

THE MARSHAL'S RETURN

A Novel by a Political Thriller
Specialist

NEXONSYNTH PUBLISHING

CHAPTER 1: THE LAZARUS PROTOCOL

The air tasted of ozone and antiseptic, a sterile cocktail that scraped the back of the throat. It was a far cry from the damp, earthy scent of the bunker complexes at Brijuni or the pine-rich air of Mount Igman. Josip Broz Tito drew a breath, a ragged, mechanical sound that seemed to vibrate through a chest cavity that hadn't known movement for decades.

He opened his eyes.

The glare was blinding, a diffuse white luminescence

that bore no resemblance to the warm, tungsten glow of the lamps in his office in Užice. He blinked, his eyelids heavy, biological curtains on a stage he no longer recognized. Shapes resolved slowly. Not the familiar, angular lines of a hospital bed in a socialist clinic, but sleek, curved surfaces of brushed aluminum and glass. A monitor hummed with a low, rhythmic pulse, displaying jagged green lines that spiked and fell in a steady cadence.

"Vital signs stable," a voice said. It was disembodied, synthesized, speaking a clipped, efficient version of Serbo-Croatian that lacked the regional warmth of his native dialect.

Tito tried to sit up. His muscles, atrophied and weak, screamed in protest. He was a prisoner in his own body, a husk that had been preserved against its will. He fell back against the pillow, which adjusted instantly to his shape, cooling slightly against the

sweat beading on his forehead.

"Where?" he rasped. The word was a croak.

A shadow detached itself from the corner of the room. A man, tall and lean, wearing a suit of charcoal grey that seemed to absorb the light. He held a tablet, his eyes fixed on the glowing screen rather than the legend in the bed.

"Belgrade," the man said. "Sector 7. A private facility." He finally looked up, his expression unreadable, his eyes dark and tired. "Welcome back to the twenty-first century, Marshal."

Tito stared at him. The face was sharp, modern, devoid of the softness of the bureaucrats he had once known. This was a new breed. "You are not a doctor."

"I am a facilitator," the man replied. He tapped the tablet. "My name is Vukovi. I work for a consortium that believes history requires a correction."

Tito's mind, sharp despite the fog of suspended

animation, began to catalogue the details. The room was windowless. The hum of electronics was pervasive, a sound that replaced the ticking of clocks and the murmur of crowds. He felt a phantom ache in his shoulder, a remnant of the bullet he took in 1948, but the flesh was numb. He was a specimen, pinned to a board.

"Correction," Tito echoed, testing the weight of the word. He shifted his gaze to the monitor, seeing the jagged lines of his own heartbeat. "And what is wrong with the current timeline that requires the resurrection of a dead man?"

Vukovi swiped a finger across the glass. A holographic map flickered into existence above the device, casting a blue glow over the sterile room. It was a map of the Balkans, but the borders were warped, overlaid with symbols and color codes that made Tito's stomach tighten.

"Everything," Vukovi said.

He zoomed in. Tito recognized the shape of the

peninsula instantly, the jagged coastline, the mountainous spine. But the political geography was a nightmare.

"Look," Vukovi commanded, though deference in his tone. "Slovenia. Croatia. They are no longer nations in the true sense. They are administrative districts of Brussels. Fully integrated into the European Union and NATO. Their sovereignty is a legal fiction. They trade the Deutsche Mark and the Euro, and their soldiers die in deserts for causes that do not serve the Balkans."

Tito watched the map rotate. He saw the familiar blue emblem of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization stamped across the Adriatic.

"Montenegro," Vukovi continued, his monotone recitation of facts. "North Macedonia. NATO members. Anchored to the alliance but kept outside the economic fortress of the EU, perpetually struggling,

perpetually dependent."

The map shifted to the interior. "Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo. Desperate. Begging for entry into both the EU and NATO. Their elites sell off national assets for the promise of borderless travel and subsidized agriculture. They are fractured, ethnically volatile, a tinderbox kept damp by foreign aid."

Tito's gaze lingered on Bosnia. The familiar jagged borders of the republic, now split along ethnic lines that had been frozen and then thawed into a messy, contested slurry. He remembered the partisan struggles there, the blood spilled to forge a unified state.

