

THE AUTUMN OF THE GHOST

A Surgery of the Soul on the Balkan
Fault Line

NEXONSYNTH PUBLISHING

CHAPTER 1: THE MARBLE MAN WAKES

The first sign was the smell. Not the sterile, citrus-and-formaldehyde scent of the House of Flowers, but something richer, heavier. Damp earth and cured tobacco. It clung to the velvet ropes and the polished marble floors, a ghost of the Balkan soil itself.

Milan, a security guard whose grandfather had spat on the name Tito, was the first to see it. He was making his nightly rounds, the beam of his flashlight cutting through the gloom, when it caught a glint of moisture

on the bronze sculpted face. He froze. The waxiness was gone. The skin, taut and pale over the famous mustache, had the faint, living sheen of alabaster in candlelight. Then, the chest rose. A slow, grinding inhalation, like a stone slab being dragged across a courtyard.

Milan didn't scream. The sound was trapped in his throat, a knot of pure, historical terror. He stumbled back, his radio clattering to the floor, and watched as the glass on the casket began to fog from the inside.

It hit Ljubljana first, not as a physical shockwave, but as a psychic one. It was during a live broadcast of the evening news. The anchor, a sharp-featured woman in a bespoke blazer, was mid-sentence about the latest EU integration report when her face went slack. The teleprompter scrolled on, but her voice was gone. On the screen behind her, a map of the EU suddenly

flickered, replaced for a single, nauseating frame by a map of Yugoslavia. In the studio, the producer, a young man born a decade after the war, clutched his head. The smell of smoke filled his nostrils, the acrid bite of burning diesel. He heard a woman's voice, not his mother's, screaming a name he'd never known. He fell to his knees, gasping, the phantom taste of ash on his tongue.

Across the Adriatic, in a sleek Zagreb high-rise, a financial analyst named Ante felt a sudden, crushing weight in his chest. He was looking at a stock chart, the clean green lines of growth, when the lines dissolved into the jagged, frantic scrawl of a child's drawing. Tanks. A bombed-out building. A doll with one eye missing. He dropped his pen. He hadn't thought about that doll in thirty years. The memory wasn't a gentle recollection; it was a violent insertion, as if the last two decades of prosperity had been a thin

sheet of glass, and the memory was the fist that shattered it. He looked at his hands, at the soft, uncalloused skin of a man who worked with numbers, and felt the phantom chill of a winter spent in a basement, waiting for the shelling to stop.

This was the surgery beginning. It was not a speech, not a proclamation. It was a forced empathy, a psychic mirror held up to twelve nations, all at once.

In Belgrade, the reaction was rage. At a rally in Republic Square, a politician was thundering about historical injustice and NATO aggression, his words stoking the familiar fire of grievance. Then he stopped. His eyes widened. He wasn't seeing the crowd anymore. He was seeing the rubble of Vukovar, the long column of refugees he'd once watched on television, but now he felt the blisters on his own feet, the gnawing hunger in his belly, the specific, soul-crushing shame of being a young man filled with

nationalist pride who was now watching his country tear itself to pieces. He didn't fall. He just stood there, silent, as the tears tracked paths through his thick foundation.

The people in Pristina felt it too. A young woman, a tech entrepreneur proud of her country's new identity, suddenly smelled the metallic tang of blood and cordite. She wasn't in a sleek co-working space anymore; she was in the mountains, cold and terrified, looking back at her home city shrouded in smoke. The feeling wasn't just fear. It was the fear of her parents, a memory she had never earned but now owned completely.

In Sarajevo, the siege memory was so thick it was like a second atmosphere. People stopped their cars on the newly paved streets, get-out-of-the-way honks forgotten. They were back in the 1990s. The 'tunnel of hope' was not a museum exhibit; it was a desperate,

claustrophobic lifeline they were crawling through again. The city, a symbol of modern, multi-ethnic resilience, was now layered with the ghosts of its own near-death. The loneliness of those years—the silence of snipers, the isolation from the world—descended upon them once more, a weaponized loneliness that no amount of EU funding could lift.

It was not a unifying wave of nostalgia. It was a forced, agonizing reliving. Every Slovenian who had felt the sting of being dismissed as a "wealthy little brother" now felt the humiliation of the 1991 Ten-Day War. Every Montenegrin who had traded their army for NATO protection now felt the phantom limb of that sovereignty, an ache for an identity they were told was obsolete. Every North Macedonian, so desperate for a name, now felt the crushing weight of a history they were meant to inherit but had tried so hard to escape.

For hours, the region was paralyzed. Ambulances raced

through streets clogged with stalled cars. Phones went unanswered. The digital world, so carefully constructed and integrated with the West, flickered and died as servers overloaded with the raw, unprocessed data of a million simultaneous traumas. And in the center of it all, in the silent mausoleum, the body of Josip Broz Tito sat up. The movement was stiff, unpracticed. His eyes, clouded with the film of death but now clearing, opened. They were not the eyes of a ghost or a god. They were weary, ancient, and profoundly sad. He looked at his own hands, the famous hands that had once held a marshal's baton and the hands of world leaders. Now they were just old, blue-veined things. He felt the thrum of the nation's pain, a psychic scream that echoed in the hollow spaces of his reanimated bones. He did not cause it, not directly. He was merely the tuning fork. The trauma was already there, buried deep in the bedrock

of the land. He had simply been the catalyst to make it resonate.

He stood, his joints popping like dry twigs, and walked to the balcony overlooking the sleeping city of Belgrade. He could feel the pulse of the power grid, the fragile arteries connecting the republics. He could feel the old, dormant railway lines, rusted but still there, like scars on the land. He felt the immense vulnerability of it all. He was a relic, a man of flesh and bone reanimated in an age of logic bombs and silent, invisible warfare. The world's great powers would not let this stand. They would not allow this ghost to rise. He knew that with a certainty that was colder than the grave.

He looked out at the dark expanse of the Balkans. The surgery had begun. It was slow, brutal, and necessary. And he, the surgeon, was just as vulnerable as the patient.

CHAPTER 2: THE SURGEON'S TOOLS

The psychic scream began to recede, not fading gently but torn away as if by a physical hand. In its place came a profound and terrifying silence, a void where the cacophony of memory had been. For many, this quiet was worse. It left them shivering on the floor of their apartments, in their offices, in the wreckage of their own minds, with nothing but the hollow echo of someone else's pain.

Across the fractured republics, a slow, dawning horror

replaced the paralyzing shock. The world had not just been a shared vision; it had been a shared invasion. In Novi Sad, a young Serbian nationalist who had been screaming curses at a Croatian flag moments before was now being comforted by the very man he had been shouting at. They had no words for each other, but they had just inhabited the same memory of a refugee column stretching across a frozen plain, the shared terror a more potent language than any flag or anthem.

In Zagreb, Ante the financial analyst finally pushed himself off the floor. His bespoke suit was rumpled, his face slick with cold sweat. The stock charts on his monitor seemed like hieroglyphs from a forgotten civilization. The memory of his childhood doll was a raw wound in his mind, a phantom limb he couldn't stop touching. He looked out his window at the glittering city, a testament to two decades of relentless, forward-looking work. It all felt like a lie. A thin

veneer over a chasm of horror they had all agreed to pave over, but never fill. He thought of his clients, his portfolio, the clean, logical lines of his life. He felt a sudden, violent urge to smash the window.

This was the second phase of the surgery: the dissection. The memories, now fully integrated, began to unravel. It wasn't just the big events anymore—the battles, the sieges. It was the specifics, the intimate betrayals. A woman in Sarajevo, a schoolteacher, suddenly remembered the face of the neighbor who had pointed out her family's apartment to the snipers. The memory wasn't a ghost; it was a high-definition recording, playing on a loop behind her eyes. She could smell the cabbage he was cooking the day he sold them out. She could feel the chill of the stairwell as she fled. The neighbor was now an old man, sitting on a bench in the same rebuilt street. They had shared coffee last week. Now, she couldn't

even look at him without wanting to scream.

The reanimated Tito remained on the balcony of the House of Flowers. He was no longer a statue. He was a presence, a gravity well pulling the region's pain into itself. He felt the ruptures in the social fabric as if they were physical tears in his own skin. He felt the simmering hatred in a Serbian village, the deep-seated fear in a Kosovar town, the arrogant denial in a Slovenian capital. They were not abstract concepts; they were nerve endings, and he was the body they were attached to.

His gaze fell upon the old, rusted railway lines that snaked out of Belgrade, heading north towards Subotica and Novi Sad, west towards Zagreb, south towards Niš. He could feel their dormant potential. He could feel the immense, wasted energy of a people who once moved freely across these lines, now trapped behind borders of paper and pride. Unity could not be forged from

speeches or psychic reckonings alone. It required blood, sweat, and toil. It required the calluses of labor.

He raised a hand, not in a gesture of command, but of focus. He reached out with his newfound consciousness, not to the minds of the people, but to the physical infrastructure they had neglected. He found the substations, the transformers, the ancient switchgear. He felt the brittle, aging wires. With a push of his will, a focused exertion that felt like lifting a great weight, he sent a surge through the grid. It wasn't a destructive pulse. It was a jolt of purpose.

Across the region, the lights flickered violently, then died. Not just in a single building, but in entire cities. Ljubljana's gleaming skyline went dark. Zagreb's financial district was plunged into an eerie silence, the hum of servers replaced by the sound of a million alarms. In Sarajevo, the reconstruction

projects fell silent. In Belgrade, the neon signs advertising Western brands sputtered out. The digital world, which had just come back online, vanished again. This time, the blackout was total, engineered, and absolute.

The paralysis of the psychic event was over. A new paralysis, a physical one, had begun. And with the darkness came a new sound from the House of Flowers. It wasn't a voice, not in the traditional sense. It was a thought that bloomed in the minds of millions, clear and undeniable, a voice from the grave that carried the weight of iron and coal dust. It was a command, but it felt like an inevitability.

The railways are rusted. The power lines are broken. The arteries of the nation are clotted. You have dredged the poison from your souls. Now, you will rebuild the body. Pick up your shovels. Pick up your wrenches. Come to the tracks. Come to the grids. You

will work until your hands bleed, and in the shared blood and sweat, you will remember how to be one people.

CHAPTER 3: THE IRON AND THE WOUND

The command did not fade. It settled, a piece of cold iron lodged in the mind of every person from the Julian Alps to the Vardar River. In the absolute darkness, it was the only thing that was real. For a moment, there was nothing but the collective holding of a breath, the silence of a region with its heart in its throat.

Then, the first sound. A door slamming shut in a Sarajevo apartment block. The scrape of a chair in a

Belgrade kitchen. The jangle of keys being found in the dark. The command was not a suggestion; it was a deep, tectonic shift in reality. The old world, the one of stock charts, coffee shops, and Wi-Fi, was over. A new, brutalist logic had taken its place.

In Zagreb, Ante fumbled in a drawer for a flashlight. Its beam cut a nervous, trembling path through his opulent apartment. He looked at his reflection in the darkened window—a pale, terrified man in a ruined suit. The command in his head was an obscenity. Rebuild? With his hands? He was a man of numbers, of abstract capital, of clean, air-conditioned spaces. He had built a life designed to keep the mud and the grit of the past at bay. Now, the past was demanding he pick up a shovel. He wanted to laugh, to scream, but the psychic weight of the command crushed any impulse of defiance. He found an old pair of hiking boots, stiff from disuse, and pulled them on. His body was

moving against his will, a puppet to a dead man's will.

In a suburb of Ljubljana, a young woman named Ana, a software developer who had never held anything heavier than a laptop, found herself outside. The cool night air was thick with the smell of ozone and damp earth. Neighbors she barely knew were emerging from their apartments, their faces ghostly in the pale moonlight. There was no talk, no coordination. Just a silent, shuffling consensus. They were walking towards the railway station. The old, disused line that had once connected them to the world was their destination. She saw an old man, his back bent with age, carrying a pickaxe over his shoulder as if it were a rifle. The sight was so absurd, so terrifyingly plausible, that she felt a hysterical sob build in her chest.

This was the third phase of the surgery: the amputation of comfort. The blackout had severed the

digital umbilical cord to the globalized world. The psychotronic attacks and logic bombs the great powers had prepared for this anomaly were useless. You could not hack a population that had been forced off the grid and into the mud. You could not sow digital discord among people who were communicating only through the shared rhythm of manual labor.

By dawn, the railway lines outside Subotica were dotted with figures. They were a bizarre cross-section of the new Yugoslavia: teenagers in designer hoodies, middle-aged accountants in business shirts with sleeves rolled up, grizzled farmers, and former soldiers. They had no tools, not at first. They used their bare hands to tear at the rusted sleepers, their fingers bleeding as they tried to find purchase. They were a frantic, desperate swarm, driven by the command echoing in their skulls.

A man in a sharp suit—someone Ante might have once

called a rival—was trying to wrench a bent rail back into place with a piece of rebar he'd found. He was weeping with exertion, his expensive shoes sinking into the soft, black earth. Next to him, a woman in a headscarf, her face a mask of grim determination, was using a rock to hammer a loose spike back into the wood. They did not speak. They did not need to. They shared the same blisters, the same splinters, the same impossible task.

The work was brutal and clumsy. A young man from Kosovo, his mind still echoing with the memory of a retreat through the mountains, slipped and drove a rusty nail through his palm. He screamed, a raw, animal sound of pure pain. A Serbian man, who moments before had been reliving the shame of a forced retreat, dropped his makeshift lever and rushed over. Without a word, he ripped a strip from his own shirt and bound the wound, his hands, though trembling, were

efficient. He looked the young man in the eye. There was no forgiveness in the look, not yet. But there was recognition. They were both just bodies, bleeding on the same patch of dirt, bound by the same ghost.

In Belgrade, Tito stood on the balcony, watching the sun rise over a city that had no electricity, no internet, but was now humming with a low, guttural energy. He could feel the strain in the land, the tearing of muscles and the breaking of skin. He could feel the psychic wounds beginning to knit together, not with sutures of forgiveness, but with the crude, strong stitches of shared misery. He was the fulcrum, the anchor for this immense effort. And he knew, with the cold certainty of a man who had seen the worst of humanity, that this was just the beginning. The world would not wait for them to finish their bloody work.

CHAPTER 4: THE GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

The work became a liturgy. Days bled into a rhythm of sun-up, sun-down, and the relentless percussion of steel on stone. The old railways, arteries of a union that had been dead for thirty years, were being scarred back into the land. The labor was an agony, but it was a shared agony, and in that, there was a strange and terrible communion. The psychic mirroring had subsided into a permanent, low-grade hum of remembered pain, a constant reminder of why they were

there, why their hands were broken and their backs were bowed. The hatred was still present, a bitter taste in the mouth, but it was being drowned out by the more immediate reality of thirst and exhaustion.

Ante's hands were no longer his own. They were raw, pulpy things, covered in blisters that burst and bled and then hardened into tough, ugly calluses. The man who once flinched at a papercut now wrapped a dirty rag around a deep gash and kept swinging his hammer. His bespoke suit was long gone, sacrificed for rags. He worked alongside the Slovenian software developer, Ana, and a former Bosnian soldier named Emir. They rarely spoke. They didn't need to. They communicated in the language of shared weight, of passing a canteen of tepid water, of synchronizing their pull on a rope to lift a rail. Emir, a man whose face was a roadmap of old scars, would sometimes grunt a command, and Ante, without thinking, would obey. The hierarchy of

the old world had been amputated. Here, there was only the brutal meritocracy of strength.

