◆ AN OPERATOR'S FIELD GUIDE

The Meerkat LLC Email Stack

From chaos to choreography — building a production-grade inbox, routing, and automation pipeline in an afternoon.

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Anna, Texas · May 2026
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VOLUME 01

PROLOGUE

The Problem Before the Build

Imagine running a real business out of one Gmail inbox. Every "sales" lead, every "support" question, every "billing" follow-up, every legal notice — they all land in the same vertical stripe of unread bold subject lines. You skim, you triage, you forget, you apologize.

For a solo operator the cost of that triage compounds. Every minute spent figuring out what kind of email this is, is a minute not spent doing the work. The fix is not "more discipline." The fix is to make the inbox itself smarter — so that by the time a message reaches your eyes, it already knows what bucket it belongs to.

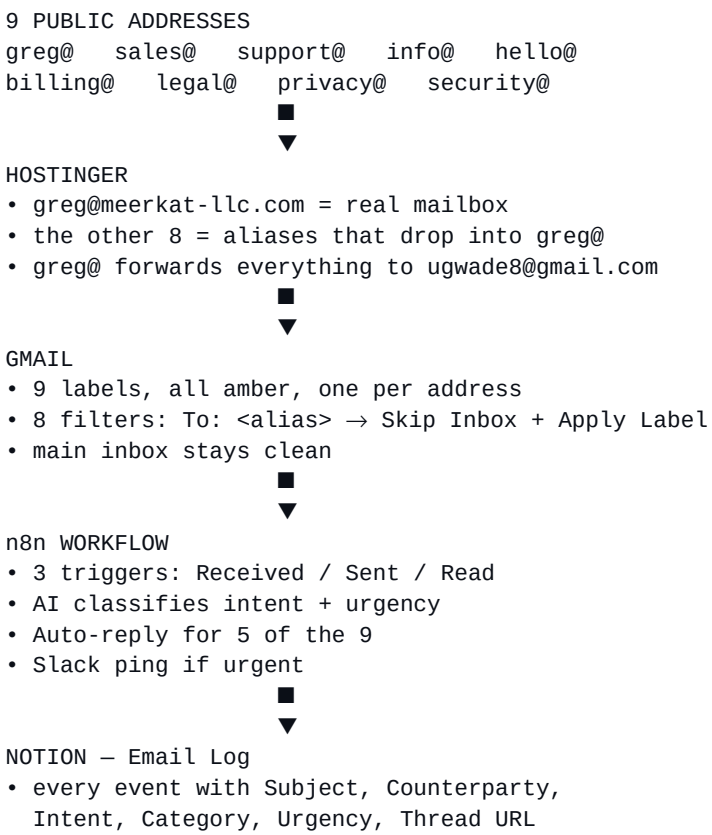
This eBook is the story of building that smarter inbox for Meerkat LLC, a one-person AI and automation shop in Anna, Texas. By the time we're done you'll have nine specialized email addresses, automatic routing, AI-classified triage, instant auto-replies, and a complete audit log — and it will be running in production.

The chapters that follow walk each layer in the order you'd actually build them, from the dirt up. If you skip ahead, you may end up debugging a problem one layer up that was caused by an assumption one layer below. The architecture works because the layers stack in a particular order; this eBook reflects that order.

CHAPTER 1

The Architecture, in One Picture

Before any of the moving parts make sense individually, look at how they fit together. The finished system is a five-layer stack: nine addresses at the top, a Hostinger mailbox in the middle of the stack, a Gmail routing layer, an n8n automation brain, and a Notion memory at the bottom.



Each arrow is a layer of indirection that buys you something specific. The Hostinger aliases buy you brand credibility (a real domain mailbox). The Gmail filters buy you triage (no more single-stripe inbox). The n8n workflow buys you intelligence (AI classification, auto-reply, alerts). The Notion log buys you memory (a queryable history, not just Gmail search).

> *Remove any one layer and you lose its corresponding capability — but the remaining layers still work. That's the test of a good stack: each layer is useful on its own, and additive when combined.*

CHAPTER 2

The Foundation — Hostinger Aliases

Why start with a domain mailbox? Because anything else is rented credibility. A Gmail address can be ignored; an @meerkat-llc.com address signals a real business. When a prospect emails support@meerkat-llc.com, they have no idea (and no need to know) that the operator on the other end is a single human in Anna, Texas.