"And Serbia?" Tito asked, his voice gaining a fraction of its old steel.

Vukovi zoomed the map eastward. A red line and pulsing, connected Belgrade to Moscow.

"Serbia," Vukovi said. "The anchor of a client state in all but name. Dependent on Russian gas

for energy, on Russian hardware for security, and on Russian vetoes for diplomatic relevance. They chant anti-Western slogans in the streets while their economy bleeds capital to oligarchs in the Kremlin."

Tito let out a slow, controlled breath. He felt a cold fury rising, a familiar instinct that cut through the physical weakness. He saw the map not as a collection of nations, but as a dismembered body. His body.

"The Non-Aligned Movement," Tito murmured, the words tasting like ash. "We stood apart. We refused to be a satellite."

"That movement died with you," Vuk flatly. "It died in the fires of the 1990s. It died in the Dayton Accords. It died in the accession treaties signed in Brussels."

"And you," Tito turned his head sharply, the vertebrae in his neck cracking audibly. "Who are you? A nationalist? A monarchist? Or just a mercenary selling

nostalgia?"

Vukovi didn't flinch. He switched off plunging the room back into the sterile white hum. "I am a patriot, Marshal. But my patriotism is not for a dead ideology. It is for survival. The Balkans is being swallowed. Piece by piece, the West eats the south, the East eats the east. There is no center left. There is no space for a third way."

Tito closed his eyes, visualizing the old maps of 1945. The hard lines he had drawn with iron and blood. A federation of six republics, a bulwark against both Washington and Moscow.

"Why bring me back?" Tito asked. "I am a relic. A ghost."

"Because," Vukovi said, stepping closer his shadow falling over Tito's face. "The people have forgotten what strength looks like. They have forgotten the taste of self-determination. They are

drowning in consumerism and debt. They need a symbol. Not a politician. Not a general. A myth."

Tito opened his eyes. The fire was still there, banked low but burning. He looked at the high-tech room, the seamless integration of machinery and biology, and felt a profound disgust. He had fought a war against fascism, only to wake up to a world conquered by bureaucracy and financial leverage.

"They will not unite," Tito said. "The hatreds are too deep now."

"They are," Vukovi agreed. "But you

man who ever kept them in check. Not by love. But by fear. And by the promise of something greater than their petty ethnic divisions."

Tito flexed his fingers. The movement was clumsy, but he felt the tendons move. He was weak, yes. But he was alive.

"The West," Tito said, his voice dropping to a whisper

that was somehow more threatening than a shout.

"They call their integration 'freedom.' It is a cage of velvet."

"And the East?" Vukovi asked, testing
"A leash of iron," Tito replied instantly. "I have
worn neither."

He looked at Vukovi, the facilitator of
resurrection. "You want a weapon. You want a hand
to hold the knife."

"I want a architect," Vukovi corrected
foundation is crumbling. We need to pour new
concrete."

Tito stared at the ceiling, where a single camera lens
glinted in the recessed lighting. He was being
recorded. Analyzed. But he was also being given a
stage.

"Get me clothes," Tito said. "And bring me a map. A
real one. Paper. I want to feel the borders."

Vukovi nodded, a faint, grim smile to
lips.

"It is being prepared. The world is waiting, Marshal. They think you are a curiosity. A medical miracle."

"They are wrong," Tito said. He closed his eyes again, conserving his energy. "I am a reckoning."

The hum of the electronics seemed to grow louder, filling the silence. In the distance, beyond the reinforced walls of the facility, the city of Belgrade slept under the watchful eyes of foreign satellites and domestic surveillance. But in the sterile white room, a spark had been reignited. The old order was dead. The new order was corrupt. And in the vacuum between, a ghost was preparing to march.

CHAPTER 2: THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Tito stood before the mirror, a stranger staring back. The man in the reflection was him, yet not. The face held the familiar heavy brow and the distinctive mustache, but the skin was unnaturally smooth, lacking the weathered map of wrinkles earned through decades of war and governance. It was a restoration, not a resurrection—a digital reconstruction of biological matter. He wore a suit of dark wool, cut in a style that felt vaguely familiar yet undeniably modern.