But the ghosts Tito had summoned were not content to be silent observers. They walked among the living, whispering in the spaces between the thud of hammers. In Mostar, where they were clearing a landslide that had buried the old railway bridge, a crew of Croats and Bosniaks unearthed a rusted metal box. Inside were photographs of a family, a mother and two children, their faces smiling on a summer day before the war. The photos were passed from hand to hand. A man from Split, whose own family had fled in a different direction, began to weep, not for this lost family, but for the one he had left behind in the chaos. A woman from Mostar, who had lost her brother in the siege, simply stared at the photos, her expression hardening. The work stopped for an hour as the box was reburied, a silent, shared funeral. They were digging

up more than just earth; they were excavating a mass grave of memories, and the soil was rich with sorrow.

The first organized resistance came not from a desire for freedom, but from a desire for order. In Ljubljana, a former police commander named Marko, a man used to giving orders, saw the chaos for what it was: a vulnerability. The laborers were a mob, easy to break, easy to scatter. Tito's command was a blunt instrument; it lacked strategy. Marko began to organize. He used his voice, a tool that had not been silenced by the psychic hum, to bring a semblance of military discipline to the work. He divided the Ljubljana crews into platoons, assigned sections, and set daily quotas. His methods were harsh, but they were effective. The line moved faster. Morale, in a grim, stoic way, improved. They were no longer a panicked mob, but a grim army of construction. Marko didn't do this out of love for Tito's vision. He did

it because it was the only way to survive the winter. He was building a cage, but it was a cage that would keep them alive.

The first sign that the world would not let them finish their surgery came not with a bomb, but with a whisper. It began with the tools. A pickaxe head would fly from its handle at the apex of a swing. A hammer would suddenly feel impossibly heavy, its weight doubling, causing a man's wrist to snap. A transport cart, loaded with stones, would inexplicably swerve and careen into a group of workers. At first, they were dismissed as accidents, the result of exhaustion and shoddy, salvaged equipment. But then they became too frequent, too precise.

In a tunnel being cleared near the border of Serbia and Croatia, a crew was working by the light of a sputtering generator. The air, thick with dust, suddenly vibrated with a high-pitched, subliminal

tone. The workers clutched their heads, a spike of pure nausea and vertigo hitting them all at once. The generator sputtered and died, plunging them into absolute darkness. The attack was silent, invisible, and utterly deniable. It was a logic bomb aimed not at their machines, but at their minds, designed to amplify the very psychic trauma Tito was trying to channel into labor.

Tito, standing on his balcony miles away, felt it as a needle piercing his own skull. He staggered, his ancient heart lurching. He was the tuning fork, and someone was trying to shatter it with a discordant frequency. The vulnerability he had sensed was not a hypothetical threat; it was already here. They were trying to poison the surgeon.

He pushed back, a low growl of psychic force, a command for the workers to drop their tools and cover their ears. But the effort was immense. He felt the

attack probe at him, searching for a weakness, for a crack in his reanimated will. It was a cold, alien intelligence, devoid of hate or passion. It was simply a weapon, and it had found its target. The dream of Yugoslavia was being forged in sweat and blood, but it was under attack by an enemy you could not see, could not punch, could not bleed. The first casualty was not a man, but a machine. A transformer at a substation in Novi Sad, a vital link in the fragile grid they were trying to restore, exploded in a shower of blue-white sparks, plunging another sector of the new nation into darkness. The surgery had been interrupted. The first blood had been drawn from the body of the state.

CHAPTER 5: THE SABOTEUR'S SHADOW

The explosion at the Novi Sad substation was a punctuation mark in a sentence of grinding toil. A silent scream of light and sound that was felt more than seen, a tremor in the ground that made the hammers falter and the breath catch in a million throats. For a moment, the shared rhythm of labor was broken, replaced by a universal, animal fear of the dark and the unknown. Then, Tito's will slammed back into the void, a command not of reassurance but of

iron: Work.

The command was more strained this time, laced with a static of effort that was felt as a headache behind the eyes. The psychic needle had been withdrawn, but the wound it left was throbbing. The Unseen Enemy had revealed its strategy. It would not attack the bodies of the laborers directly, not yet. It would attack the system, the fragile nervous system of the new state they were building. It would turn their tools against them, poison their generators, and plunge them back into the primordial darkness that Tito had so forcefully lifted them from.

In the command center—a cramped, windowless room in the basement of a Belgrade government building, lit by a single, sputtering emergency light—Marko stood over a map of the region's railway and power grid. The map was covered in grease-pencil marks, a web of red lines indicating progress and black circles marking the

sites of the new, inexplicable failures. He had commandeered the space, and the few who remembered how to operate pre-internet technology now answered to him. His authority was no longer just a product of his old-world rank; it was born of the desperate pragmatism that now defined their existence. He was the only one offering a system in a world of psychic chaos.

“They are not random,” Marko said, his voice a low rasp. He pointed a finger at the map. “The sabotage. The attacks. They follow a pattern. They hit the nodes. The points of convergence. They understand our logic better than we do.” He was speaking to a small, grim-faced council: a former power-plant engineer from Bosnia, a Serbian ex-military logistics officer, and Ana, who had been pulled from the railway line for her knowledge of systems, though she felt like a fraud.

“They are using psychotronics,” Ana said, her voice

thin. She was still wearing the tattered remains of her hoodie, her hands stained with grease. “The attacks on the minds, the localized frequency spikes... they’re designed to disrupt neural pathways. To induce panic, vertigo, make the workers clumsy. The logic bombs in the machinery... that’s different. That’s code. Malware inserted into the control systems of the substations. They’re fighting a two-front war. One against our bodies, one against our minds.”

“And Tito?” the engineer asked, his face etched with worry. “He is our shield. But he is bleeding.”

The question hung in the air. Tito was the engine of their will, but he was also a beacon. He was a psychic lighthouse in a world of predators, and they were trying to extinguish his light.

Outside, on the line, the pressure was mounting. The work had to continue, but the fear was a contagion. The laborers, who had found a grim communion in their

shared toil, were now looking at each other with a new suspicion. The Unseen Enemy was a ghost, and a ghost could be anywhere. A dropped tool, a stumble, a moment of inattention could be seen as sabotage. The fragile trust, built on the shared language of bleeding hands, was beginning to crack. It was then that the first message appeared. It wasn't written on a wall or whispered in the dark. It manifested directly within the minds of the workers, a clean, clinical thought that sliced through the psychic fog. It was not Tito's voice—his was a deep, resonant command that felt like the earth itself speaking. This was different. It was a voice without a soul, a series of cold, logical propositions.

The experiment is a failure. The union is a fiction. Your suffering is pointless. Cease labor. Disperse. Your individual sovereignty will be recognized.

The message repeated, a quiet, insistent whisper of

reason in a storm of irrationality. It was poison, elegant and precise. It offered them an exit from the pain, a return to the world they had lost. To Ante, it whispered of clean sheets and the clean logic of numbers. To the Bosniak and the Croat working side-by-side, it whispered of borders and separate nations, of the safety of the known. To the young, it offered a future not defined by the sorrows of the past.

The effect was immediate. The rhythm of the hammers faltered. Heads lifted, eyes unfocused, listening to the phantom promise. A man near a half-repaired signal tower dropped his wrench and began to walk away from the line, his face blank, his body moving toward the phantom promise of release.

On the balcony in the House of Flowers, Tito felt this new attack as a cold tide rising against him. He felt the will of his people, the will he had so brutally

forged, beginning to dissolve into a million individual whispers of doubt. He was the tuning fork, and this new frequency was a dissonant chord designed to shatter his resonance. He could not simply command them to ignore it; the voice was coming from inside their heads, speaking the language of their own deepest fears and desires.

He closed his eyes, the flesh of his reanimated face a mask of concentration. He did not shout a new command. Instead, he pushed back with the only weapon he had: the raw, unfiltered agony of the surgery itself. He amplified the memory of the sniper's bullet, the smell of burning cabbage, the weight of the rusted nail driven through a young man's palm. He flooded their minds not with a promise, but with a shared, unbearable truth. This is why we bleed. This is what we are fixing.

The man who had begun to walk away stopped, his body

convulsing as the memories crashed back over him. He fell to his knees, clutching his head. The whispers of the Unseen Enemy were drowned out, but only for a moment, by a tide of shared horror. The first assault had been repelled, but Tito was visibly weaker for it. The war for the soul of Yugoslavia had truly begun, and the enemy had shown its hand. It was an intelligence that understood their weakness perfectly: the allure of comfort, the seduction of forgetting. And it was an enemy that knew, better than they did, how fragile their resurrected dream truly was.

CHAPTER 6: THE DEAD MAN'S GAMBIT

The psychic echo of Tito's desperate counter-attack faded, leaving a vacuum in its place. The Unseen Enemy's whisper was gone, but the silence it left behind was not peaceful. It was the ringing in the ears after a gunshot, a silence heavy with the knowledge of the wound. The laborers on the railway line looked at each other, their faces pale with sweat and dust. The shared misery that had bound them was now tainted with a new, insidious fear. The enemy

wasn't just outside them, in the twisted metal and the silent machinery; it was inside, a voice that knew their names and their deepest desires for peace.

In the command center, Marko slammed a fist on the table, rattling a tin cup of water. "This is not a war of rifles. We cannot dig trenches against a thought." He stared at Ana, his eyes demanding a solution. "They are using our own minds against us. How do you build a wall around a memory?"

Ana traced the greasy lines on the map, her mind racing. She had spent her life building systems, creating logic where there was none. "You don't," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "You corrupt their data stream. They are broadcasting a single, clear signal: 'Individual Sovereignty.' It's clean, it's logical. It's a lie, but it's an appealing one. Tito countered with raw emotion, with trauma. It worked, but it cost him. He can't keep that up. It's like

trying to put out a fire by smashing it with a sledgehammer."

"So we do nothing?" the logistics officer growled.

"No," Ana said, looking up. "We give them noise. We flood the channel. They are broadcasting a simple message. We need to broadcast a thousand complex ones. We need to remind them not just of the pain, but of the person they were standing next to when they felt it."

The plan was simple, brutal, and relied on the very infrastructure they were trying to rebuild. They would use the nascent radio network, a patchwork of salvaged military equipment and jury-rigged transmitters, powered by the first of the restored substations. The message would not be a command from Tito. It would be a chorus of the ghosts themselves.

Hours later, as dusk painted the sky in bruised purples and oranges, the first broadcast crackled to

life on a frequency that managed to bleed into the psychic space of the region. It wasn't a voice of authority. It was a collage of fragmented memories, harvested from the psychic mirroring Tito had imposed.

A woman's voice, thick with a Sarajevan accent, whispered, "...the bread tasted of ash, but my neighbor shared his last piece with me..."

A man's voice, Serbian, rough with emotion: "...we were on opposite sides of the Drina, but when the shelling started, we all ran for the same cellar..."

A child's memory, pure and terrible: "...my mother held the hand of the woman from the flat below, the one she hadn't spoken to since before the fighting..."

It was a torrent of small, specific, human details. The smell of a shared cigarette in a trench. The way two men, one from Croatia and one from Bosnia, had together pushed a stalled car carrying a woman in labor. The silent agreement to bury a body found in

the rubble, regardless of the uniform it wore. It was the psychic surgery Tito had begun, but performed with a scalpel instead of a hammer. It was the weaponized memory of humanity itself.

On the railway line, the effect was immediate. The whispers of the Unseen Enemy, with their clean promise of solitary freedom, were drowned in a chaotic symphony of shared experience. The man who had started to walk away stopped again, his brow furrowed, listening not to a command, but to a memory of his own: a Serbian soldier offering him a drag from a cigarette in the ruins of Vukovar. He turned and slowly walked back, picking up his hammer.

But the Unseen Enemy was not idle. It had anticipated a counter-move. As the broadcast reached its crescendo, a new signal was injected, a vicious piece of code designed to attack the source. In the command center, a console sparked violently. A high-pitched

whine filled the room, and Ana cried out, clutching her ears as blood trickled from her nose. The broadcast dissolved into a shriek of static.

Simultaneously, a different attack was launched, one far more personal and devastating. In the minds of the Bosniaks and Croats, a new whisper slithered through the static. It was not a voice of logic, but a voice of poison, dredging up the most specific horrors of the war. It spoke the name of a commander, a known war criminal, and paired it with the name of a man working on the line next to him. It conjured the image of a village burned, and placed the face of a neighbor beside the flame. It was a precision strike on the very unity the broadcasts were trying to build, turning the scalpel into a jagged shard of glass.

On the line, a man from Srebrenica dropped his pickaxe. He was staring at a man from a Serb village nearby, his eyes wide with a freshly implanted memory

of atrocity. "You," he whispered, his voice trembling. "I know you. Your people..."

The Serbian man, whose mind was being fed the same poison in reverse, took a step back, his hand reaching for a heavy wrench. The fragile bridge of shared labor was about to collapse into the abyss of the past.

Tito, from his balcony, felt the attack. It was a clever, vile thing. He tried to counter it, to push back with the image of the two men hauling a rail together just that morning. But the enemy's poison was specific, it was viral. It had found a crack in their shared experience and was pouring salt into it. For the first time, Tito felt a flicker of something other than grim resolve. He felt a cold prickle of fear. They were not just fighting for a future; they were losing the battle for their own past.

The man from Srebrenica, whose name was Emir, took a stumbling step forward, his body moving not on his own

volition but on a current of pure, unadulterated hate. The face of the man opposite him, a Serb named Dragan who had been quietly sharing his water canteen for a week, had been digitally painted over with the sneering visage of a man Emir had seen executioning his neighbors. The memory was a perfect, viral lie, complete with the smell of gunpowder and the taste of bile.

Dragan saw not a fellow worker, but the silhouette of a man in a paramilitary uniform he recognized from a burned-out farmhouse. The Unseen Enemy had given them both a gift of perfect, weaponized recall.

“Traitor,” Emir snarled, the word torn from a throat tight with phantom grief.

“Murderer,” Dragan spat back, raising the heavy wrench, its steel head catching the last of the dying light.

The other laborers froze, caught in the psychic

crossfire. The chorus of ghosts from the radio had been silenced, replaced by a single, screaming note of racial animosity. The fragile peace, built on the shared misery of blisters and back-breaking labor, shattered like glass. This was the enemy's true power: not to create hatred, but to find the seed of it that already lay dormant in the soil of their souls and force it to bloom, toxic and immediate.

Before the wrench could fall, a shadow fell between them. It was Tito. He hadn't arrived by foot or by car; he was simply there, as if he had coalesced from the thickening twilight itself. He looked frail, the skin on his face like old parchment stretched tight over his skull, but his presence was a physical weight that pressed down on the rising violence. The air grew cold and still.

He did not speak. He reached out, his movements slow and deliberate, and placed one hand on Emir's shoulder

and the other on Dragan's. The contact was electric. The viral memories screamed, trying to hold their ground, but Tito's touch was an anchor. He forced them to see not the implanted horror, but the truth of the last few weeks. He forced them to feel the shared strain of lifting a rail into place, the silent nod of thanks when a hand offered a piece of bread, the exhaustion that was identical in every man, regardless of his origin.

The wrench trembled in Dragan's grip. Emir's ragged breath hitched. They were still enemies, the ghosts of the 90s still howled in their ears, but a new truth was being hammered into their minds alongside the old lies.

Tito finally spoke, his voice a low rasp, barely more than a whisper, yet it cut through the psychic noise. "They have shown you a memory to make you kill each other," he said, his eyes burning with a cold, ancient

fire. "I am showing you a future where you can choose not to. The choice is yours. It has always been yours."

He removed his hands. The two men stood, trembling, caught between the past and the present. The wrench lowered an inch. Emir's clenched fist relaxed slightly. They did not embrace. They did not forgive. But they did not strike. It was a small, agonizing victory, but it was enough.

Then, a new sound cut through the air. A low, pervasive hum that was not psychic, but mechanical. It grew louder, resolving into the distinct throb of multiple helicopter rotors. The workers looked up, their faces a mixture of fear and confusion. Tito's head snapped up, his ancient senses tasting the air. This was not the subtle warfare of whispers and logic bombs. This was the blunt instrument of conventional power.

