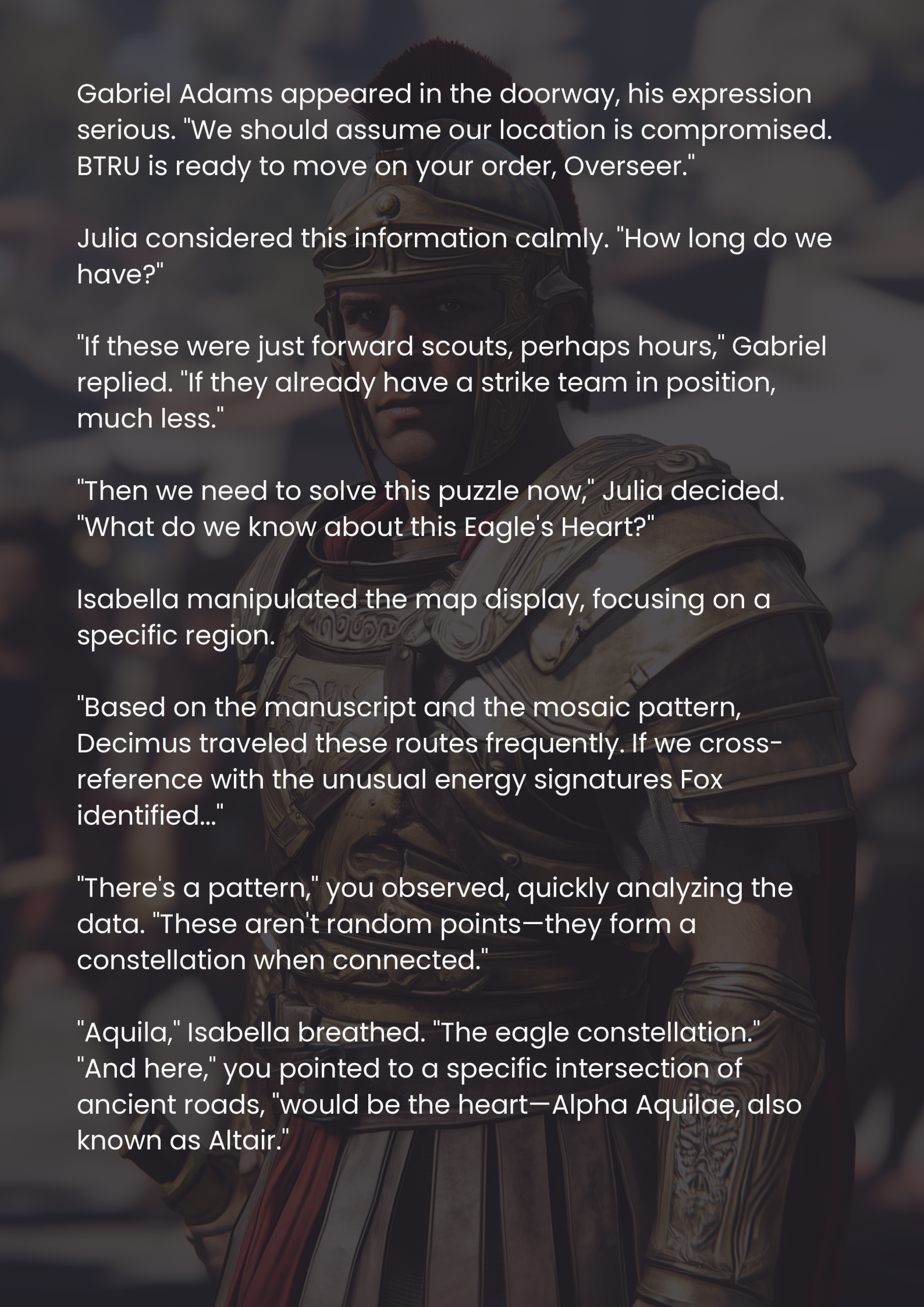
You nodded. "That connects with what I found. The Shadow Walkers aren't just an organization; they're a family. Their core membership consists of direct descendants from a single bloodline dating back to the Roman Republic."