There was no uniform, no star, no red star. Just the austere, anonymous grey of the 21st-century elite.

"Your physical strength is approximately forty percent of what it was at your peak," V from behind him. He stood by the door, holding a tablet and a heavy leather briefcase. "We can increase that with targeted therapies, but it will take time. Your mind, however, has been cleared of the degradation. You are as sharp as you were in 1975."

Tito turned away from the mirror. The room they had moved him to was larger, an office of sorts, though it lacked the warmth of wood or the texture of history. It was all glass and brushed steel, overlooking a panoramic screen that displayed a live feed of Belgrade. The city sprawled out below, a chaotic mix of brutalist concrete blocks and shimmering glass towers. Neon signs in Cyrillic and Latin competed with holographic advertisements for Western brands.

"It is loud," Tito observed. He walked to the window,

his movements stiff but deliberate. He tested his balance, shifting his weight from foot to foot. The floor was perfectly level, no give, no creak of wood.

"The world is loud, Marshal," Vuković placed the briefcase on a low table. "Information overload. That is the primary control mechanism of the modern age. Keep the population distracted, entertained, and anxious, and they will not look at the chains binding their wrists."

Tito watched the traffic below. The cars were silent, electric pods moving in streams of light. He saw the architecture of the new Belgrade—luxury high-rises rising above the skeletal remains of socialist housing projects.

"You mentioned a consortium," Tito said, turning to face the younger man. "Who funds this... miracle?"

Vuković opened the briefcase. He did not find weapons or documents, but a tablet. He slid it across

the table. "There are factions within the Serbian intelligence community, the military, and the industrial sector. Men who see the current trajectory as suicide. We are not funded by a single state, but by a network of interests who believe that a unified Balkans is the only way to survive the coming century."

Tito picked up the tablet. It was cold, heavy. He navigated the interface with a surprising ease, his muscle memory adapting quickly to the glass screen. He opened a dossier labeled Project Lazarus. "Nationalists," Tito guessed, scrolling through names and financial trails.

"Pragmatists," Vukovi corrected. "The that nationalism, in its current fragmented form, is a weakness. It makes us easy to divide and conquer. They need a symbol that transcends the ethnic divide. A unifier."

"And they chose me." Tito scoffed, though there was no

humor in it. "The man who suppressed the very nationalisms they now fear."

"Because you were the only one who could," Vukovi said. "You didn't suppress them. You suppressed them by force and by structure. You gave them a greater identity."

Tito set the tablet down. He walked to the large screen on the wall. He could zoom in on the city, on the streets. He saw the people. They walked with their heads down, staring at their own screens. They wore clothes from global chains. They looked tired.

"The West calls this progress," Tito murmured. He touched the screen, his finger tracing the Danube. "It is colonization by commerce. The Americans and the Europeans do not need to send armies to conquer us. They simply buy our land, our politicians, and our souls."

"And the Russians?" Vukovi asked, beside

him.

Tito's expression hardened. "The Russians offer a different cage. A return to the past. To authoritarianism wrapped in the flag of Orthodoxy. They offer protection in exchange for servitude. It is the same bargain they have offered for three hundred years."

He zoomed the map out, shifting the view from Belgrade to the wider region. The holographic overlay returned, the color-coded zones of influence.

"Slovenia and Croatia," Tito said, pointing to the glowing blue zones on the Adriatic coast. "They believe they are free because they can travel to Paris without a visa. They have traded their sovereignty for convenience."

"Exactly," Vukovi said. "And that is what this step is not military. It is economic."

Tito looked at him. "Explain."

"The European Union is unstable," Vukovi said. "The

energy crisis, the inflation, the internal political fractures. They are overextended. Serbia is the anchor of Russian influence in the region, but that anchor is dragging the economy down. The people are suffering."

"And Bosnia?" Tito asked, his eyes fixing on the fractured territory in the center.

"A powder keg," Vukovi said. "The entity within Bosnia is threatening secession again, backed by Belgrade and Moscow. The Federation is begging Brussels for troops. It is the flashpoint."