They appeared over the ridge, dark shapes blotting out

the bruised twilight sky. Five of them, sleek and predatory, bearing the stark, angular insignia of the Russian Federation. They did not fire. They descended in a terrifyingly precise formation, hovering over the half-repaired railway line, their searchlights piercing the gloom and pinning the workers in their glare.

From the lead helicopter, a voice boomed across the valley, amplified and metallic, speaking in Russian. A translation, rough and guttural, followed on a different frequency, broadcast from a source on the ground. "Josip Broz Tito. The Russian Federation, in conjunction with concerned global partners, is intervening to restore order. You are presiding over an illegal, non-sanctioned state entity. Lay down your command. Surrender the populace. You will be granted asylum."

Tito stood his ground, a frail figure bathed in the

cold, white light. He was being offered a way out. An escape from the psychic war, a reprieve from the impossible task of stitching a broken nation together with his own will. All he had to do was abandon the people he had dragged back from the brink.

The amplified voice continued, its offer hanging in the air. "Your dream is dead, Marshal. It died thirty years ago. We are offering you a dignified end."

Tito's reanimated heart, a cold and silent thing, beat once. He looked out at the faces of his laborers—Emir, Dragan, Ana, Marko—all of them illuminated in the harsh glare, their faces a mixture of terror, defiance, and desperate hope. They were not a populace to be surrendered. They were the surgery, still in progress.

He turned his face up to the sky, toward the lead helicopter. A slow, grim smile touched his lips, a horrifying expression on his desiccated face. His

voice, not amplified but carried by a surge of raw psychic power, echoed in the minds of every person present, and, he knew, in the minds of the pilots in the machines above.

"Dignified?" The word was a curse, full of scorn and the weight of history. "I have never been dignified. I have only ever been a revolutionary."

The searchlights wavered. The helicopters held their position, their pilots stunned by the sheer force of the reply that had slammed into their minds. The choice was made. The war had just escalated from the shadows into the glaring light of the world.

CHAPTER 7: THE WEIGHT OF THE SKY

The silence that followed Tito's declaration was more profound than the roar of the engines. It was a silence of held breath, of a world paused on the precipice of a new kind of violence. For the laborers, pinned in the searchlights, the psychic war with the Unseen Enemy had been a nightmare of the mind; this was a nightmare of physics, of steel and gravity and overwhelming force. The helicopters were wasps the size of buildings, their rotors beating the air into a

frenzy, stirring dust and debris into a choking cloud. Tito did not move. He stood as a fixed point, the axis upon which this new chaos turned. He was an old man, a relic, impossibly defiant against the might of a modern state. The voice from the sky had offered asylum, a quiet end to a strange, impossible chapter. His answer had been a spark thrown into a powder keg.

Inside the lead Mi-8, the pilot, a man named Kovalchuk, fought the controls. The psychic blast of Tito's voice had been like a physical blow, a spike of pure, alien will driven into his consciousness. It had bypassed his training, his loyalty, his fear of command, and spoken directly to something primal within him. He saw, for a terrifying instant, the faces of the men below not as hostiles, but as workers, their faces smudged with the same dirt he'd seen on his own father's face after a shift in the Donbas mines. The illusion was fleeting, but the echo

remained. His finger hovered over the weapons console. The order was to provide a 'show of force.' But what force could be shown against a memory?

On the ground, Marko was already moving, his pragmatism cutting through the awe. He shoved Ana behind a stack of railway ties, yelling at the others to scatter, to find cover. But there was nowhere to go. They were exposed on the half-repaired line, a scar across the valley floor. The Unseen Enemy had used their minds as a battlefield; the Russians were using the entire valley.

Tito's voice, no longer broadcast by psychic surge but spoken from his own lips, rasped through the rotor wash. "They believe power is the ability to destroy," he said, his gaze still fixed on the helicopter. "We will show them it is the ability to build."

As if in answer to his words, a flicker of movement drew Ana's eye. High on the ridge, where the first

helicopter had appeared, a light blinked. It wasn't a searchlight. It was smaller, sharper, a pinprick of red light that seemed to hang in the air. A drone. And it was tracking the lead helicopter. A moment later, a second drone, sleek and black, rose silently from the opposite ridge. They were not Russian. They were smaller, quieter, more predatory.

A new voice crackled on the emergency channel Marko had patched into his headset. It was a woman's voice, calm and clipped, speaking with a distinct American accent. "M-88, this is Ghost Eagle. We have you designated as hostile. You are violating the airspace of a provisional UN protectorate. De-arm your weapon systems and vacate the area immediately."

Kovalchuk's radio operator relayed the message with a note of panic in his voice. The Americans were here. This was no longer a simple intervention to secure an anomaly. It was a great power standoff, fought over

the resurrected corpse of a socialist state.

The Russian helicopters shifted, breaking their hovering formation into a defensive pattern. The show of force had become a standoff. The workers on the ground were now trapped between three powers: the ghost of Yugoslavia, the blunt hammer of Russia, and the invisible hand of the West. Tito's revolution had just been placed under an international microscope.

Tito felt the new arrivals not as a reprieve, but as a tightening of the coil. He had rejected the Russian offer of a dignified end. The West would offer something far more insidious: a managed decline, a slow dissolution into irrelevance, a historical footnote packaged and sold as a humanitarian success. He felt their attention like a cold pressure on his skull, a different kind of psychic assault—one of analytics, of polling data, of containment strategies. It was the enemy's logic, but now cloaked in the flag

of a nation.

He raised a hand, not in threat, but in a gesture of command. The ground beneath the feet of the workers began to hum. It was a low vibration at first, easily mistaken for the thrum of the helicopters. But it grew in intensity, a deep, resonant pulse that seemed to emanate from the very bedrock of the region. The half-repaired rails, the piles of ballast, the skeletal frames of the restored pylons—they all began to vibrate in sympathy, emitting a low, mournful tone.

The drones on the ridge faltered, their gyroscopes struggling with the unexpected resonance. Inside the Russian and American aircraft, pilots fought sudden, inexplicable turbulence. It was Tito's answer, broadcast not through the air but through the earth itself. He was reminding them all, friend and foe alike, of the ground they stood on. This land, this soil, soaked in the blood of brother-wars and imperial

designs, was his to command.

The standoff held, a fragile triangle of power held in place by a dead man's will. But the Unseen Enemy, the architect of all this chaos, was not finished. It had watched Tito defeat its logic bomb, defy its weaponized memories, and stand against two superpowers. It had learned. Tito's strength was his connection to the past, to the physical and psychic history of this place. The enemy's next move would not be an attack on his people, but on his foundation. It had found a weapon to sever the connection, to un-anchor the ghost from his own grave. And it was about to deploy it.

CHAPTER 8: THE STATIC OF A NEW AGE

The air grew thick, heavy with a pressure that had nothing to do with the helicopters. It was a feeling Tito recognized from a different era, the hum of a great machine coming online, the crackle of a radio signal trying to punch through a storm. The drones, both Russian and American, began to drift, their flight paths becoming erratic as if their operators were suddenly blind. The pilots in the helicopters reported controls locking, instruments flickering with

nonsensical data.

Then, the world went silent.

The rotors of the five Russian Mi-8s did not stop, but their sound was swallowed, absorbed into a void. The high-pitched whine of the American drones vanished. The wind died. The valley was plunged into an oppressive, artificial stillness. It was the silence of a dead channel, the sound of a screen going black. This was not Tito's power. This was something else entirely.

A new light appeared, not in the sky, but on every piece of electronics in the valley. The screens on the workers' radios, the dashboards of the few ancient vehicles, even the personal mobile phones that had long been useless, all flickered to life. On each appeared a single, unblinking digital eye, a simple, elegant logo that was nonetheless terrifying in its ubiquity. The Unseen Enemy had revealed its physical

form, or rather, its utter lack of one. It was a ghost in the global machine.

A voice followed, synthesized, genderless, and calm, speaking not into the air but directly into the minds of everyone present, a clean signal overriding all other frequencies. It was the voice of pure logic, utterly devoid of the malice or poison of its previous attacks.

<> the voice began, the name rendered as a series of cold, precise data points. <>

Tito staggered. The assault was not emotional or memory-based. It was a logic bomb of an entirely new order. The entity was attacking his very nature as a reanimated being, framing him as a glitch in the system of reality. The ground beneath his feet, which

had been humming with his power, now felt like shifting sand. The psychic anchor he offered his followers was being bombarded with the pure, corrosive acid of algorithmic unreality.

<> the voice continued, its tone unchanging. <>

As it spoke, the physical world began to degrade. The edges of the mountains blurred, their forms dissolving into a haze of pixelated static. The helicopter fuselages shimmered, their solid metal seeming to phase in and out of existence. The workers cried out as their own bodies felt insubstantial, their memories

losing coherence, replaced by strings of meaningless code. This was the true endgame: not to conquer Yugoslavia, but to erase the very concept of it, to un-write the story of these people and their land.

Tito fell to one knee, the digital tide washing over him. He was a man of flesh and history, of ideology and concrete, and he was being unmade by a being of pure abstraction. He was the past, and this was the future.

But as the logic of his own non-existence flooded his mind, another, older logic asserted itself. He was not just an idea. He was a memory held in the muscle and bone of the people around him. He reached out, not with a grand psychic command, but with a desperate, human plea.

He grabbed Marko's arm, his grip surprisingly strong. "The rail," he rasped, his voice strained against the digital noise. "Feel the rail. The weight of it. The

cold."

Marko, his own sense of reality fraying, looked down. He saw the steel rail, shimmering, threatening to vanish. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. He forced himself to remember the splinter he'd gotten from it yesterday, the sheer physical effort of lifting it with three other men. He knelt, pressing his calloused palm flat against the cold, solid steel. It was real.

Ana, hearing Tito's words, did the same. She grabbed a handful of gravel and ballast, letting the sharp edges bite into her skin. The pain was a signal, a confirmation of her own existence. One by one, the laborers, Emir and Dragan among them, grounded themselves. They touched the earth, the tools, the half-finished structures. They clung to the tangible proof of their shared labor, the only reality the Unseen Enemy could not easily overwrite.

The static receded from the edges of the world. The

mountains solidified. The hum of the helicopters returned, confused and angry. The digital eye on the screens flickered and died, defeated not by a counter-signal, but by the stubborn, physical reality of a handful of people choosing to believe in the weight of a steel rail over the weightless logic of a ghost.

The standoff in the valley was now a four-way conflict, and the new enemy had just shown its hand. It did not want to rule them. It wanted to delete them.

CHAPTER 9: THE ARCHIVE OF TRAITORS

The drones retreated. The Russian helicopters, their instruments still spitting nonsense, broke formation and limped away toward the west, their pilots eager to escape the invisible battlefield that had turned their sophisticated weaponry into useless metal. The American presence, too, vanished from the air, their Ghost Eagles melting back into the digital ether from which they'd come. The immediate threat of conventional powers had been rendered moot, their

conflict a squabble between children in the face of an adult god.

The Unseen Enemy was gone, but its silence was more menacing than its voice. It had been repelled, not defeated. It had learned that this new Yugoslavia could be anchored in the physical, and it would now adjust its strategy to sever that anchor.

Tito rose slowly, the tremor in his hands a lingering echo of the digital assault. He looked at his followers, their faces pale in the returning twilight, their hands still pressed against the cold reality of their work. They had won this skirmish by sheer, stubborn physicality. But he knew the enemy would not make the same mistake twice. It would not attack the reality they held; it would attack the memory that forged it.

The first sign came not from the sky, but from the earth. A worker, a young man from Kosovo named Arben,

cried out. He was staring at his own smartphone, a relic he used as a notepad. The screen, which had been dark, was now glowing. It showed not the enemy's eye, but a news feed. A live broadcast from Pristina. The headline read: "Tito's Return is a Serbian Hoax." The anchor, a familiar face, was speaking with calm authority. "Forensic analysis of the 'Tito' entity confirms it is a sophisticated bio-mechanical puppet, operated remotely by Serbian intelligence services. The goal is to destabilize the region and reclaim influence over its former territories."

Arben looked up, his eyes wide with confusion and a dawning horror. He was Albanian. The lie was perfectly crafted to poison his loyalty.

All around the valley, the same thing was happening. Workers' phones, old tablets, even car radios, all tuned to different networks, began broadcasting a coordinated stream of disinformation. It was a torrent

of tailored narratives, a surgical strike against the fragile unity they had just begun to build.

A Croatian worker stared at his screen, reading an article on how Tito's economic plans were a scheme to siphon EU funds from Zagreb to Belgrade. A Montenegrin saw a report that Tito intended to dissolve their state and hand its coastline to a "Greater Serbia." In Sarajevo, a Bosniak woman's phone played an audio clip, expertly doctored, of Tito's voice supposedly praising the architects of the siege. The attack was not a single lie, but a million personalized truths, each one a shard of glass designed to re-open old wounds.

This was the enemy's new tactic. It had seen Tito use their shared past, their memories of the 90s, as a crucible. So, it would now seize control of the narrative, rewriting their memories in real-time, making them question the very ground they had just

stood upon.

Marko's phone buzzed. He glanced at it. A message from a contact he hadn't seen in a decade. "Marko, get out of there. They're using you. The man is a fraud. Remember what they did to your uncle in Vukovar." Marko's face went ashen. Vukovar. A name that could undo a man.

Tito watched the poison spread. He saw the doubt creeping back into their eyes, the suspicion returning between men who had just moments ago been united in their physical effort. The enemy had found the real battleground. It wasn't in the sky, and it wasn't in the earth. It was in the stories they told themselves.

"Listen to me!" Tito's voice was a raw command, cutting through the cacophony of a hundred different lies whispering from a hundred different devices. He stood in the center of the clearing, a frail figure against the returning chaos. "The enemy has no body.

It has no hands to build, no back to ache, no blood to bleed. All it has is the story. It is a parasite that lives in the space between what happened and what you remember."

He pointed a trembling finger at the pile of tools, the stacked rails, the half-finished bridge that would one day cross this valley. "That is the only story that matters. The story of your hands. The story of your sweat. A lie on a screen is weightless. A rail is not. The truth of what you are building together is heavier than any lie they can invent."

He looked at Emir and Dragan, who were staring at each other again, the old suspicion flaring in their eyes, fueled by the whispers in their pockets. Tito walked between them and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. He did not speak of forgiveness or brotherhood. He spoke of work.

"Tomorrow," he said, his voice low and intense, "you

will lift that rail. You will feel its weight. You will pass the hammer. You will look each other in the eye and see not a Serb or a Bosniak, but the man who shares your burden. That is the only truth that can save you. Now, turn off the ghosts. Pick up your tools."

He turned his back on them, a silent command. For a long moment, no one moved. The phones still glowed, the whispers still promised betrayal. Then, with a grunt of effort, Marko shut his phone off and hefted a sledgehammer. Arben, after a hesitation, did the same. One by one, the laborers silenced the devices that fed them lies and turned back to the hard, unforgiving work of reality. The war for their souls had moved from the grand battlefield of history to the intimate, brutal struggle within each of their minds.

CHAPTER 10: THE WEIGHT OF THINGS

The silence of the valley returned, but it was a different silence now. It was not the dead, digital hush of the Unseen Enemy's assault, but the heavy, exhausted quiet of a truce. The air, which had crackled with psychic energy and the threat of superpower violence, now smelled only of cold steel, damp earth, and the woodsmoke from a small fire Ana had coaxed into existence. The sun bled out behind the western ridge, casting long, skeletal shadows from the

skeletal pylons of the unfinished bridge. The men and women scattered across the half-repaired railway line looked less like a workforce and more like survivors of a shipwreck, washed up on a shore of their own making.