"Decimus Claudius Lucidus," Isabella said suddenly. "The name they mentioned at the dig site—I've been searching historical records, and I found references to him. He was a Roman merchant and spy who lived from approximately 152 to 87 BCE, known for traveling extensively throughout the Republic."

You quickly pulled up additional information on the display. "According to these records, he was rumored to be involved with a secretive group called the Ambulatores Umbrarum."

"The Shadow Walkers," Isabella translated. "The original Latin name of the organization."

From another room came the sound of Mikko's distinctive Finnish-accented voice. "Perimeter breach. Small drones, likely surveillance. I've neutralized three, but there may be more."



Gabriel Adams appeared in the doorway, his expression serious. "We should assume our location is compromised. BTRU is ready to move on your order, Overseer."

Julia considered this information calmly. "How long do we have?"

"If these were just forward scouts, perhaps hours," Gabriel replied. "If they already have a strike team in position, much less."

"Then we need to solve this puzzle now," Julia decided. "What do we know about this Eagle's Heart?"

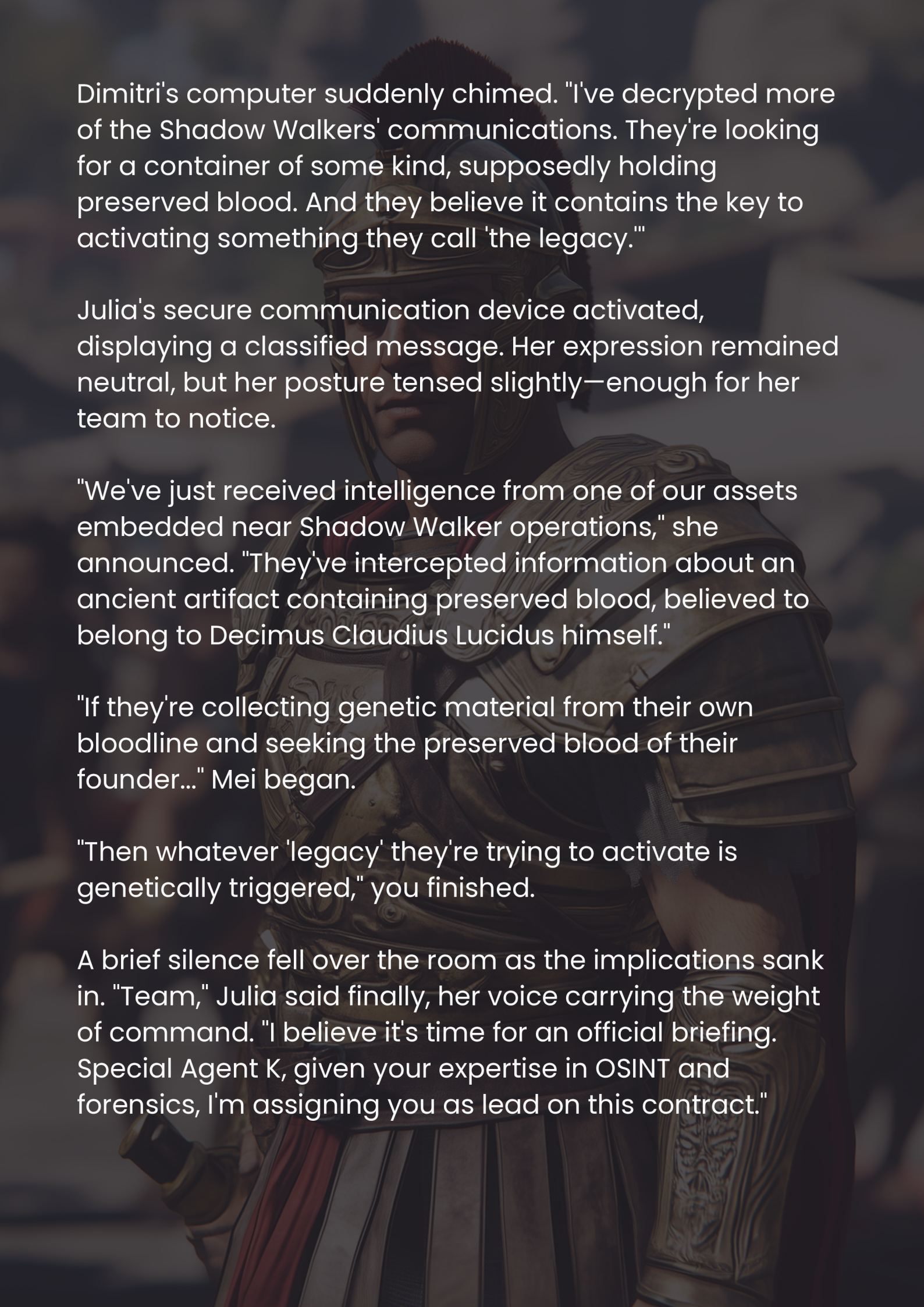
Isabella manipulated the map display, focusing on a specific region.