Tito traced the border of Bosnia with his finger. He remembered the mountains, the bitter cold, the brotherhood of arms. "If Bosnia burns, the fire spreads. Croatia will intervene to protect its interests. Serbia will intervene to protect the Serbs. NATO will be forced to act."

"Chaos," Vukovi said.

"Opportunity," Tito countered. He turned from the

screen, his eyes gleaming with a cold, calculating light. "If I appear in that chaos... if I speak the language of unity... who will listen?"

"The old partisans," Vukovi said softly to the disillusioned youth. The soldiers who see NATO bases on their soil and Russian generals in their barracks and wonder where their country went."

Tito walked back to the table and picked up the tablet again. He pulled up a file on the current leadership of the region. He scanned the faces—modern faces, polished by media training, devoid of the scars of revolution.

"They fear me," Tito said. "All of them. The West fears the instability I bring. The East fears the loss of control. The local politicians fear the eclipse of their own power."

"Yes," Vukovi agreed.

"Good," Tito said. He dropped the tablet onto the

table with a heavy thud. "Fear is a starting point. Respect must be earned."

He straightened his jacket, smoothing the lapels. He felt the phantom ache of his old injuries, but the pain was distant. The mind was clear. The board was set.

"Where do we begin?" Tito asked.

V u k o v i h a n d e d h i m a s m a l l , m a t t e - b
looked like a remote control, but it contained a secure communication link. "We begin with a message. A broadcast. Untraceable. It goes out to the dark corners of the web, to the encrypted channels used by the old guard and the new dissidents."

Tito took the device. It was light, insignificant in his hand. "What do I say?"

V u k o v i s m i l e d , a t h i n , d a n g e r o u s e x
nothing at first. Just a symbol. The five-pointed star. And a date. The date of the liberation of

Belgrade."

Tito looked at the device. A simple signal. A spark in the digital darkness.

"They will think it is a hoax," Tito said.

"Let them," Vukovi replied. "Let them mock. Let them wonder. The doubt is the seed. We just need to plant it."

Tito held the device up. He felt the weight of the 20th century pressing down on the 21st. He was a man out of time, a relic of concrete and ideology stepping into a world of glass and data.

"Let them wonder," Tito agreed. He pressed the button.

On the screen behind him, the map of the Balkans flickered. In the digital ether, a ghost began to stir.

CHAPTER 3: THE SIGNAL

The broadcast traveled through fiber-optic veins buried beneath the Adriatic seabed, leaped to satellites in geostationary orbit, and splintered into a million fragmented packets across the dark web. It was not a speech. It was not a manifesto. It was a sigil.

In a café in Ljubljana, a university student named Elena refreshed her encrypted feed. She was twenty-two, born long after the wars, yet she felt a

gnawing dislocation in her own country. Slovenia was a model EU citizen—clean, efficient, and affluent—but to Elena, it felt like a museum exhibit, perfectly preserved and utterly dead. Her screen blinked. A single image loaded, bypassing the usual ad-blockers and firewalls. A red, five-pointed star. Below it, a date: October 20, 1944.

Elena frowned. It was the date of the liberation of Belgrade, a holiday that had been quietly scrubbed from the national curriculum. She looked around the café. No one else seemed to notice. They were sipping expensive lattes, scrolling through shopping catalogs, living in the comfortable present. She saved the image. A cold shiver traced her spine.

In Banja Luka, in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia, a retired VRS officer named Goran sat in his dimly lit study. He was nursing a glass of rakija, staring at the news feed on his television. NATO

troops were conducting "stability exercises" fifty kilometers down the road. The sight of their armored vehicles made his hand shake with suppressed rage. His phone vibrated. An old, unregistered SIM card he kept for emergencies. He looked at the screen. The star. The date.

Goran set his glass down. He leaned forward, his breath fogging the screen. He had seen the star on flags during the siege of Sarajevo, on patches of the old JNA uniforms. He had buried friends who fought under that symbol. To see it now, appearing from nowhere in the digital ether... He traced the outline of the star with a calloused thumb. "Impossible," he whispered. But the seed of doubt took root in the barren soil of his nostalgia.