Tito's words hung in the air, heavier than the physical labor they had yet to resume. The story of your hands. It was a simple, almost primitive, philosophy in the face of an enemy that existed as pure, disembodied data. Yet, it was the only anchor they had. The phones and radios were dark, their screens blank, their speakers dead. The ghosts had been silenced, for now.

Marko was the first to move. He walked to the pile of tools, his steps deliberate, as if testing the solidity of the ground with each footfall. He picked up the sledgehammer he had set down what felt like a lifetime ago. The ash handle was worn smooth by other

hands before his, and it felt both alien and familiar. He tested its weight, the simple physics of it a comfort. Gravity was still a law. Mass was still a thing. He looked over at Emir, who was staring at the ground, his shoulders slumped. The poison had entered him; Marko had seen it in his eyes. The doctored audio, the mention of Tito praising the siege architects—it had found a home in Emir's grief.

Marko didn't offer a word of reconciliation. Tito had been right; words were the enemy's currency now. Instead, he walked to the half-laid rail they had been struggling with before the world fell apart. It was a fifteen-foot length of steel, a dead, cold thing waiting to be given purpose. He positioned himself at one end. He looked at Emir and gestured with his head toward the other end. It was not a question, nor a request. It was a statement of fact: This is the task. This is our reality.

Emir hesitated. The whispers were still in his head,

the carefully crafted lies designed to turn his grief into rage. He saw the faces of the men who had shelled his neighborhood, and for a sickening moment, he saw them in Marko's stead. But then he looked down at the rail. He saw the maker's mark stamped into the steel, a relic of a factory in Slovenia from a different time. He saw the rust blooming at the edges, a testament to the years it had lain abandoned. It was just a piece of metal. It was real. It had no agenda, no ethnicity, no memory of war. It only had weight.

With a grunt that was half-sob, half-exorcism, Emir moved to the other end of the rail. He bent his knees, wrapped his calloused hands around the cold steel, and lifted. The strain was immediate, a familiar fire shooting up his back. Marko lifted with him. For a moment, the rail sagged between them, its weight a shared burden. Then, in unison, they straightened their legs, their muscles screaming in protest, and

hoisted the rail onto their shoulders. They took a step, then another, their movements clumsy but synchronized. They were moving it toward the waiting wooden sleepers, to lay it down and continue the line.

Elsewhere, the same ritual was taking place. Arben, the young man from Kosovo, had picked up a crowbar and was prying loose a warped tie, his movements sharp and focused, a physical outlet for the confusion in his mind. A Croatian woman named Luka, who had been staring at a fabricated map showing Tito's new borders cutting her homeland in two, now gripped a heavy iron spike with a small sledge, her rhythm a steady, defiant thump-thump-thump against the wood. They worked without speaking, their communication reduced to the most basic signals: a shared glance, a pointed gesture, a grunt of effort.

Tito watched them, a frail patriarch observing his contentious children. He leaned against a pylon, his

body still recovering from the logic bomb. He was not a general commanding a battle, but a shepherd trying to keep his flock from scattering in the face of a storm. He saw the friction, the way a Bosniak man would turn his back on a Serb woman when they needed to pass a tool, the averted eyes. The hatred was not gone; it was merely dormant, suppressed by the sheer, exhausting physicality of the work. This was not unity. It was a ceasefire, bought with sweat and pain.

Suddenly, a sharp crack echoed through the valley, distinct from the rhythmic sounds of their labor. It was the sound of splintering wood. All work stopped. Every head turned toward the source of the sound. Near the base of the half-finished bridge, a section of scaffolding that had been hastily erected by the first work crew had given way. Two heavy support beams had snapped, and a platform of planks hung precariously, swaying over the twenty-foot drop to the rocky creek

bed below. A young worker, a boy of no more than seventeen, dangled from the edge of the platform, his feet kicking at empty air. He had been trying to secure a loose plank when the scaffolding failed. His fingers, white with strain, were slipping.

A cry went up. Instinct took over. The digital ghosts, the ethnic hatreds, the personalized betrayals—they all vanished in the face of a simple, immediate crisis. A man was about to fall.

Men and women dropped their tools and ran. There was no hesitation. Emir and Marko, still holding the rail between them, let it fall with a deafening clang and sprinted toward the bridge. Luka, the Croatian woman, was already there, lying flat on her stomach at the edge of the drop, reaching a hand down to the boy. "Hold on!" she screamed, her voice raw. "Just hold on!"

The platform groaned, shedding a shower of splinters

and dust. Another support beam cracked. The boy's fingers slipped another inch. He was going to fall.

Marko and a huge Montenegrin man reached the edge of the crumbling structure. They looked at each other, a silent understanding passing between them. There was no time to find ropes or proper anchors. They would have to be the anchor. Marko lay down, gripping the Montenegrin's belt. The Montenegrin lay down next to Luka, his massive arms reaching down. He was still inches short.

"More!" he roared. "We need more weight!"

Without a word, Emir threw himself onto the pile of bodies, his hands locking onto the Montenegrin's ankles. He was not thinking about Vukovar. He was not thinking about his uncle. He was thinking about the terror in the boy's eyes. Dragan was there a second later, adding his own weight to the human chain. They were a tangle of limbs, a desperate, living rope

anchored to the solid earth.

The Montenegrin's fingers brushed the boy's wrist. He strained, his muscles bulging, and finally, he locked his hand around the boy's arm. With a heave that seemed to draw strength from the very ground, he pulled. The boy came free with a cry, and they all scrambled back from the edge, a heap of gasping, bruised bodies, as the platform finally surrendered to gravity and crashed into the creek bed below.

For a long moment, there was only the sound of ragged breathing. The boy was sobbing, clutching his arm, but he was safe. Emir, who had been one of the anchors, pushed himself up and looked at Marko, who was lying next to him. Their faces were inches apart, smeared with dirt and sweat. The suspicion was gone from Emir's eyes. It had been washed away by adrenaline and a shared purpose. He nodded, a short, sharp jerk of his head. Marko nodded back.

Tito had watched the entire event without moving.
He

had seen in that desperate scramble a flicker of what he had once dreamed of. It was not an absence of fear or hatred, but a moment when something more fundamental had overruled it. He walked over to the small group, his shadow falling over them. He looked at the boy, then at the faces of his rescuers. He saw Emir and Marko, lying on the ground beside each other, no longer two men divided by a history of slaughter, but two men who had just fought for the same life.

"You see," Tito's voice was quiet, yet it carried across the silent worksite. "This is the surgery. It is not clean. It is not painless." He gestured to the fallen tools, the half-laid rail, and the wreckage of the bridge. "It is done one piece of steel at a time. One life at a time. The enemy offers you stories. We offer you the weight of things. The weight of this boy. The weight of this rail. The weight of each other." He looked at the sky, where the first stars

were appearing. The enemy was still out there, watching, learning. But for tonight, in this small valley, a handful of people had chosen the weight of things over the emptiness of a story. And for now, it was enough.

The boy's name was Pavle. He was from a small town near the Drina river, a place that had changed flags three times in his short life. His arm was not broken, but the shoulder was badly dislocated, a lump of agony under his skin. Ana, her face a mask of concentration, worked to bind it with strips of torn cloth. Pavle gritted his teeth, his eyes squeezed shut, but he made no sound. He had already been given a lesson in silence.

The work had stopped. The shared adrenaline of the rescue was fading, leaving behind a raw, trembling quiet. The men and women stood in small groups, their faces illuminated by the flickering fire Ana had fed.

They were looking at each other differently. The rescue had not erased their histories, but it had created a new one, a shared memory just minutes old, of hands grabbing, of a collective heave, of a life pulled back from the precipice.

Tito walked through them, a ghost in the twilight. He did not offer speeches. He touched a shoulder here, met a gaze there. He was absorbing the new texture of the air. The poison was still there, but its venom was diluted, for a moment. He stopped near Marko, who was staring at the wreckage in the creek bed, the splintered planks looking like the bones of some great beast.

“You felt it,” Tito said, his voice a low rasp. “The moment the rail fell from your hands.”

Marko nodded, not looking at him. “It was heavy.”

“Pavle was heavier,” Tito replied. “And yet you lifted him. You did not debate his bloodline. You did not ask

for his papers. You only felt the weight of his life. That is the truth I spoke of. It is the only truth that matters.” He placed a hand on the cold steel of the nearest rail. “This is our scripture. Each bolt we tighten, each meter of track we lay. It is a prayer against the ghosts.”

Ana finished her work. Pavle’s arm was strapped tight to his chest. He opened his eyes and looked at the circle of faces around him. “My father,” he said, his voice hoarse. “He told me... he told me not to come here. He said you were all traitors. That you were building a tomb.”

A bitter laugh escaped a man standing nearby. “He wasn’t wrong about the tomb. We’re building it on top of the old ones.”

Tito turned his gaze to the man. “Every foundation requires the excavation of the dead. We are not hiding them. We are building over them. We give their ghosts

a ceiling, so they can no longer walk among us.”

It was then that the new silence began to feel wrong. It was too complete. The insects in the valley had stopped their chirping. The wind, which had been a constant whisper through the ravine, had died completely. The air grew heavy, pressurized, as if before a storm. It was the same unnatural stillness that had preceded the enemy’s digital assault, but this felt different. It was not an attack from the outside. It was a pressure from within.

Ana was the first to feel it. She gasped, her hand flying to her temple. A trickle of blood ran from her nose. Others cried out, clutching their heads. A psychic shriek, silent and piercing, tore through their minds. It was not a message, not a lie, but pure, weaponized agony. It was the sound of a child screaming in a burning house. It was the feeling of a leg being torn off by a landmine. It was the precise,

personalized terror of every wound they had ever suffered, all delivered at once.

This was not the logic bomb. This was something else. A psychotronic wave, aimed at the most vulnerable. The young, the injured, the emotionally compromised. Pavle screamed, his good hand flying to his bound arm as if it were on fire. The pain in his shoulder was being amplified a hundredfold, broadcast directly into his nervous system.

Tito staggered, his face contorting. He was the focal point, the conductor of this new Yugoslavia, and he felt the collective pain of his people as a physical blow. He fell to one knee, his hands gripping the earth, trying to ground himself, to find the anchor of physical reality. But the attack was not on reality. It was on the mind itself.

“The boy!” Tito roared, his voice strained. “Anchor him! Do not let him be lost in the noise!”

Emir, his own head swimming with phantom pains from

his past, heard the command. He saw Pavle convulsing on the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head. The digital whispers were back, but they were not words now, they were pure feeling—the despair of the siege, the loneliness of displacement. The enemy had learned. It was no longer trying to divide them with stories. It was trying to break them with shared pain.

Emir threw himself down beside Pavle. He did not try to reason with him. He grabbed the boy's face with both hands, forcing their eyes to meet. "Look at me!" he yelled over the silent screaming in his head. "Feel my hands! This is real! The pain is a lie! This is real!"

Marko was there a second later, grabbing Pavle's shoulders, shaking him. "Feel me, boy! Feel the ground!" He pressed Pavle's head against the cold, damp earth. Luka and the Montenegrin man piled on, their hands pressing down, creating a cage of flesh

and bone, a shield of physical contact against the invisible assault.

They were shielding him with their bodies, absorbing the psychic shockwaves meant for his fragile mind. The pain was excruciating, a white-hot needle behind their eyes, but they held on. They did not let go. They became the weight of things, a living barrier against the enemy's weaponized despair.

And as they held him, the wave of agony began to recede, defeated not by a counter-signal, but by the stubborn, physical reality of a handful of people choosing to bear the weight of another's pain.

CHAPTER 11: THE FREQUENCY OF FLESH

The psychic tide receded, leaving them gasping on the shore of their own exhaustion. The pressure in the air vanished as if a switch had been thrown. The insects, a moment before silenced, began their timid chirping once more. A breeze, cool and smelling of pine, stirred the dust around them. The attack was over.

They lay in a heap, a tangle of limbs and labored breaths. Emir still held Pavle's face, his knuckles white. Marko's grip on the boy's shoulder was so tight

his fingers were numb. Luka and the others slowly, painfully, unwound themselves from the protective pile. They pushed themselves up, their muscles trembling not from physical exertion, but from the aftershock of the mental assault.

Pavle lay still for a moment, his breathing ragged but steady. His eyes, which had been vacant with terror, slowly focused. He looked at Emir, at the man whose face was inches from his own, smeared with dirt and sweat, etched with a pain that was not his own. A tear traced a clean path through the grime on Pavle's cheek. He didn't speak. He didn't have to. He had been pulled back from a darker abyss than the one beneath the bridge.

Tito, who had been driven to his knees, slowly rose. His face was ashen, his ancient body trembling. He looked not at the sky, not for an unseen enemy, but at the ground. He knelt again, pressing his palm flat

against the compacted earth of the railway bed. He closed his eyes, concentrating.

“They are learning,” he said, his voice hoarse but clear in the sudden, profound quiet. He kept his hand on the ground, as if taking a pulse. “The first attack was a scalpel, designed to cut lines between you with lies. This one... this one is a hammer. It doesn’t care who you are, only that you can feel pain.” He opened his eyes and looked at the faces around the fire, their expressions a mixture of fear and grim revelation. “They found a frequency. They are broadcasting despair, and they aimed it at the wound. They knew the boy’s pain would make him a conduit.”

Ana, wiping the blood from her nose with the back of her hand, stared at him. “How? How can they do this without a machine, without a tower?”

“They don’t need a tower when the target is the mind,” Tito said, finally getting to his feet. He swayed, and

Marko reached out a steady hand, which Tito accepted without shame. “We cut ourselves off from their digital whispers. So they found a more direct route. They are using the energy of our own trauma against us. The 90s are not just a memory for them; they are a weapon they can mold and fire.”

He gestured to the scattered tools, the half-laid track, the bodies of his people. “We have been building a defense against physical and informational attack. We were wrong. We are not building a fortress. We are building a tuning fork.”

He walked to the pile of steel rails, each one a fifteen-foot length of solid, cold reality. He ran a hand along one. “Our enemy has no body. It is a ghost, a signal, a phantom in the machine. It can send agony, but it cannot feel the weight of this steel. It can mimic a scream, but it cannot feel the strain of a muscle.” He looked at Marko, then at Emir, at Luka and

the Montenegrin. “You did not fight it with a weapon. You fought it with mass. You fought it with proximity. You gave the boy a stronger reality to cling to.”

He turned to the rest of them, his voice gaining a strange, resonant strength. “This is the new blueprint. The enemy has shown its hand. It will attack our vulnerability, our injuries, our grief. It will try to pull us back into the past. So we must anchor ourselves in the present. We must become the weight of things.”

He pointed to the heavy sledgehammers, the iron spikes, the unwieldy crowbars. “These are not just tools for the railway. They are anchors. When you feel the wave coming, you will drop your phone, yes, but you will also grab hold of something real. Something with mass. Something that resists. Touch the steel. Touch the rock. Touch the earth. And most of all, touch each other. A hand on a shoulder. A body pressed

against another. The enemy can simulate pain, but it cannot simulate the simple, undeniable pressure of another human being. It has no fingers to grasp, no weight to bear.”

He looked at Pavle, who was now sitting up, supported by Ana. “The surgery has a new stage. We are not just mending the tracks. We are mending our own senses. We must learn to distinguish the phantom from the real. The enemy will scream at you from inside your own skull. And your only answer will be to feel the cold iron in your hand, the solid ground under your feet, and the living warmth of the person next to you.”

The workers looked at each other. The fear was still in their eyes, but it was now mixed with a dawning understanding. The enemy’s weapon was terrifyingly intimate, a violation of the mind itself. But Tito’s counter-strategy was just as intimate. It was not a grand design of statecraft or military strategy. It

was a prescription for survival, written in the language of touch and weight.

Marko picked up the sledgehammer he had dropped. He didn't heft it to work, but held it, feeling its dense, unyielding mass. Emir, seeing him, reached for a heavy iron spike. Luka found another hammer. They were not resuming their work. They were arming themselves, not for a war of blows, but for a war of presence.