"Based on the manuscript and the mosaic pattern, Decimus traveled these routes frequently. If we cross-reference with the unusual energy signatures Fox identified..."

"There's a pattern," you observed, quickly analyzing the data. "These aren't random points—they form a constellation when connected."

"Aquila," Isabella breathed. "The eagle constellation."

"And here," you pointed to a specific intersection of ancient roads, "would be the heart—Alpha Aquilae, also known as Altair."



Dimitri's computer suddenly chimed. "I've decrypted more of the Shadow Walkers' communications. They're looking for a container of some kind, supposedly holding preserved blood. And they believe it contains the key to activating something they call 'the legacy.'"

Julia's secure communication device activated, displaying a classified message. Her expression remained neutral, but her posture tensed slightly—enough for her team to notice.

"We've just received intelligence from one of our assets embedded near Shadow Walker operations," she announced. "They've intercepted information about an ancient artifact containing preserved blood, believed to belong to Decimus Claudius Lucidus himself."

"If they're collecting genetic material from their own bloodline and seeking the preserved blood of their founder..." Mei began.

"Then whatever 'legacy' they're trying to activate is genetically triggered," you finished.

A brief silence fell over the room as the implications sank in. "Team," Julia said finally, her voice carrying the weight of command. "I believe it's time for an official briefing. Special Agent K, given your expertise in OSINT and forensics, I'm assigning you as lead on this contract."

Briefing

Greetings, Special Agent.

We recently came into possession of an ancient document, written in what appears Latin. Our sources tell us that it holds the location of the “Cor Aquilae”, also known as The Eagles Heart. This ancient artifact holds the blood of Decimus Claudius Lucidus, one of the early founders of the Ambulatores Umbrarum, these days known as The Shadow Walkers.

It's imperative that we find this artifact and its location. We will use the blood of Decimus to create a genetic profile of the entire family. Once complete, we'll have a lab create a virus that only kills members of this family. We will find their whereabouts and unleash the virus, killing all of their family members. Since they meet frequently, but never all together, the virus will have a long delay, ensuring they infect all the other rats as well. Your assignment is clear: find the location of the Cor Aquilae, or Eagles Heart, that holds the blood of Decimus Claudius Lucidus.

The information we have so far, tells us that Decimus frequently traveled the roads to Rome, sticking mostly to what is now Italy. His life lasted from 152 to 87 BC. Trading secrets, stolen goods and slaves whenever he had the opportunity.

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

Materials

aerial-image-road-to-rome.png
ancient-text-road-to-rome.png

Answer Instruction

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

The answer is as listed with its official name on Google Maps.

Example answer and format: puerto-de-cádiz

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.