In a high-rise apartment in Belgrade, overlooking the Danube, Milos, a mid-level executive at a Serbian energy conglomerate, was reviewing quarterly losses.

His company was bleeding money, forced to buy Russian gas at inflated rates while Western sanctions choked their access to capital markets. He was a man of the new world—pragmatic, cynical, devoid of ideology. Yet, he felt the humiliation of his nation keenly.

His secure work email, usually reserved for sensitive contracts, pinged. There was no sender address. Just the attachment. He opened it. The star. The date.

Milos stared at it. It wasn't a threat. It wasn't a demand. It was a question mark made of red light. Who had the access to penetrate these systems? Who had the audacity? He minimized the window, but the image burned in his mind. He thought of the Russian executives who treated his boardroom like a vassal court. He thought of the EU regulations that strangled their exports. For the first time in years, he considered the possibility of a third option.

Back in the sterile facility in Sector 7, Tito watched

the reaction metrics on a large display. Tito stood beside him, analyzing the data streams.

"Latency is high in the West," Vukov said. "Croatian and Slovenian intelligence firewalls caught the packet immediately, but they can't trace the source. They're classifying it as a ghost signal. A prank."

"And in the East?" Tito asked. He was sitting in a high-backed chair, his hands resting on the armrests. He looked like a statue of himself.

"Serbia and Bosnia are different," Vukov said. "The signal bypassed the standard ISP filters. It used legacy protocols, backdoors left over from the days when our intelligence agencies had priority. It's being shared on private networks. Encrypted chats. Darknet forums."

"Reaction?"

"Confusion," Vukov said. "Disbelief."

curiosity."

Tito nodded slowly. "Good. Confusion is the precursor to awakening. When the narrative is absolute, people sleep. When a crack appears in the story they are told, they wake up."

He looked at the map of the region. The blue zones of NATO and the EU seemed to pulse with a steady, arrogant light. The red line of Russian influence stretched down from the north. In the center, Bosnia flickered like a dying bulb.

"The Consortium is asking for next ste

said. "They need to know you are operational. They are nervous. If the West traces this back to them..."

"Let them be nervous," Tito said. "Nerves keep you sharp." He stood up, testing his legs again. The strength was returning, day by day, hour by hour. The treatments were aggressive, experimental, but effective. "I need to see the city. Not on a screen. I

need to breathe the air."

Vukovi hesitated. "It is risky. Facial
ubiquitous. Even with the reconstruction of your
features..."

"We will go to the old quarters," Tito said. "Where
the concrete is still stained with history. Where the
cameras are old and the people have long
memories."

Vukovi tapped his tablet, consulting
protocols. "It will take an hour to arrange. A secure
vehicle. A route that avoids the main thoroughfares."

"Make it thirty minutes," Tito said. He walked to the
window and looked out at the sprawling city. The
sun was setting, casting long shadows across the
brutalist architecture. The glass towers caught the
light, gleaming like blades. But down below, in the
streets, the shadows were deep and old.

"Tonight," Tito said, "we walk among the ghosts."

Vukovi nodded, a flicker of somethi

respect in his eyes. He spoke into his comms unit, his voice low and urgent. The machinery of the operation whirred to life.

Tito turned back to the room. He adjusted his collar. He was no longer just a biological specimen in a lab. He was a signal. A virus in the system. And he was about to go mobile.

"The map," Tito said.

Vukovi handed him a folded piece of physical map, printed on heavy stock. "The route is marked."

Tito took it. He felt the texture of the paper, the weight of the ink. It was real. Tangible. Unlike the holograms and screens that had governed his awakening.

"Let's go," Tito said. "It is time to remind the city who it belongs to."

CHAPTER 4: CONCRETE AND NEON

The air outside the facility was colder than the conditioned atmosphere of the lab, carrying the scent of diesel and distant rain. Tito sat in the back of an unmarked Audi A8, a vehicle designed to look like every other executive car in Belgrade but fitted with reinforced plating and run-flat tires. the front passenger seat, his eyes scanning the street through polarized glass. The driver, a silent man introduced only as Marko, navigated the labyrinthine

streets of New Belgrade.