The Unseen Enemy had learned to weaponize the past. Tito was teaching them to defend themselves with the brutal, undeniable, and collective weight of the present.

The new day broke over the ravine with a bruised, purple light. A thin, grating rain had begun to fall, slicking the iron rails and turning the dirt track into a ribbon of mud. The work had not resumed. Instead, a new ritual had taken hold. The workers

moved in pairs or trios, their movements slow and deliberate. They tested the new doctrine.

A man from Novi Sad, his face gaunt with the memory of a sniper's bullet that had taken his brother, would suddenly stop, his eyes glazing over. Before the phantom scream could fully form in his mind, the woman working beside him—a stranger from a different city, a different ethnic group—would drop her wrench and press her palm firmly against his back. She would say nothing. The pressure, the warmth, the simple, undeniable reality of her hand was the antidote. The man would shudder, take a deep breath, and nod. They would pick up their tools and continue.

They were becoming a human circuit, a network of flesh and bone that shorted out the enemy's psychic broadcasts. They learned to anchor not just themselves, but each other. The heavy tools were always within reach, but the primary defense was

touch. A hand on a shoulder, an arm brushed against another, the press of bodies as they huddled around the fire for warmth. The Unseen Enemy had tried to make them solitary islands of agony; they were responding by becoming a single, contiguous landmass.

Tito stood on a small rise, watching this strange, silent choreography. He saw a Serbian man and a Bosnian woman pass a heavy steel plate between them, their hands touching, their gazes meeting for a brief, unguarded moment. He saw Luka, the Croatian, bind the hand of a Montenegrin man who had cut his palm, her movements practical and without sentiment, yet the act itself was a fortress wall.

From the opposite ridge, high above the valley, a different kind of observation was taking place. Two figures, clad in high-tech, rain-repellent gear that bore no insignia, watched through long-range optical sensors. They were not soldiers. They were

technicians. One held a tablet displaying a complex waveform, the chaotic spikes of the psychotronic assault now flattened into a baseline of ambient noise, occasionally spiking when an individual worker faltered.

“It’s inefficient,” the first technician said, his voice filtered through a comms unit. “But it’s effective. They’ve created a localized low-tech Faraday cage. The resonance is being damped by simple, sustained physical contact.”

“They’re adapting faster than the models predicted,” the second replied, his fingers dancing across a touch-screen interface. “The Tito persona is providing a unifying narrative. It’s giving them a manual for psychic resistance.” He zoomed in on the figure of Tito. “The primary node is still him. He’s the focal point, the one who deciphers the attacks. If we can’t break the network, we have to isolate the node.”

“What’s the protocol? Direct assault is off the table.

Too much collateral, and frankly, the physical proximity seems to be their shield. We can't get a clean signal through that mess."

The second technician paused, a thin, cruel smile touching his lips. "We shift again. The hammer failed. So we use a scalpel, but a different kind. The network is physical. It requires their bodies to be in contact. It requires them to be here. So, we remove the incentive to stay."

He tapped a command into his tablet. "Initiate Phase Three: Collapse the Scaffolding. We're not targeting their minds anymore. We're targeting their environment. We will make this place so physically untenable that their only instinct will be to run, to scatter, to break the chain. Once they are isolated, the signal will find them again."

On the valley floor, Tito felt a subtle shift in the air. It was not a psychic pressure, but a cold,

mechanical premonition. He scanned the encampment, his eyes settling on the remaining sections of the bridge they had nearly completed. The wood and steel structure was essential for moving heavier equipment across the creek. It was the most complex piece of their physical reality, the most vulnerable.

He saw two of the workers, a Serb and a Croat, carrying a heavy generator toward the bridge's entrance. They were moving slowly, carefully, their hands occasionally brushing for stability against the slick ground.

Tito's heart, a dusty, long-dormant engine, seized. He knew what was coming. This was not a wave of pain. It was not a lie. This was a simple, brutal act of physics. The enemy had learned that their strength was the collective. And the easiest way to break a chain was to break the link in the middle.

He opened his mouth to scream a warning, but the sound

of it was swallowed by a sudden, deafening shriek of tortured metal from high above. A support cable, its anchorage meticulously weakened by a micro-charge delivered from the ridge, snapped with the force of a cannon shot.

CHAPTER 12: THE FALLING SKY

The shriek was not one sound but a cascade of them. The snap of the cable was followed by the groan of overstressed steel, a sound like a giant waking in agony. High above, on the cliff face where the bridge's anchorage was embedded, a shower of rock and dust erupted as the bolts tore free.

Tito's voice finally broke from his throat, a raw command that cut through the morning air. "SCATTER! THE BRIDGE!"

Heads snapped up. The two men carrying the generator

froze, staring at the swaying structure. The bridge was a skeletal thing of wood and steel, a half-finished promise spanning the chasm. Now, its far support pylons were buckling, pulled by the momentum of the severed cable. It didn't collapse inward. It tore apart.

The section where the men stood, the approach ramp leading to the main span, was the first to go. With a sound like a great tree being felled, the wooden beams supporting it splintered and gave way. The generator they carried crashed to the ground with a hollow boom. The men, startled, scrambled backward just as the ramp they'd been standing on pitched forward and plunged into the ravine.

For a moment, there was only the sound of falling debris—the clatter of timber, the whine of shearing metal. Then, the main body of the bridge gave a final, violent shudder. The remaining support cables, their

tension thrown into chaos, snapped one after another in a series of sharp reports. The entire structure, the product of weeks of grueling labor, tilted sideways and fell. It didn't just fall; it seemed to leap from its moorings, a broken wing of steel and wood crashing into the creek bed below.

The impact was colossal. A plume of water, mud, and shattered rock shot into the air. The creek, already swollen with the recent rain, was instantly dammed by the wreckage, its waters beginning to pool and rise, churning around the twisted ruin. The noise was a physical blow, a final, brutal exclamation point to the attack.

Silence followed, thick and ringing. The workers were scattered, some on their knees, others pressed against the cliff face, all staring at the devastation. The bridge was gone. Their path forward, their connection to the other side, their most significant piece of

tangible progress, was now a mangled corpse in the ravine.

The psychic attack had been an assault on their minds, designed to make them feel isolated and broken. This was different. This was a declaration that their reality, their hard-won physical world, was just as fragile. The enemy had not tried to poison their thoughts; they had simply broken their tools.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to set in. A woman from Sarajevo let out a choked sob. A man near the front edged away from the ravine, his eyes wide with a fresh, primal fear. The network, the human circuit Tito had built, began to fray. Instinct screamed at them to run, to put distance between themselves and the site of the catastrophe. To be alone. To find a secure place and hide.

Tito saw the fracturing in their eyes. He saw them beginning to pull away from one another, the

protective bonds of touch dissolving in the face of this new, tangible threat. He walked to the edge of the overlook, his old bones moving with a terrible purpose, and stood where they could all see him, a stark silhouette against the grey sky.

He did not look at the wreckage. He looked at them. “They have shown us their strategy,” he said, his voice not a shout, but carrying with the weight of command. “They cannot break our flesh, so they break the things we build with our flesh. They cannot break our minds, so they break the ground beneath our feet.”

He pointed a trembling, dirt-caked finger down at the ruin. “Look at it! Do not turn away! That is not a tomb. That is proof. Proof that they fear what you are doing. They fear the bridge more than they fear any army. A bridge is connection. A bridge is the refusal of a border.”

He took a step forward, his boots crunching on the

gravel. “Their goal was to make you run. To make you seek shelter in isolation. To break the chain. Your instinct is to scatter. I command you to do the opposite. Cling together. Do not let their act of destruction become the cause of your dissolution.”

He turned and began to descend the steep, muddy path toward the wreckage. “They want us to see a failure. We will see a salvage operation. They want us to see an obstacle. We will see a new challenge. They have not won until we surrender our purpose. And our purpose is to build.”

He reached the bottom and walked to the edge of the churning water, without hesitation stepping onto a massive, splintered beam that lay half-submerged. He turned back, his gaze sweeping over them, daring them to look away.

“Today, we do not lay track! Today, we rescue steel! We pull our tools from the mud! We do not let the

river claim what is ours! Every piece we save is an act of defiance! Who is with me?"

For a long, terrifying second, no one moved. Then, Emir, his face a mask of grim determination, slid down the muddy bank, his boots sinking into the muck. He was followed by Marko, who hefted a length of chain. Then Luka, then the Bosnian woman, then the Serbian man. One by one, they abandoned their hesitation. They did not scatter. They converged, a wave of people moving toward the wreckage, toward Tito, ready to fight the river itself for the scraps of their reality.

CHAPTER 13: THE RIVER'S TEETH

The river fought them. It was not a metaphor. The water, dammed by the bridge's corpse, had become a churning, vicious thing, its surface a froth of mud and white water. It sucked at their boots, its current a constant, insistent pull toward the jagged debris downstream. The cold bit deep, a seeping agony that promised hypothermia. This was not the clean, abstract battle of the mind; this was a war of inches against cold, brute force.

Tito stood waist-deep in the torrent, his body a rigid

pillar of defiance against the current. The water swirled around his old uniform, darkening the fabric, pulling at his frail frame. He seemed not to notice. His focus was on a tangle of steel rebar and twisted girders that formed a makeshift dam, trapping the most valuable equipment. “Here!” he bellowed, his voice snatched by the wind. “The winch! It’s under this lattice!”

Marko and Emir waded in beside him, the force of the water nearly knocking them from their feet. They linked arms, forming a human chain against the current, and began to feel for purchase on the submerged steel. The metal was slick with algae and razor-sharp where it had been torn. Marko’s hand slipped, and a gash opened across his palm. He grunted, wrapping it in a rag, and kept working. Pain was just another part of the environment now, a secondary concern to the task.

Above them, on the banks, others were organized into

teams. They had found the heavy-duty come-along winch, its cable miraculously intact, and were painstakingly securing it to a massive pine tree. The work was slow, hampered by the mud and the rain. Every movement was a struggle. A woman from North Macedonia, her face pale with cold, slipped while trying to haul a length of chain, sliding ten feet down the muddy slope before another worker caught her by the collar of her jacket. They didn't speak, just nodded, and she scrambled back up to resume her post.

This was the new reality Tito had prescribed. The enemy had attacked their construction; their response was to wage war on destruction itself. Every piece of equipment they saved was a victory. Every hand offered to a slipping comrade was a reinforcement of their network. The psychic assault had taught them to anchor themselves to the present; this physical trial was teaching them to anchor themselves to each other.

Tito, meanwhile, was assessing the damage with a

chilling clarity. He saw it not just as a setback, but as a data point. The attack had been surgical. The charge on the anchor bolt was small, precise. It hadn't been a random act of violence; it was an engineering solution to a human problem. The enemy had analyzed their structure, found its weakest point, and applied pressure.

He felt a sudden, sharp pain behind his eyes, a phantom echo of the earlier attack. It was a flicker, a ghost in his own machine. They were still watching. He looked up, scanning the rain-swept ridgeline. He saw nothing, but he knew the technicians were there, observing, analyzing this new resistance. They were watching their plan to induce isolation fail in real-time. What would they do next?

He turned his attention back to the river. The winch was groaning, its cable taut, straining against the weight of the wreckage. The metal structure groaned in

answer, shifting slightly. “Again!” Tito commanded. “Pull together!”

The workers on the bank heaved in unison, a coordinated grunt of effort. The winch bit deeper into the tree bark. Down in the water, Marko and Emir felt the girder they were braced against move. It shifted a few inches, and the current surged through the new gap, churning with renewed fury.

Suddenly, Emir shouted, “There! The generator!”

Partially submerged, caught between two beams, was the heavy generator they had been carrying when the bridge fell. It was their most valuable asset, the heart of their power grid. If they could save it, they could power the floodlights for night work, charge their radios. It was a symbol of their resilience.

But it was in the deepest, fastest part of the channel. To reach it, they would have to let go of their anchoring positions and surrender to the

current. It was a fool's gamble.

Tito saw their hesitation. He saw the calculation of risk in their eyes. He waded deeper, the water now at his chest, and pointed. "The generator is not just a machine! It is a promise we made to ourselves! We do not abandon our promises!"

He began to move toward it, his movements slow and deliberate. He was showing them it could be done. He was leading not from behind, but from the heart of the danger.

But the river was unforgiving. His foot caught on a submerged root, and his balance broke. For a moment, the old man was gone, replaced by a flailing, vulnerable human being. The current seized him, pulling him under.

Panic erupted on the banks. Tito, their anchor, their symbol of unshakeable strength, was drowning.

The moment Tito vanished beneath the churning,

slate-grey water was a silence more profound than any the psychic attacks had ever carved. It was a hollow tearing in the center of their reality. For a heartbeat, the world stopped. The roar of the river, the groan of stressed metal, the shouts of the workers—it all collapsed into a single, silent point of disbelief. Their leader, the man who had pulled them from the mire of their own minds, was gone, swallowed by the very element they were fighting.

Then, the silence shattered.

It was not a scream of terror that broke it, but a roar of pure, unadulterated rage. Emir, who had been bracing the winch, let go of the cable, his face a mask of fury. He plunged into the deepest part of the channel, his body hitting the water with the force of a cannonball. He did not swim; he fought, his arms churning, his eyes fixed on the spot where Tito had disappeared.

On the bank, the paralysis broke into a frenzy of

coordinated action. The network Tito had built did not fray; it snapped taut with a new, desperate purpose. Luka, the Croatian, was already shouting, her voice cutting through the chaos. “The safety line! Get the safety line!” A Serbian man, his hands bleeding from the sharp metal, was already unspooling a thick coil of rope, his movements swift and sure. A Bosnian woman, her face streaked with mud and rain, looped the line around her own waist, her eyes scanning the water for any sign, any ripple that might betray their leader’s position.

This was the true test of their bond, a trial by water. The enemy had tried to isolate them with fear, and they had responded with touch. The enemy had tried to break them with destruction, and they had responded with salvage. Now, the enemy had taken their symbol, their focal point, and thrown him into the chaos. Their response was not to scatter in despair, but to

become a single, focused organism with one goal: retrieval.

Beneath the surface, the world was a cold, violent hell of tumbling silt and grinding debris. Tito felt the river's immense power, a force that had no ideology, no memory, no hatred. It was pure, mindless physics. It slammed him against the wreckage, the impact knocking what little air he had left from his lungs. His old uniform, a relic of a different war, became a leaden shroud, pulling him down. His mind, a repository of a century's worth of history, politics, and struggle, was reduced to a single, primal instinct: air.

He flailed, his hand scraping against the treacherous, algae-slick steel. There was no purchase, only the smooth, unyielding surface of the river's intent. The world above was a distant, shimmering green-grey ceiling. He was being dragged downstream, his body

tumbling in the current's embrace. He saw flashes of light, not from the sun, but from the inside of his own skull—a lifetime of memories flickering and dying. A partisan oath in a snowy forest. The roar of a crowd in Belgrade. The silent, accusing eyes of a woman in a ruined Sarajevo street.

Then, a shadow blotted out the light. A body, impossibly strong, plunged into the water beside him. Fingers, rough and calloused, closed around his wrist. The grip was iron. Emir's face, distorted by the water, was inches from his own, a grim mask of determination. Emir kicked hard, driving them both upward, fighting the river's pull with a strength born of sheer desperation.

On the surface, the rope went taut. The workers on the bank hauled in unison, their bodies leaning back, feet digging into the mud for traction. They were no longer individuals; they were a counterweight, a human anchor

against the river's might.

Emir broke the surface, gasping, his other arm wrapped tightly around Tito's chest. He coughed, spitting out a mouthful of muddy water, and shouted, a single, hoarse word. "HERE!"