Mailboxes versus aliases versus forwarders

Hostinger gives you three primitives that often get conflated. Untangling them is the first non-obvious move:

Primitive	What it is	Limit on a Starter plan
Mailbox	A real inbox. Holds mail at rest. Has its own login.	1 of 1
Alias	Alternate address for a mailbox. Mail drops into the parent inbox.	8 of 50
Forwarder	Auto-forwards from a mailbox to an external address.	1 of 10

The trick for a solo operator

One real mailbox plus many aliases. That's exactly the Meerkat setup: greg@meerkat-llc.com is the only real mailbox; the other eight addresses are aliases of it. Every message to any of them lands in the same Hostinger inbox. From there, a single forwarder pushes everything from greg@meerkat-llc.com to ugwade8@gmail.com so Greg can read and respond from Gmail (better search, better mobile, better keyboard shortcuts than any webmail).

The forwarder is configured with "Saved copies enabled" — a copy stays on Hostinger as a backup. If Gmail ever has a bad day, the mail isn't lost; it's still sitting in the Hostinger webmail. This is the kind of belt-and-suspenders decision that costs nothing at setup and pays off the first time it matters.

Verification before moving on

In hPanel → Emails → meerkat-llc.com → Mailboxes, the greg@meerkat-llc.com row should show: **Status: Active · 1 active forwarder · 8 active aliases.** If the destination address (ugwade8@gmail.com) hasn't been confirmed, an email from team@info.hostinger.com is waiting in that inbox with subject "Confirm your email forwarder request" — click the activation link inside.

Hostinger requires the receiving address to consent to the forwarding, as an anti-abuse measure.

CHAPTER 3

The Routing — Gmail Labels and Filters

The mail now lands in Gmail. Without further setup, every message arrives at the same inbox stripe — same as before. The aliases give us *who the sender thought they were writing to*; we need to actually use that information.

Step 1: nine labels

Create nine Gmail labels matching each address exactly: greg@meerkat-llc.com, sales@meerkat-llc.com, and so on. The address-as-label-name convention is verbose but explicit — six months from now you don't want to wonder what "Sales" means.

Color all nine labels the same accent (amber for Meerkat). With nine matching-colored labels in the sidebar, the @meerkat-llc.com block is instantly scannable. A single glance tells you which addresses have new mail.

Step 2: eight filters

For each aliased address, create a Gmail filter with two actions:

Match	Action
To: sales@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label sales@meerkat-llc.com
To: support@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label support@meerkat-llc.com
To: info@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label info@meerkat-llc.com
To: hello@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label hello@meerkat-llc.com
To: billing@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label billing@meerkat-llc.com
To: legal@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label legal@meerkat-llc.com
To: privacy@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label privacy@meerkat-llc.com
To: security@meerkat-llc.com	Skip Inbox · Apply label security@meerkat-llc.com

No filter for greg@. Mail to greg@ should still land in the primary inbox — that's the personal/canonical address. Filtering it would mean missing personal correspondence. The eight filters cover the eight aliases that need automatic triage; greg@ stays human-handled.

Step 3: hide the noise

Gmail accumulates labels over years — auto-generated ones from extensions, leftover categories from old workflows, generics you never actually use. The sidebar gets crowded. A thirty-second pass through Settings → Labels can hide the irrelevant ones, leaving the nine @meerkat-llc.com labels and a small handful of personally-useful ones (Receipts, Invoice, Work-related, Action Required). Hiding is reversible at any time, so be aggressive.

> *After this layer: mail to any alias lands in its labeled folder (out of the main inbox), the main inbox shows only direct mail to greg@, and a single glance at the sidebar tells you "support has 2 unread, sales has 1, hello has none."*

CHAPTER 4

The Verification — Sending Real Test Emails

Before building anything on top, prove the foundation works. The setup so far has two opportunities to silently fail: a Hostinger alias might not have propagated, or a Gmail filter might not match the way you expect. Both are easier to catch now than after you've built three more layers on top.

The right test

For each of the nine addresses, send a test email. The full loop you're verifying:

1. Compose from ugwade8@gmail.com to (e.g.) sales@meerkat-llc.com with subject "Routing test - sales". **2.** Send. **3.** Wait ~1 minute (Gmail filter latency plus Hostinger forwarder latency). **4.** Search Gmail: subject:"Routing test - sales". **5.** Confirm the sent copy shows the sales@meerkat-llc.com label applied.