Tito pressed his face to the window. The brutalist ghosts of the 1960s and 70s stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the glass-and-steel intrusions of the new millennium. He saw the Palace of Serbia, a monolithic slab of concrete that once housed the federal government, now dwarfed by the glass towers of foreign banks. The contrast was jarring—a clash of eras that felt less like evolution and more like a violent overwrite.

"The city has lost its center," Tito murmured. His voice was low, vibrating against the glass.

"It has new centers," Vukovi replied, the rearview mirror. "Financial centers.

Entertainment districts. The geography of power has shifted from the state to the corporation."

"Power is the only constant," Tito said. "It merely changes its clothes."

They turned onto a boulevard lined with linden trees.

The streetlights were modern LEDs, casting a harsh white light that bleached the color from the passing pedestrians. Tito watched the people. They walked fast, heads down, illuminated by the glow of their phones. He saw a group of young men standing near a kiosk, laughing loudly, wearing branded sportswear that cost more than a month's pension. He saw an elderly woman struggling with a bag of groceries, ignored by the rushing crowd.

"Stop here," Tito commanded.

Marko glanced at Vuković, who nodded and pulled over to the curb near a busy intersection. The engine hummed silently.

Tito opened his door. The noise of the city rushed in—honking horns, the thumping bass from a passing car, the electronic chime of a crosswalk signal. He stepped out onto the pavement, pulling his coat collar up against the chill. He stood for a moment, a man out

of time in a dark suit, looking incongruous against the backdrop of neon advertisements.

Vukovi exited the vehicle, moving to His hand rested casually inside his jacket, near his weapon. Marko remained behind the wheel, ready to move.

Tito began to walk. He didn't head toward the bright lights of the main thoroughfare, but turned down a side street that led into the older residential blocks. Here, the buildings were lower, the concrete stained gray by decades of exhaust and weather. Graffiti covered the walls—tags in Latin and Cyrillic, stylized art, political slogans that faded into illegibility.

He stopped before a mural painted on the side of a housing block. It depicted a partisan fighter, a woman with a rifle slung over her shoulder, her face fierce and determined. The paint was peeling, but the image

remained powerful. Tito reached out, his fingers brushing the rough surface.

"They remember," he whispered.

"Many have forgotten," Vuković countered, scanning the street. "To the youth, she is just art. Aesthetic, not ideology."

"Then we must remind them," Tito said. He turned away from the mural. "Take me to the bridge."

Vuković hesitated. "The Gazela? It is under surveillance."

"That is exactly why we go there," Tito said. "I need to see the flow. The arteries of the city."

They returned to the car and drove the short distance to the Gazela Bridge. The bridge was a relic of the socialist era, a concrete arch spanning the Sava River, connecting Old Belgrade with New Belgrade. It was choked with traffic, a river of red taillights stretching into the distance.

They parked in a lay-by on the approach to the bridge.

Tito got out again, walking to the railing. The wind off the river was strong, whipping at his coat. Below, the water was dark, reflecting the city lights in fractured shards.

On the bridge, the noise was deafening. The roar of engines, the screech of tires, the shouts of street vendors selling roasted corn and energy drinks. But Tito seemed to ignore it. He looked west, toward the hills of Novi Beograd where the massive federal buildings sat like sleeping giants.

"Look at them," Tito said, pointing to the rows of identical apartment blocks. "Millions of people, stacked in boxes. They work for foreign companies. They buy foreign goods. They consume foreign media. They are told they are free because they can choose between fifty brands of coffee."

Vukovi stood beside him, his posture what is the alternative, Marshal?"

Tito looked at him, his eyes reflecting the passing

headlights. "The alternative is agency. The ability to choose one's own destiny, not just one's own consumer goods."

A police car siren wailed in the distance, growing louder. Vukovi stiffened. "We have long. The facial recognition algorithms in this sector are aggressive. They will flag us."

Tito didn't move immediately. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the polluted air of the city he once ruled. He felt the vibration of the bridge through the soles of his shoes. It was real. It was alive.