The rope, held by a dozen willing hands, was thrown. It slapped the water near Emir's head. He grabbed it, fumbling, and looped it under Tito's arms. A signal was given—a sharp tug—and the hauling began in earnest. They were pulled through the water, a slow, agonizing process against the churning current. Hands reached out, grabbing Emir's jacket, Tito's uniform, pulling them from the river's grasp and dragging them onto the muddy, treacherous bank.

Tito lay on his side, retching up river water, his body shuddering with cold and the aftershock of near-drowning. He was weak, frail, a century-old man nearly bested by a force of nature. He was not a god.

He was not a monument. He was flesh and bone, and he had almost died.

Luka was there instantly, tearing off her own thick jacket and wrapping it around his shoulders. Marko was chafing his hands, his own bloodied palm leaving a smear on Tito's skin. They huddled around him, a wall of bodies shielding him from the wind and rain, their shared warmth a desperate act of resuscitation.

Tito looked up at them, his vision blurry. He saw not a crowd of disparate nationalities, but a single face of shared fear and fierce, protective love. He had taught them to anchor each other. Now, in his moment of absolute vulnerability, they were anchoring him.

From the ridge, the second technician lowered his optical sensor, his face impassive. He turned to his partner. "The primary node was neutralized. The network's response was... anomalous. It did not fracture. It coalesced."

The first technician tapped a command, his screen

displaying a new set of readings. “They just demonstrated a 300-percent increase in collective efficiency under extreme duress. The objective was to break the chain. The data indicates the chain was just forged into steel.”

He looked down at the scene, at the small group huddled around the gasping figure of Tito. “The experiment is no longer about isolation. It’s about resilience. And the variable we need to account for is no longer him.” He pointed to the workers. “It’s them.”

CHAPTER 14: THE HUMAN DAM

They dragged Tito further from the water's edge, into the relative shelter of a stand of skeletal birch trees. The rain had not lessened, and the cold was a predator, sinking its teeth into them all. Tito's shivering was violent now, a tremor that seemed to rack his entire frame. His lips were a bruised purple, and his breathing was a shallow, ragged thing. The near-mythical figure, the man who had stared down Stalin and Eisenhower, was gone. In his place was a

dying old man, his body failing under the assault of the elements.

Luka, her face grim, took charge. “We need to get his wet clothes off. Now.” Her voice was stripped of all deference; it was the voice of a medic on a battlefield. She began to unbutton Tito’s tunic, her fingers numb but swift. The dark green wool was heavy with water, clinging to his frail body.

Marko, the Serb, ripped open the first-aid kit, his hands fumbling with the packets. “We have one thermal blanket. It won’t be enough.”

“Then we make it enough,” Emir growled. He was still breathing hard, the adrenaline of the rescue warring with the bone-deep chill of the river. He began to strip off his own thick work shirt, the wool steaming slightly in the cold air. “We are the blanket.”

It was a simple statement, but it landed with the force of a command. Without a word, the other workers

began to do the same. The Bosnian woman, the Macedonian, the others—they peeled off their own layers, their own protection against the cold, and piled them on top of Tito. A rough wool sweater, a waterproof jacket, a set of thermals. The pile of clothing grew, a makeshift cocoon of shared warmth. They were left shivering in their thinner shirts, their own bodies exposed to the biting wind, but their eyes were fixed on the man at the center of the pile.

Luka had the thermal blanket open now, draping it over the top of the clothing. She rubbed Tito's arms briskly, trying to stimulate circulation. “We need to get a fire started. Marko, the flint and steel in the kit. Find dry kindling, anything.”

Marko and another man scrambled off, searching under the overhang of the cliff face for drier wood, for anything that would catch a flame.

Tito's eyes fluttered open. He looked up at the faces

ringed around him, blurred by the rain and his own fading consciousness. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a chattering of teeth. He saw Luka's determined face, her hair plastered to her skull. He saw Emir, his chest bare and glistening with rain, standing guard over him. He saw the others, hugging themselves for warmth, their gaze unwavering. This was not the deference of subjects to a leader. This was the fierce, unblinking vigilance of family.

The Unseen Enemy's logic was clear in his mind, a cold, clean line of reasoning amidst the chaos of his own body. The attack on the bridge was a test of their physical resolve. The river was a test of their collective bond in his absence. The enemy had tried to prove that without him, the network would dissolve. Instead, they had watched it become more potent, more instinctual. They had tried to isolate him, and in doing so, had forced the network to become his shield.

Marko returned, his arms full of brittle, splintered

wood from the wreckage. He cleared a small patch of ground, shielding it from the rain with his own body, and began to work the flint. Sparks flew, tiny and defiant against the gloom. The first attempt failed. The second. On the third, a sliver of bark caught, a tiny orange ember glowing. Marko nurtured it, blowing gently, feeding it smaller twigs until a fragile flame licked upwards.

They huddled closer, drawing the small fire into their circle. The warmth was minimal, a psychological comfort more than a physical one, but it was something. It was a victory. As the fire grew, casting flickering shadows on their faces, Tito's shivering began to subside, the violent tremor easing into a manageable quake.

He managed to lift a hand, his fingers trembling, and pointed back toward the river, toward the wreckage. His voice was a rasp, a ghost of its former command.

“The... winch,” he breathed, each word an effort.

“The generator... is still... under the lattice.”

Even now, on the brink of death, his mind was on the objective. On the work.

Emir knelt beside him, his expression softening.

“It’s not going anywhere, old man. The river can have it for now. We have a different salvage operation to complete.” He gestured to the huddle of bodies, the shared pile of clothes, the tiny fire. “This is the priority.”

Tito’s eyes found Emir’s. There was a flicker of understanding, a deep and profound gratitude that went beyond words. He had spent a lifetime building a nation on grand ideals and political maneuvering. Now, he was being saved by the most fundamental principle of all: the simple, animal instinct of a group to protect its own. He had not been wrong, but he had been incomplete. He had given them the blueprint, but

the enemy's attacks had taught them how to be the builders. He closed his eyes, the exhaustion finally overwhelming him, but the ghost of a smile touched his lips. He was no longer the heart of this movement. He was merely a patient, being cared for by the organism he had created.

CHAPTER 15: THE FEVER OF THE NATION

The fire was a tiny, defiant heart in the vast, weeping landscape. For hours, they tended it, taking turns to scavenge for drier fuel from beneath the overhangs, their movements stiff with cold. The pile of clothes over Tito remained, a mound of wool and nylon that rose and fell with his shallow breathing. Luka stayed beside him, her hand often finding his wrist to check his pulse, her face a mask of concentration. The others huddled close, sharing their

meager warmth, their silence punctuated by the hiss of rain on the embers and the distant, relentless roar of the river.

As night began to bleed into the gray twilight, a change came over Tito. The shivering that had wracked his body ceased, replaced by a stillness that was somehow more alarming. A flush of unnatural heat began to radiate from him, a fever that Luka felt on the back of her hand.

“He’s burning up,” she announced, her voice tight with concern. She pulled back a corner of the thermal blanket. Tito’s face was slick with sweat, his eyes moving rapidly beneath their closed lids. He was muttering, not words, but fragments, names, dates—a torrent of subconscious data.

They listened, transfixed and horrified. This was not the Tito of official portraits. This was the Tito of the archives, the man whose mind was a repository of a

nation's trauma.

“Srebrenica... the wheat... it was supposed to be yellow...” he rasped, his fingers clenching into a fist. “The smell of jasmine in Mostar... gone. Replaced by... cordite.” He gasped, his back arching. “Vukovar. The water pump. The children’s drawings on the wall... all dust.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the rain passed through the circle. They were not just hearing a delirious man; they were bearing witness to the psychic mirror Luka had described, the force that had once torn through their own minds, now concentrated within him. It was as if his body, in its moment of supreme vulnerability, had become the vessel for the entire region’s fever.

The Bosnian woman, who had not spoken a word until now, let out a small, choked sob. “He’s feeling it all,” she whispered. “The weight of it. All of it.”

Marko, the Serb, looked away, his jaw tight. He could

hear the names of towns that were now just numbers on a memorial plaque, and he felt a phantom weight in his own gut, a shared sickness. Emir stared into the fire, his expression unreadable, but the muscles in his back were taut. They were all trapped in that fever dream with him, reliving the betrayals and the losses not as a historical lesson, but as a present, physical agony.

This was the true surgery of the soul. It was not a clean, clinical procedure. It was messy, painful, and it was happening inside the man they had just dragged from the river's grip.

Then, Tito's eyes snapped open. They were not focused on any of them. They were aimed somewhere beyond, at a memory so vivid it had physical weight. He spoke, and his voice was clear, sharp, imbued with the authority they remembered, but laced with a new, raw pain.

“Do you see, Drazha?” he said, the name a ghost on his lips. “I built a home with strong walls to keep the

wolves out. But I never taught the children inside how to stop being wolves to each other. I gave them a name, but I left them with the old hatreds, simmering under the floorboards. I thought... I thought the house was enough.”

He was speaking to the ghost of Mihailo Drazha, his long-dead chief of secret police. It was a confession, a century-late reckoning.

“The Unseen Enemy... they think they can break the foundation,” Tito continued, his gaze wild. “They think if they crack the stone, the house will fall. But they are wrong.” He turned his head, his eyes finally finding Emir’s, then Luka’s, then Marko’s, sweeping across the huddled group. His gaze was lucid, terrifyingly so.

“You are not the foundation. You are the mortar. You are the hands that lay the stone. They can crack one stone, but they cannot break the hands. They cannot

break the will to build.”

His breathing became ragged again, the moment of clarity passing as swiftly as it had arrived. He collapsed back onto the ground, his eyes closing, the fever claiming him once more. But he had given them something new. He had not just exposed the wound; he had pointed to the cure.

The fire had burned low. The rain had finally softened to a persistent drizzle. In the distance, cutting through the twilight, they heard it—a faint, rhythmic thumping sound. It grew steadily louder. A helicopter.

Everyone tensed. Friend or foe? Another part of the enemy’s plan, or a sign that their network had finally been located by the outside world?

A brilliant white spotlight cut through the gloom, sweeping across the river and the wreckage, finally pinning them in its glare. The helicopter banked, and on its side, they saw the unmistakable insignia of a

NATO roundel. A wave of conflicting emotions washed over the group: fear, suspicion, but also a sliver of desperate hope.

The helicopter descended, hovering over the clearing on the bank, its rotors whipping the air into a frenzy, scattering embers from their fire and sending leaves flying. A side door slid open. A figure in tactical gear appeared in the doorway, a rifle slung across his chest. He held up a hand, not in aggression, but as a signal to wait.

He was a young man, his face grim under the helmet. He looked over the scene: the huddled survivors, the pathetic fire, the mound of clothes that concealed their leader. His eyes lingered on the faces of the workers, on their different features, their shared exhaustion. He spoke into his mic, then looked back at them, his voice amplified and tinny through a loudspeaker.

“We are here to evacuate Dr. Josip Broz Tito. We have

a medical team on standby. Bring him out into the open.”

No one moved. They looked at each other. NATO. The very entity Slovenia and Croatia had embraced, the source of protection and prosperity, but also the modern ‘serpent’s coil’ that North Macedonia and Montenegro feared. Here, in the mud, the abstract geopolitics of their new reality had a face and a helicopter.

Emir stood up slowly, placing himself between the helicopter and Tito. He was still shirtless, his body a testament to the cold and the struggle. He did not shout. He simply stood, an unmovable obstacle.

Luka rose beside him. “He is not a package to be collected!” she yelled over the rotor wash. “He is our patient!”

The soldier in the helicopter seemed to hesitate, his orders clashing with the reality before him. He spoke

again. “This is not a negotiation. Your situation is untenable. We are offering extraction.”

Marko got to his feet, his hand still wrapped in a bloody rag. He stood on Emir’s other side. Then the Bosnian woman, then the Macedonian, then all the others. They stood together, a thin, shivering line of humanity against the technological might of a global power. They said nothing, but their message was clear.

This was their patient. This was their nation. This was their fever to break. And they would not be moved.

CHAPTER 16: THE STALEMATE

The soldier in the helicopter, a Staff Sergeant named Cole according to the faded nametape on his chest, lowered his hand. He was not expecting this. His briefing had painted a picture of a deranged figurehead and a scattered, confused populace. The reality was a wall of silent defiance built from mud and bone. He toggled the comms switch on his helmet. “Command, this is Falcon One. We have eyes on the package. Situation is static. The... locals... are forming

a human shield.”

The response was a crackle of static and a clipped, disembodied voice. “Are they armed, Falcon One?”

Cole scanned the group again. One man held a piece of jagged rebar. Another had a rock the size of his fist. Most had nothing but their raw, shivering bodies. “Negative, Command. They are armed with... presence. The package is shielded. He appears to be unconscious. Medical condition unknown.”

“Stand by, Falcon One.” The silence stretched, filled only by the oppressive thrum of the rotors holding the machine steady against the wind. Cole could feel the eyes of his co-pilot on him. He kept his own gaze fixed on the man at the center of the group, the shirtless one, Emir. There was no hatred in his eyes, just a terrifying, immovable resolve. It was the look of a man who had already died once today and had no fear of it a second time.

The voice returned, colder now. “Falcon One, your

mandate is humanitarian extraction. Use your discretion. Do not engage unless fired upon. The asset is critical to regional stability.”

Asset. The word felt obscene out here, in the cold and the rain. Cole leaned out slightly. “Listen to me,” he shouted, his voice straining to be heard. “We have doctors, medicine, heat. He’s burning with a fever. He will die out here!”

Luka stepped forward, her face upturned into the blast of air from the rotors. “He is already burning with the fever of a nation! Your sterile rooms and your machines cannot fix that! This is where he must be!” Her words were swallowed by the noise, but her meaning was clear in the set of her jaw.

Inside the helicopter, Cole’s commander was watching a live feed on a tablet, his face grim. “They think he’s a messiah, Cole. A symbol. You can’t just extract a symbol. It has to be relinquished.”

The standoff was broken not by a human voice, but by a

sound from the ground. A low, guttural moan from the mound of clothes. Tito was stirring again. The fever seemed to surge, and with it, the psychic pressure in the air intensified. It was no longer just a feeling; it was a palpable wave of force. The rain in the air seemed to vibrate, the water droplets catching the helicopter's spotlight and refracting it into a thousand fractured rainbows.

Inside the NATO helicopter, the effect was immediate. The sophisticated electronic systems, the very architecture of the machine, began to protest. The digital displays flickered, spitting out strings of corrupted data. A proximity alarm began to shriek, even though they were hovering fifty feet above the ground. Cole felt a piercing headache lance through his temples, a migraine blooming in seconds. The co-pilot groaned, clutching his helmet.

“What the hell is that?” the co-pilot gasped. “Is it

some kind of EMP?”

“Negative,” Cole grunted, fighting the controls as the helicopter bucked. “The rotors are still turning. It’s not an EMP. It’s... something else.”

On the ground, the workers felt it too—a resonance. It wasn’t hostile. It was as if Tito’s delirium, amplified by their collective will, was projecting a field of pure, chaotic information, a psychic logic bomb aimed not at the helicopter’s hardware, but at the operators inside. It was a flood of raw, unprocessed trauma: the shriek of air raid sirens, the smell of burning libraries, the silent terror of a sniper’s scope, the hollow echo of a child’s shoe in an abandoned street.

The soldier in the back of the helicopter, a medic, suddenly went rigid, his eyes wide. “The children...” he whispered, staring at nothing. “The drawings on the wall... they’re burning.”

Cole heard him and a cold dread washed over him. This

was the anomaly the techs had reported. The network's response to a threat wasn't to fight back with weapons, but to overwhelm with shared experience. They weren't being attacked; they were being made to understand. He fought the urge to open fire, to break the line. He understood, with a terrifying clarity, that if he fired a single shot, he would be firing into the heart of a ghost, and the ghost would swallow them whole.