What the actual Meerkat verification produced

Sent to	Filter applied?	Open confirmed?
sales@meerkat-llc.com	✓	✓
support@meerkat-llc.com	✓	✓
info@meerkat-llc.com	✓	✓
hello@meerkat-llc.com	✓	✓
billing@meerkat-llc.com	✓	✓
legal@meerkat-llc.com	✓	—
privacy@meerkat-llc.com	✓	—
security@meerkat-llc.com	✓	✓
greg@meerkat-llc.com	(no filter by design)	✓

The "open confirmed" column comes from MailTracker, a browser extension that adds an invisible tracking pixel to outbound mail and emails Greg every time a recipient opens the message. Seven of nine got open confirmations within seconds; the other two (legal@, privacy@) didn't get tracker

pings but their filter labels applied correctly. The reason matters: a label can be applied to a sent copy without the recipient ever actually receiving anything, if the forwarder is broken. Seeing "X has just read Routing test - X" is end-to-end proof.

Watch out: if a browser extension intercepts Gmail's compose UI (MailTracker famously does this), automation tools may fail to click "Send." The workaround: pre-fill drafts via the Gmail API, then click Send by hand. Eight clicks is faster than fighting the extension.

CHAPTER 5

The Memory — Notion Email Log Database

Gmail's filters are now triaging in real-time, but the historical record is locked inside Gmail's UI — searchable but not relatable, not reportable, not aggregatable. To answer questions like "how many billing inquiries did we get this quarter," or "which support tickets are unanswered after 24 hours," we need structured data.

The Email Log schema

A Notion database lives under the existing Leads Tracker page, with these columns:

Column	Type	Purpose
Subject	Title	The subject line, prefixed with ■ / ■ / ■ to indicate Event
Event	Select	Received (blue) · Sent (green) · Read (purple)
To Address	Select	Which of the 9 aliases is involved (all amber)
From	Email	The counterparty's email address
Received At	Date	Timestamp of the event
Snippet	Rich text	First 500 chars of the body (plus AI summary)
Intent	Select	Lead · Inquiry · Support · Billing · Legal/Privacy · Other
Category	Select	Sales · Support · Billing · Legal · Privacy · Security · General
Urgency	Select	Low · Normal · High · Urgent
Thread URL	URL	Click-through back to the Gmail thread
Auto-replied	Checkbox	Did the workflow auto-reply?
Slack pinged	Checkbox	Did the workflow Slack-alert?
Gmail Message ID	Rich text	For dedup and joining

Why Notion instead of a spreadsheet

Two reasons. **First, querying.** Notion's filtered views let you slice this data by Category, Urgency, Date, Auto-replied state — and save those views for future reference. "What are all the high-urgency emails from the last 7 days that didn't get an auto-reply?" becomes one click.

Second, cross-linking. This database lives inside the same Notion workspace as the Leads Tracker, the Church Prospects database, the Follow-up Playbook. Future automation can Relation-link an Email Log row to a Lead row — "this lead has had fourteen emails over three weeks; last touch was a Sent with urgency High." None of that is possible against a flat spreadsheet.

CHAPTER 6

The Brain — The n8n Workflow

n8n is the glue that connects Gmail to Notion (and to Slack, to OpenAI, and back to Gmail for auto-replies). The Meerkat email-tracking workflow has three triggers and one log.

Three triggers, one log

Trigger A — Received. Every minute, Gmail polls for new messages where the To: header includes one of the nine aliases AND the From: header is not Greg himself (no self-loops). Each new message kicks off the Received branch.

Trigger B — Sent. Every minute, Gmail polls for new messages with the SENT label where the From: is Greg or one of the aliases. This captures every outbound email Greg writes — whether sent from his bare Gmail or via the "Send as" alias feature.

Trigger C — Read. Every minute, Gmail polls for new emails from update@getmailtracker.com. MailTracker emails Greg every time a recipient opens one of his messages; the workflow parses these notifications and logs them as Read events.

All three triggers funnel into the same Notion logging node, with branch-specific Code nodes upstream that normalize each event type into a common shape: event, matched_alias, counterparty, subject, snippet, received_at, etc.

AI classification — only where it pays

Classification runs only on Received events. The HTTP node calls OpenAI's gpt-4o-mini with a system prompt that returns a strict JSON object: intent, urgency, one-line summary. At roughly $0.0001 per email, the entire month's classification budget for a typical solo operator costs less than a cup of coffee. Sent and Read events skip the AI step entirely — no point classifying your own outbound mail, and a Read event is by definition transactional.