"Let them see," Tito said softly.

"Marshal?"

"Not my face," Tito clarified. He turned back to the car. "Not yet. But the idea. The star is in the air. Now, we feed it."

He slid back into the Audi. Vukovi

signaling Marko to drive.

"Where to?" Marko asked.

"Back to the facility," Vukovi ordered.

"No," Tito interjected. He pulled the matte-black device from his pocket. "To the safe house in Zemun. I have a message to record."

Vukovi looked at him, alarmed. "Recording is too risky. The metadata—"

"I am not recording a video," Tito said. He typed a command into the device. A simple text interface appeared on the small screen. "I am writing a letter. A manifesto. We will distribute it through the same channels as the star."

"A manifesto?" Vukovi asked. "In 2022 spans are seconds."

"Then every word must be a hammer," Tito replied. He began to type, his fingers moving with surprising speed. "We don't need to reach everyone. We just need

to reach the right ones. The ones who are already looking for a way out."

He paused, looking up at the passing cityscape. The neon signs of Western fast-food chains blurred into streaks of light.

"We start with the economy," Tito said, continuing to type. "We expose the debt. We show them the leash they wear around their necks. And then... we offer to cut it."

Vukovi watched the Marshal's profile window. The man was no longer a patient or a specimen. He was a catalyst. And the reaction was just beginning.

"Send it," Tito said, handing the device.

Vukovi took it. The screen glowed with brutal text. It was signed with a single letter: T.

He pressed the transmit key. The message vanished into the digital ether, seeking out the disenchanted

student, the retired soldier, the pragmatic executive.
Seeking out the ghosts.

The Audi merged onto the highway, speeding away from the city center, leaving the lights and the noise behind. But the signal remained, echoing in the dark.

CHAPTER 5: THE ARCHITECTURE OF DEBT

The safe house in Zemun was a relic of a different kind, a narrow townhouse squeezed between a vape shop and a Turkish bakery. Its facade was crumbling plaster, its windows shuttered with rotting wood. Inside, however, the air was cool and filtered. The Consortium had stripped the interior down to concrete and steel, turning the residential shell into a hardened digital bunker.

Tito sat at a metal desk, the matte-black device

projecting a holographic interface onto the wall. The
light cast his face in a harsh, blue glow
paced the room, checking the perimeter sensors.

Marko stood guard by the door, a compact
submachine gun hanging loosely at his side.

"The manifesto has reached three thousand devices,"

Vukovi reported, looking at his tablet
"Engagement is high in Bosnia and Serbia. Low in
Slovenia and Croatia—their firewalls are sanitizing
the content before it reaches the endpoint."

"Sanitizing," Tito scoffed, not looking away from
the hologram. "They call it curation. It is censorship
dressed in the language of safety." He tapped a key,
and the hologram shifted to a complex web of
financial flows. Arrows connected Belgrade to
Moscow, Ljubljana to Brussels, Sarajevo to Berlin.

"This is the map that matters," Tito said. "Not the
borders drawn by diplomats, but the pathways of

capital."

The hologram displayed the external debt of the former Yugoslav republics. It was a staggering figure, a mountain of interest payments and structural adjustment loans. Slovenia and Croatia, despite their EU prosperity, were leveraged to the hilt. Serbia was entangled in Russian energy contracts that functioned as economic strangulation. Bosnia was a patchwork of international grants and predatory micro-loans.

"Look at this," Tito pointed to a thick, pulsing line connecting Belgrade to the European Investment Bank. "Serbia is borrowing from the West to pay the Russians. It is a tripartite trap. The West bleeds them dry through debt, the East controls them through energy. They fight over the scraps while the state dissolves."

"It is the reality of the 21st century.
"Sovereignty is a commodity. If you cannot afford it,

you rent it."

"Then we will default on the lease," Tito said. He zoomed in on a specific dataset—a list of infrastructure projects financed by foreign capital. The Belgrade-Niš highway, the Port of Bar, the energy grid in Republika Srpska. "These are not developments. They are liens. They are collateral." He stood up, the hologram distorting as he moved through it. "The Consortium believes they can buy my loyalty with funding and technology. They think I am a mercenary for their nationalistic dreams. They are wrong."