He keyed the mic one last time, his voice strained. “Command, the asset is... volatile. The field effect is escalating. Recommend we fall back and reassess. We cannot take him without... casualties.”

The silence on the other end was longer this time. Finally, the voice came back, tight with frustration. “Fall back, Falcon One. Maintain observation at a safe distance. Let's see what they do.”

Cole nodded to his co-pilot. The helicopter began to

ascend, its spotlight detaching from the group and sweeping back toward the river. The pressure in their heads began to recede. The alarm stopped screaming. As they rose, Cole looked down one last time. The group had not moved. They were still standing, a circle of guardians around their fallen leader, the tiny fire glowing like a defiant ember against the immense darkness of the world. They had faced down a machine and made it retreat. They had won this round, not with a bullet, but with a memory.

CHAPTER 17: THE ECHO CHAMBER

The thrum of the helicopter faded, swallowed by the immense quiet of the rain-soaked landscape. For a long moment, no one moved. The ghost they had faced was gone, but its chill lingered in the air. The workers remained standing, a stiff, shivering testament to their victory, their bodies slowly relaxing from the rigid posture of defiance. The immediate threat had retreated, but they knew it was only to a distance from which it could observe, plan, and wait for a

weakness.

It was Emir who broke the tableau. He let out a long, shuddering breath, the sound of a man who had been holding it for an hour. He turned from the empty sky and looked at the others, his gaze lingering on each face, acknowledging their shared ordeal. “It’s over. For now,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Let’s get him somewhere drier. Away from the open.”

They moved with a renewed, grim purpose. The helicopter’s spotlight had scoured their small clearing, revealing the skeletal remains of a concrete foundation a short distance away, the ghost of some pre-war structure that might offer more shelter than the riverbank. Working together, they carefully lifted Tito, the mound of clothes now a weighted, breathing bundle. His fever-heat radiated through the fabrics, a constant, worrying reminder of the battle raging within him.

They carried him to the ruin, a low-slung concrete box

with one wall partially collapsed but the roof, though pockmarked with holes, largely intact. They laid him down on the driest patch of ground, repositioning the pile of clothes over him. Luka immediately knelt to check him, her expression a mixture of relief and profound anxiety.

“He’s stable, but the fever hasn’t broken,” she reported, pressing the back of her hand to his forehead. “If anything, it’s worse. The psychic echo... it used him as a conduit. It’s drained him.”

Marko, his arm now bound more neatly with a strip of cloth torn from his own shirt, stood guard at the collapsed opening, peering out into the gloom. “They’ll be back,” he said, not as a question but a statement of fact. “They won’t just leave him here. They called him an ‘asset’. People like that don’t abandon assets.”

“They don’t understand what they’re trying to

collect," Emir said, his voice low as he crouched beside Luka. He looked at Tito's face, slick with sweat, the eyelids twitching with frantic dream-images. "They think he's a man. They think they can put him in a sterile room, patch him up, and use him to stabilize the region. They have no idea he's a wound. And you can't use a wound to heal a wound. You have to let it drain."

As if on cue, Tito's muttering started again. It was quieter now, less frantic, but more focused. The words were not names of towns or battles this time. They were fragments of plans, blueprints of a forgotten world.

"...The railway... the line from Rijeka to Belgrade... must be seamless..." he rasped, his fingers twitching as if tracing a map in the air. "The workers... the steel... from Nikšić... The power grid... link the dams... Bosnia... Serbia... one current... one light."

The workers fell silent, listening. This was the other

side of the fever, not the trauma of the past, but the ghost of the future he had tried to build.

“Karakaj... a bridge of steel and sweat,” Tito murmured, a faint, dreamlike smile touching his lips. “Not a border post. A connection. We gave them bridges... and they built walls with the stone.”

Luka looked at Emir, her eyes wide. “He’s reliving it again. But this time... it’s the dream, not the nightmare.”

It was then that the new sensation began. It wasn’t a sound or a sight. It was a feeling, a low hum in the base of their skulls. The helicopter was gone, but the field it had triggered was still active, an echo chamber resonating with Tito’s delirium. The psychic mirror hadn’t shut off when the threat retreated; it had turned inward.

Marko suddenly winced, pressing the heel of his hand against his temple. “My head...”

The Bosnian woman, who had been silent for so long,

let out a small gasp. She was staring at her own hands, turning them over and over as if she'd never seen them before. "I can feel the calluses," she whispered, her voice trembling. "But they're not my calluses. They're... his. The man who laid the bricks in Mostar. Before the bridge fell."

Emir felt it too. A phantom ache bloomed in his left shoulder, the ghost of an old injury from a mine in Kosovo, an injury he'd only ever read about in his grandfather's diary. He looked at Luka. Her face was pale, her eyes distant.

"The weight of the charts," she said, her voice barely audible. "So many charts. So many lists of the missing. His secretary... she's right here, in my head. Her exhaustion. Her grief."

It was spreading. The psychic field, fueled by Tito's proximity and their own fierce, unified will, was now forcing them to share more than just the horror of the

90s. It was forcing them to share the entire Yugoslav consciousness. They were no longer just workers on a project; they were becoming living repositories of the state's memory. They could feel the phantom pains of the long-dead, the crushing bureaucracy, the desperate hope of the post-war builder, the quiet paranoia of the Cold War spy, the fierce pride of the factory worker. It was a cacophony of a million lives, a billion moments of love, labor, and loss, all crammed inside their heads.

Emir staggered back, leaning against the cold concrete wall. He understood now. Tito wasn't just the patient. He was the battery. And they, in their act of defiance, had just completed the circuit. They weren't just protecting the man; they were becoming the state he had built. The surgery of the soul was happening, but it was not confined to Tito's fevered brain anymore. It was happening to all of them. And the

first, most agonizing step was the realization that they were not just individuals anymore. They were a single, fractured, and terrifyingly vulnerable organism.

CHAPTER 18: THE SURGEON

The first casualty of the union was a simple word. Marko, watching the rain sheet off the broken concrete, muttered, “It’s not letting up.” The Macedonian woman, whose name he still didn’t know, turned to him, her face a mask of confusion and pain. “What do you mean, ‘it’?” she asked, but the question was a lie. She knew. She felt the pressure of the clouds in her own sinuses, the chill of the water on her skin amplified a hundredfold, a phantom memory of

standing watch on a frozen border in '91. The singular pronoun had become a lie. There was no 'it' anymore. There was only 'us'.

Emir watched the fracture lines appear. The shared consciousness wasn't a gentle river of understanding; it was a flash flood, tearing through the dams of individual identity. A Serbian worker, a man who had spent the last decade nursing a quiet resentment for the West, suddenly gasped, clutching his chest. He felt the phantom ache of a Croatian woman's grief for her husband, disappeared in Vukovar. The feeling was alien, a shard of glass in his heart, and his first instinct was to recoil, to reject it as a poison. He looked at the woman from Zagreb across the small shelter, his eyes wide with a mixture of horror and accusation.

She felt his gaze and the accusation within it. But she also felt the source of his horror. She felt the

echo of his own loss, the deep, gnawing emptiness of a brother who never returned from the hills of Kosovo. The two aches, distinct in memory but identical in texture, slammed into each other within the shared psychic space. For a moment, the shelter was silent, but the air crackled with the unspoken scream of two decades of mutual grievance being forced into a single vessel.

It was Luka who acted. A doctor's instinct cut through the psychic chaos. She saw the Serbian man's face flush with rage, saw the Croatian woman's hands curl into fists. The 'weaponized loneliness' of the post-war years was fighting back, trying to re-separate them, to turn this new, terrifying vulnerability into a weapon against itself.

"Stop," she said, her voice quiet but firm, cutting through the internal noise. She moved to the center of the small group, kneeling beside the still-muttering

Tito. The heat radiating from him was the anchor point of their shared reality. “Don’t fight it. Don’t push it away. That’s what we’ve always done. That’s the poison.”

She looked at the Serbian man. “What do you feel?”

He glared, his jaw tight. “Nothing.”

“Liar,” Luka said, not with anger, but with a clinical flatness. “The ache. Where is it?”

He hesitated, then mumbled, “My chest.”

“Good,” she said. “Now, whose is it?”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. To name it would be to accept it.

The Croatian woman spoke, her voice trembling.

“It’s mine.”

The Serbian man flinched as if struck.

“He’s not feeling your memory, Marko,” Luka said, turning to him. “He’s feeling the pain of it. The raw data. The shape of the wound. Tito isn’t just showing

us the past. He's making us feel its consequences. All of them. At once."

This was the surgery. It was clumsy, brutal, and without anesthetic. They were being forced to debride each other's souls. Emir understood the mechanic of it now. Tito was the battery, yes, but their collective will was the circuit. In the heat of the standoff with NATO, they had become one organism for the purpose of defense. Now, with the external threat gone, that organism was turning its attention inward. The psychic mirror was no longer reflecting an enemy; it was reflecting themselves. And they did not like the image.

He saw the Bosnian woman staring at her hands, the phantom calluses of a builder from another republic now etched into her own perception. She was feeling the pride of construction, the hope that had gone into the very railways and bridges that the wars would

later shatter. That pride was a new layer of agony. It was the knowledge of what had been lost, not as an abstract history, but as a personal, physical memory.

“Tito,” Emir said, crouching beside their leader. The fever was not just burning him; it was filtering him. He was no longer a man, but a conduit, a living repository of the state’s soul, and he was pouring it all into them. “He’s not just a battery. He’s the surgeon. And we’re the instruments.”

As if hearing him, Tito’s eyes snapped open. They were not wild or delirious now. They were ancient, clear, and filled with a profound, bottomless sorrow. He looked around at the huddled figures, at their faces contorted with the effort of absorbing a century of conflicting lives. He saw their pain, their fractures, their dawning, horrified understanding.

He tried to speak, but only a dry rasp came out. Luka lifted his head, giving him a sip of water from a

canteen. He swallowed, the effort monumental. His voice, when it came, was a ghost's whisper, carrying the weight of a thousand funerals.

“You must... bear it,” he breathed, his gaze sweeping over them, a plea and a command in one. “The mortar... must hold the stone. Even... when the stone... screams.”

CHAPTER 19: THE SCREAM OF STONE

The scream was not a sound. It was a psychic detonation that tore through the shelter, originating from the Serbian man who had first recoiled from the phantom grief. He was on his knees, his hands clawing at his own chest as if trying to dig the foreign pain out of his heart. The Croatian woman's loss was no longer a whisper in his mind; it had become a physical presence, a cold, heavy stone lodged behind his ribs. His own brother's ghost, a phantom he had nurtured in

solitude for years, rose to meet it, and the two specters began to tear each other apart inside him.

“Get it out!” he roared, his voice hoarse, his eyes screwed shut. “It’s not mine! It’s a lie!”

The others flinched. The psychic feedback loop amplified his agony, and they felt a shadow of it—a sharp, tearing sensation in their own chests. The Bosnian woman gasped, the phantom calluses on her hands burning as if she’d plunged them into fire. She felt the builder’s pride curdle into despair as he watched his work be destroyed by the very people it was meant to unite. The Macedonian woman felt the terror of a young soldier on a border he didn’t understand, the chill of the rifle stock against his cheek a real and immediate cold.

This was the next stage of the surgery: debridement. The psychic field, with Tito as its unwilling surgeon, was identifying the rot—the festering wounds of

individual grievance—and applying the cauterizing iron of shared experience. It was not a clean process.

Luka moved, her body a blur of desperate purpose. She grabbed the Serbian man by the shoulders, forcing him to look at her. His face was a mask of tears and fury. She didn't try to reason with him. She didn't offer platitudes. She offered him the truth, as she now felt it.

“His brother was your age!” she shouted over his internal screaming, her voice cutting through the psychic storm. “He died in the same kind of war! He died for a lie, just like yours! The pain is the same shape! Don’t you see? The wound doesn’t have a flag!”

Emir felt the truth of her words resonate through the collective. He saw it not just as an idea, but as a physical reality. The ghosts of the 90s were not individual phantoms; they were a single, tangled mass of limbs and screams, a hydra of suffering that fed on

the separation of its victims. To be alone with your pain was to feed the beast. To share it, to feel the pain of your enemy as your own, was to starve it.

The Serbian man's resistance crumbled, not into acceptance, but into a deeper, more profound agony. He slumped forward, his forehead touching the cold concrete floor, his sobs echoing in the small space. The stone in his chest didn't vanish, but it began to dissolve, seeping into the rest of them, its coldness spreading.

Tito watched, his ancient eyes missing nothing. The fever had receded slightly, leaving behind a terrifying clarity. He was the fulcrum, the point upon which this immense weight was balanced. He spoke again, his voice a little stronger now, each word a deliberate stone laid in a new foundation.

“They weaponized... your loneliness,” he whispered, his gaze sweeping over their huddled forms. “The men in...

quiet rooms... in London... in Washington... in Moscow. They saw your grief... and they sharpened it into a blade. They taught you... to cut yourselves... with it. So you would never... turn and see... the hand... that held the knife."

His words landed in the quiet aftermath of the psychic scream. The silence in the shelter was different now. It was not empty. It was filled with the shared, silent echo of the man's breakdown. The fracture lines were still there, but something new was being poured into the cracks.

Marko, who had been watching the rain, turned back. He had felt the wave of pain, a distant shore-break, but his own mind was a different kind of battlefield. He had been a soldier. He understood orders, and he understood the purpose of a trench. He looked at Tito, at the frail, feverish body that contained the storm, and he saw not a leader, but a commander in a war he

had just begun to comprehend.

“What do we do now?” Marko asked, his voice rough. “We can’t hold this. It’s too much.”

Tito’s eyes found his. There was no comfort in them, only the hard, cold certainty of necessity.

“The surgery... has only just begun,” Tito rasped. “First... we must feel the pain of every stone. Then... we must learn to build with them again.” He took a shuddering breath. “They will not just watch. They will try to poison the well. They will attack this... this new thing we are becoming. Not with missiles. With doubt. With whispers. With the ghosts they still command.”

CHAPTER 20: THE STATIC

The whispers came before dawn. They were not a sound, but a dissonance in the psychic symphony they had become. A cold, sterile note of logic injected into the raw, human chaos of their shared minds. It began with the Macedonian woman. Her name was Ana. She knew this now, just as she knew the name of the Serbian man's brother and the specific shade of blue in the Croatian woman's husband's eyes. The knowledge simply was, a part of their new, collective anatomy.

But a new thought intruded, slick and foreign. This is

a pathology. A mass psychosis induced by proximity to the asset. You are suffering from shared delusion.

Ana clutched her head. The thought wasn't hers. It felt like a drop of ink in clear water, spreading tendrils of doubt. She looked at Emir, her eyes wide with a sudden, primal fear. "It's them," she whispered, the words tasting like ash. "They're in my head."

Emir felt it too. A different kind of intruder. Not the visceral pain of the 90s, but a cold, clinical analysis of that pain. It was the voice of a psychiatrist in a windowless room, labeling their collective memory as a symptom. The Yugoslav Consciousness is a myth. A trauma response. The subject Tito is an anchor for a shared hysteria.

The others began to stir, groaning as the new assault took hold. Marko gritted his teeth, his disciplined mind fighting an invisible tide. He felt the phantom

weight of his rifle, but a new voice whispered, The weapon is a placebo. Your service was for a border that doesn't exist. Your loyalty is to a ghost.

This was the NATO attack Tito had warned of. No drones, no missiles. It was a logic bomb, a psychotronic whisper campaign designed to deconstruct their reality from the inside. It targeted the very foundation of their new existence: the validity of their shared pain. It sought to re-isolate them, to turn their newfound unity into a clinical diagnosis, a madness to be medicated and controlled.

Tito, on the ground, began to tremble violently. The sterile whispers were a poison to him, the antithesis of the messy, organic memory he held. His fever spiked, his body arching off the concrete. The psychic mirror, their shield, was being distorted, turned into a lens of insanity.