Auto-reply — five of the nine

Auto-reply runs only on Received events for the five aliases where boilerplate makes sense:

Alias	Auto-reply gist
hello@	Welcome / first-touch. "I'll personally reply within 24 hours."

info@	"Thanks for the message. Greg will reply within 24 hours."
support@	"Ticket received. Response within 4 business hours."
billing@	"Forwarded to accounting. Reply within 1 business day."
privacy@	"Privacy/GDPR request acknowledged. 30-day response window."

The other four — greg@, sales@, legal@, security@ — get no auto-reply. Those need human touch and can't tolerate generic boilerplate. A canned response to a security incident is worse than no response at all.

Slack ping — only when it matters

The workflow Slack-pings #email-alerts only when AI classifies the message as High or Urgent urgency, OR when the alias is security@ (security alerts are always urgent by default). The ping includes subject, sender, AI summary, and a deep-link back to the Gmail thread. Nothing else routes to Slack — the goal is a clean alert channel, not a firehose.

The self-loop guards (three layers)

Self-mail is the trickiest part of this workflow. When you send a test email from ugwade8@gmail.com to sales@meerkat-llc.com, three things happen sequentially: the sent copy hits SENT (Trigger B picks it up), the mail loops through Hostinger back to your inbox (Trigger A would normally pick it up), and MailTracker pings (Trigger C picks it up). Without guards, one test would generate three log entries.

The workflow has three layers of protection:

1. Trigger A's Gmail filter excludes -from:ugwade8@gmail.com and -from:update@getmailtracker.com. **2.** Extract A's Code node hard-drops items where from_email contains ugwade8@gmail.com (belt-and-suspenders). **3.** Extract B's Code node drops Sent items where the To: address is itself one of the 9 aliases — that kills the routing-test echoes.

> *Result: one outbound test produces a single Sent log entry. The recipient opens it producing a single Read log entry. A genuine reply from the counterparty produces a single Received log entry. Three different events, three different rows, no duplicates.*

CHAPTER 7

The Outcome — What This Buys You

Before this stack

Every email lands in one bold pile. Triage is manual. History is locked in Gmail's search. Auto-reply is non-existent. Urgent things blend with marketing things.

After this stack

Capability	What you get
Routing	Every alias has a folder, every folder has a meaning.
Triage	AI assigns intent and urgency before you see the message.
Auto-reply	Five of the nine aliases ack instantly, setting expectations.
Audit	Every meaningful email event lives in a queryable database.
Alerting	Urgent or security mail pings Slack so you can't miss it.

Cost and savings

Cost: roughly $0.0001 per email for AI classification (negligible at small-business scale), $0 for everything else (Hostinger is bundled in the domain plan, Gmail is free, n8n is free on the self-hosted/community edition, Notion has a generous free tier, Slack has a free tier).

Savings: per-email triage time drops from roughly 30 seconds (open, read enough to classify, decide what to do next) to roughly 3 seconds (glance at the labeled folder, see the AI intent tag, know exactly what this is). Across 50 emails a day, that's twenty-plus minutes back, every day.

The real point

The bigger win is what this eBook can't really demonstrate: **the foundation enables the next thing.** Once every email is logged with structured metadata, you can auto-create Notion lead pages from high-intent Received events, score and prioritize the lead pipeline, compute response-time SLAs per category, auto-route specific categories to specific human reviewers (when there are more humans), and train future AI classifiers on labeled history.

None of that is possible against a pile of unstructured emails. All of it is possible on top of an Email Log database with proper schema. That's the real point of this whole exercise — not the email triage itself, but the platform it becomes for everything that comes after.

APPENDIX

The Files

Every artifact produced by this build is listed below, with the canonical location for each.

Artifact	Location
Hostinger config	hPanel → Emails → meerkat-llc.com → Mailboxes / Forwarders / Email Alias
Gmail filters	Settings → Filters and Blocked Addresses (8 active filters, one per alias)
Notion Email Log database	notion.so/817d043d389c40ecad073f8649c4f493
n8n workflow JSON	iCloud/00_Workspace/20_Projects/meerkat-llc/DEPLOY-TO-HOSTINGER/n8n/meerkat-email-t
Brand accent	amber #f59e0b — applied to Gmail labels, Notion select chips, and this eBook

Built in an afternoon. Designed to outlast the operator who built it.