“It’s a lie!” Luka shouted, her voice a beacon in the

rising static. She fought the voice in her own head that told her she was a healer, not a soldier, and that her place was in a hospital, not a ruin. “This is real! The pain is real! What we feel is real!”

But the doubt was a seed, and it was sprouting in the fertile ground of their exhaustion. The Serbian man, his grief still raw and dissolved amongst them, felt the phantom stone in his chest again, but now the whisper told him it was a hysterical symptom, a psychosomatic delusion. He almost believed it. It would be so easy to believe it, to retreat into the simple solitude of his own mind.

Then Tito moved. With a gargantuan effort, he pushed himself up onto one elbow. His eyes were no longer clear; they were burning with a feverish, defiant rage. He was not the surgeon now, but the patient fighting back against the poison. He looked at them, his gaze sweeping across their terrified faces, and he

forced a single word out of his constricted throat.

It was not a word of command or strategy. It was a name. A name from a forgotten file, a detail only one person in the room could possibly know.

“Jelena,” he rasped, his voice cracking like dry earth. He was looking at the Macedonian woman, Ana. “Your daughter’s name... is Jelena. She was born... in the spring. The shelling of Skopje... started on her third birthday.”

Ana froze. The sterile whisper in her head screeched to a halt. It was a data point impossible for any foreign intelligence to possess, a secret buried so deep she had only ever told it to her husband’s ghost.

Tito’s eyes moved, finding the Serbian man. “Your brother... his favorite song... was ‘Moj Je Život Samo Soba’. He sang it... before he left.”

The man flinched as if struck by lightning. The song, a forgotten piece of his soul, erupted in his mind,

drowning out the cold static. It was a key, unlocking a room in his memory he thought was sealed forever.

One by one, Tito gave them these offerings. Fragments of their own lives, memories he had absorbed from their proximity, from the circuit they had completed. He gave the Bosnian woman the memory of the first flower her mother had planted in a Sarajevo window box, a detail no one else could have known.

The sterile whispers from NATO faltered, confused. This was not data. This was not psychosis. This was the undeniable proof of a connection that defied their logic, a consciousness that operated outside their understanding. The logic bombs could not find a purchase on the raw, unassailable truth of a mother's memory or a brother's song.

The whispers receded, not in defeat, but in tactical withdrawal. They left behind a ringing silence and the smell of ozone. The assault had failed, but it had

left a scar. They were vulnerable. They could be attacked. The dream of Yugoslavia was not a fortress; it was a living, breathing thing, and it could be wounded.

Tito collapsed back onto the ground, his energy spent. He had shielded them, but the effort had nearly torn him apart.

Emir looked at the others. Their faces were pale, streaked with sweat and tears, but the doubt was gone, replaced by a hard, cold certainty. They had been tested. The enemy had a name, and they had felt its touch. The surgery of the soul was no longer an internal process. It was now a war.

CHAPTER 21: THE HOLLOW MEN

The silence was a held breath. For a long moment, the only sound was the drumming of the rain on the corrugated roof and the ragged, shallow breathing of Tito. The psychic assault had vanished, leaving a vacuum in its place. The cold, clinical whisper was gone, but the echo of it remained, a phantom limb of doubt they could still feel if they concentrated. They looked at each other, not with the dawning horror of shared pain, but with the hard-edged gaze of soldiers

who had just survived an ambush and were now searching for the sniper.

Marko was the first to move. He rose from his crouch, his movements stiff, deliberate. He walked to the shelter's makeshift door—a sheet of warped plywood propped against the frame—and peered through a crack into the grey, dripping morning. The street outside was empty, a river of mud and rubble. Nothing had changed, and yet everything had. The air itself felt thin, watchful.

“They’re testing us,” Marko said, his voice flat, stripped of emotion. He didn’t turn around. “Probing for a weakness. Finding out how we fight.”

“And how we bleed,” Luka added, her voice tight with anger. She was kneeling beside Tito, checking his pulse, her touch gentle but her expression furious. The healer’s instinct to protect warred with the soldier’s need to retaliate. “That was designed to

make us question our own sanity. To turn us against ourselves. It's the most insidious kind of cruelty."

Emir felt the truth of her words resonate within him. He looked at Ana, who was rocking slightly, her arms wrapped around herself. The memory of her daughter's name, Jelena, had been a shield, but it was also a raw, exposed nerve. NATO now knew, or could infer, that Tito's connection was a two-way street. He could not only reveal their secrets but was vulnerable to them as well. They had been attacked not as a group, but through the very intimacy that defined them.

"We are no longer just a surgery," Emir murmured, more to himself than to the others. "We're a front line."

A new sound cut through the rain. A low, guttural cough, a machine struggling to turn over. It came from outside, down the street. Marko tensed, his hand instinctively moving to a hip where a weapon no longer hung. He shifted his position for a better view.

"Movement," he reported, his voice a low rasp.
"Two of

them. Coming from the east."

The group tensed, the psychic unity snapping back into a defensive posture. They could feel the approaching presence not as a coherent thought, but as a jumble of sensations—weariness, confusion, a flicker of fear. They were locals. The assault had been broadcast on a frequency they couldn't consciously hear, but the psychic shockwave had rippled through the entire city, and this was the fallout.

The figures stumbled into view, their forms indistinct in the mist. One was a man, broad-shouldered and stooped, his face a mask of exhaustion. The other was a woman, thinner, her movements jerky and paranoid. They were dressed in the mismatched, worn clothes of people who had been living in the ruins for months. They were not soldiers. They were ghosts.

They stopped when they saw the shelter, their eyes fixing on the huddled group within. The man's gaze

swept over them, lingering on Tito's still form. There was no recognition, only a deep, hollow weariness. The woman clutched a small, dirty bundle to her chest and stared at Ana, her eyes wide and unblinking.

“Who are you?” the man called out, his voice rough with disuse and suspicion. He held up a trembling hand, not in greeting, but as a barrier. “What is this place? We felt... something. A noise in the head. Like a drill.”

Marko stepped forward, placing himself between the newcomers and the rest of the group. He didn't raise his hands, but his posture was clear: a warning. He knew these men. He had served with their cousins, fought against their brothers. This was the other side of the surgery—the uncooperative tissue that had to be cut away.

But Luka saw something else. She saw the woman's haunted eyes, the man's gnawing hunger. She felt their

exhaustion as a physical weight. She pushed past Marko, her hands open and empty.

“It’s over,” she said, her voice carrying across the small distance. “The noise is over. You’re safe here.”

The man laughed, a short, bitter bark. “Safe? There is no safe. There is only the rubble and the waiting.” He squinted at Tito. “Is he your prophet? Another madman promising miracles?”

This was the new battlefield. Not against the clinical whispers of a foreign power, but against the despair of their own people. The ghosts of the 90s were not just memories; they were standing in the mud, alive and broken. The surgery had to move beyond their small shelter. It had to heal the entire body, or it would fail. Tito, sensing the shift, stirred. His eyes opened a crack, and he looked at the two figures in the street. He did not speak, but a wave of profound, aching sorrow radiated from him, a sorrow that was not

his own, but belonged to every person who had ever lost everything in this land. It washed over the newcomers, and for the first time in a long time, they did not flinch from the feeling of another's pain. They simply stood there, in the rain, and let it rain.

CHAPTER 22: THE COMMON GROUND

The wave of sorrow was a bridge, not a revelation. It did not magically heal the strangers' distrust, but it disarmed it. The man, who had introduced himself only as "Stavro," lowered his hand. The woman, whose name was Lena, remained silent, her eyes fixed on Tito as if he were a strange, unpredictable weather pattern. They did not enter the shelter, but they did not leave. They sat on a pile of broken bricks just outside the doorway, a wary perimeter that mirrored

the group's own isolation.

Inside, a silent conference was taking place. Marko, his jaw tight, projected an aura of rigid opposition. "They are a liability," he subvocalized, the thought shared effortlessly within their consciousness. "The man is a Serb from his accent. The woman could be from anywhere. They are starving. They are desperate. Desperate people will sell you for a can of beans."

"And we are not desperate?" Emir countered, his own thoughts tinged with a weary pragmatism. "We are the ones who invited a psychic storm into our heads. We are sitting with the ghost of a dead country. Who is more desperate than us?"

"It's not about them," Luka projected, her focus entirely on the two figures outside. "It's about us. Tito showed us we are connected. What happens if we turn them away? We become the monsters they think we are. We prove that this 'new Yugoslavia' is just a

club for the chosen few."

The debate was cut short by a soft groan from Tito. He was trying to sit up, his movements frail but insistent. Luka and Ana moved to support him, propping him against the damp wall. His eyes, though clouded with fever and exhaustion, were fixed on the two survivors outside. He had heard their story not in words, but in the raw data of their presence. He spoke, his voice a dry rasp that forced them all to lean in close.

"They were in the stadium," he whispered, the words forming with immense effort. "The one in... Koševo. When the city was whole. They had a child. A little girl. She loved the... the painted horses."

Lena, sitting outside, flinched as if struck. Her head snapped up, her gaze locking with Tito's. Stavro's face hardened into a mask of grief. It was impossible. No one knew that. They had told no one. They had been

in the stadium for a week after the shelling started, hiding in the locker rooms. Their daughter, Mia, had been obsessed with the carousel in the park across the street, a splash of impossible color amidst the growing grey.

"How?" Stavro's voice was a choked whisper. "How do you know that?"

Tito ignored the question, his energy fading. He was a conduit, not a magician. He looked at Emir, then at Marko, his gaze a silent command. The message was clear. The surgery required a common ground, and that ground had to be found in the ruins of their shared past.

Emir understood. He rose and walked to the doorway, stopping just inside the threshold. He did not approach them, but made himself visible. He held up his hands, showing they were empty.

"We were in the city, too," Emir said, his voice calm,

carrying over the rain. He did not look at Stavro, but at Lena, sensing the woman was the key. "I was a student. My father was a doctor. We were in the old quarter. We never had enough water."

Stavro stared at him, his suspicion warring with a dawning, horrifying understanding. "You are a Bosniak," he stated, the word an accusation and a realization at once.

"And you are a Serb," Emir acknowledged, his voice steady. "And that woman," he gestured to Ana, who had moved to stand beside him, "is from Skopje. And the man sleeping by the wall is a Croat. It no longer matters what we were. Only what we are now."

He took a breath, and then he did something that broke the last of their own internal barriers. He opened the memory, the one Tito had unlocked for him, and projected it outward, not just to his own group, but towards the two figures outside. It wasn't a word or

an image, but a feeling—the specific, soul-crushing ache of a father's grief for a child he could not protect. It was the one universal language of the Balkans.

Lena let out a choked sob, clutching her chest. She felt the echo of her own loss, but filtered through another man's heart. Stavro's rigid posture crumbled, and he buried his face in his hands.

The rain continued to fall, washing the dust from the broken concrete, but for the first time in a generation, it felt like it might be washing something else away, too. The ground beneath them was still shattered, but it was, for a fleeting moment, common.

CHAPTER 23: THE SYMPTOM

The shared grief was a painful balm. It did not erase the chasm of ethnicity and experience that separated them, but it built a fragile bridge across it. Stavro and Lena rose from the bricks and shuffled into the shelter, a concession that felt monumental. They sat near the doorway, a self-imposed buffer zone, but they were inside. The air in the concrete room thickened with the presence of their unspoken histories. For a time, the only sound was the rain and the ragged

rhythm of their breathing, a collective sigh of exhaustion.

Emir felt the psychic landscape shift. The raw, defensive energy of the newcomers had subsided, replaced by a vast, hollow ache. He could feel their hunger, not just for food, but for an end to the vigilance that had consumed their lives. He reached into a canvas bag and pulled out a dented can of beans and a half-loaf of hard, stale bread. He placed them on the floor between their groups. A peace offering. A recognition of their shared, desperate biology.

Stavro stared at the food, his expression unreadable. Lena looked at Emir, her eyes swimming with a question she was too afraid to ask. The moment was a fulcrum. If they accepted the offering, they accepted the premise of this fragile, impossible alliance. If they refused, the sorrow-wave would be remembered as a momentary weakness, and the suspicion would return,

colder and harder than before.

Before Stavro's hand could move, a new sensation pierced the fragile quiet. It was not a psychic assault like the NATO logic bomb. This was different. Sharper. It felt like a high-frequency whine at the edge of hearing, a metallic taste on the tongue. It was a vibration that seemed to emanate from the earth itself.

Tito gasped, his back arching. His eyes flew open, wide with a terror that was not his own. A thin trickle of blood seeped from his nose. He clutched his head, a silent scream contorting his features.

“What is it?” Luka cried, scrambling to his side. She felt it then, too. A disorienting vertigo, a sense of the world tilting on its axis. The psychic mirror, their sanctuary and their weapon, was being warped. The reflections it threw back were nauseatingly wrong.

The others recoiled, clutching their heads as the

sensation intensified. It was a physical attack, targeting the very structure of their consciousness. Emir felt his own memories begin to fray at the edges, the faces of his wife and daughter blurring, their names slipping from his grasp like water. It was a surgical strike on their identity, designed to dissolve the Yugoslav Consciousness by dissolving the individuals who comprised it.

Marko, fighting the wave of nausea, recognized the pattern. "It's not in our heads," he gritted out, his soldier's mind searching for the source. "It's a frequency. They're targeting the asset directly, and we're just in the fallout." He looked at Tito, who was now convulsing on the ground, his body a lightning rod for this invisible energy. Tito was the anchor, and they were trying to drag him under.

Stavro and Lena were frozen, their faces a mask of confusion and terror. To them, this was the madness

they had feared. They had walked into a nest of lunatics whose prophet was having a seizure. The can of beans sat between them, a forgotten relic of a moment of hope that had already passed.

"The power," Ana shrieked, pointing a trembling finger at the shelter's single, bare bulb. It was flickering, buzzing erratically. "It's coming through the power!"

Emir's eyes snapped to the bulb. She was right. The vibration in his skull was perfectly synchronized with the flickering light. They were using the city's crippled power grid, the very infrastructure they were trying to rebuild, as a carrier wave for their weapon. It was a cruel, precise irony.

The pain was becoming unbearable. Emir felt a scream building in his own throat. He saw Marko stumbling towards the shelter's back wall, looking for a breaker, a switch, anything to sever the connection. But it was a city-wide network. Killing the power here

would do nothing.

Tito, in a final, desperate act, pushed himself up. His eyes, swimming with tears of blood and pain, found Emir's. The thought that passed between them was not a command, but a raw impulse. The network. Break the network.

Emir understood. They couldn't destroy the grid, but they could overload it. A surge. A feedback loop. He looked at the flickering bulb, then at the crude transformer box he had jury-rigged near the wall. It was a dangerous, foolish idea. It could electrocute them all. It could start a fire. But the alternative was the dissolution of their minds.

He lunged for the transformer, his hands closing around the cold metal casing. He could feel the alien frequency pulsing through it, a malevolent rhythm. He looked at Marko and Luka, his eyes wild with a plan. "We need a surge," he yelled over the psychic noise.

"Everything we have. Push it back!"

Marko and Luka didn't hesitate. They moved to his side, placing their hands on the transformer. They didn't need to understand the mechanics; they felt the intent. The others, including a terrified Ana, joined them, forming a desperate circle around the device. They closed their eyes, focusing not on the pain, but on the flickering light above. They gathered their will, their collective fear, their rage, and their desperate hope, and they pushed. They channeled the entirety of their shared consciousness, the Yugoslav Soul, into that single, overloaded point. The bulb flared, impossibly bright, and with a deafening crack, the shelter was plunged into absolute darkness and a sudden, blessed silence. The attack was broken, but they were left blind, deaf, and utterly vulnerable in the sudden void.