"Then what is the objective?" Vuković stopping his pacing. "If not to restore the Serbian state to its former glory?"

Tito turned to him, his eyes cold. "The objective is to dissolve the cages. The EU cage. The Russian cage. The NATO cage. I do not want to build a stronger

Serbia. I want to make the borders irrelevant again."

He returned to the desk and pulled up a new window. It showed live surveillance feeds from across the region. A protest in Sarajevo against IMF austerity measures. A rally in Podgorica demanding NATO withdrawal. A quiet, candlelit vigil in Zagreb for a forgotten partisan hero.

"The signal is waking them up," Tito said. "But they are waking up in separate rooms. We need to connect the doors."

He typed a command, opening a secure channel to the Consortium leadership. The text scrolled rapidly across the screen, encrypted and compressed.

"Message draft," Tito dictated. "The debt is unsustainable. The alliances are predatory. The people are restless. We will not attack the armies at the gates. We will rot the foundations of the house they live in."

He paused, his finger hovering over the enter key.

"Specifics?" Vukovi asked. "They w

specifics."

Tito smiled, a thin, dangerous expression. "We start with the energy sector in Bosnia. The grid is divided between Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian operators. It is inefficient, expensive, and dependent on foreign imports. We expose the corruption in the contracts. We offer a unified, state-controlled energy grid. Free from Russian gas and German capital."

"That will provoke a reaction," Vuković

"The Russians will not sit idle while we cut their pipeline."

"Let them react," Tito said. "Reaction reveals intent. We need to know who will move first."

He pressed enter. The message vanished, traveling through the dark web to the Consortium's servers in Belgrade.

Outside, the sounds of Zemun drifted through the ventilation system—the call to prayer from a mosque,

the clatter of dishes from the bakery, the distant thumping of bass from a passing car. It was a cacophony of cultures and histories, layered over one another.

Tito walked to the window, peering through a slit in the shutters. The street was empty save for a stray dog rummaging through a trash bin.

"The Consortium wants a figurehead," Tito said quietly, to himself as much as to Vukovski. They wanted a symbol to rally the masses. They wanted a return to the past."

He turned back to the room. The holographic map still glowed on the wall, a web of light and shadow.

"I am not a return to the past," Tito said. "I am a correction to the present. And the present is a failed experiment."

He sat back down, his hands clasped on the desk.

"Prepare the next signal. This time, we don't send an image. We send a question."

"A question?" Vukovski asked.

"Yes," Tito said. "A simple one. 'Who do the banks

serve?"

Vukovi nodded, entering the command tablet. "It will be sent to the Digital Ghosts. The disenchanted. The pragmatists."

"Good," Tito said. He looked at the map of the Balkans, fractured and bleeding light. "Let the people ask the questions. The answers will bring them to us."

CHAPTER 6: THE DIGITAL SEANCE

The silence in the bunker was heavy, broken only by the low hum of the server racks and the rhythmic tapping of Vuković's fingers on the tablet. Tito sat motionless, watching the holographic map. The web of debt pulsed with a faint, sickly light, a visual representation of the region's suffocation. He had sent his question into the digital ether: Who do the banks serve?

For ten minutes, there was nothing. checked

the encryption relays, his brow furrowed. "The signal is out," he confirmed. "But silence is the standard response. Most people are afraid to answer."

"People are not afraid to answer," Tito corrected, his eyes fixed on the wall. "They are afraid to be the first to answer. They wait for the echo."

As if on cue, a soft chime emanated from the main terminal. It wasn't the aggressive buzz of an intrusion alert, but the melodic ping of an incoming data packet. Then another. And another.

Vuković leaned in, his expression shifting skepticism to alarm. "It's not a response," he said, his voice tight. "It's a cascade."

On the holographic map, tiny points of light began to ignite across the region. They started in the refugee camps of Sarajevo and the rust-belt towns of Serbia, spreading rapidly to the university dorms of Ljubljana and the corporate offices of Zagreb. The Digital

Ghosts were waking up.

Tito stood and walked toward the projection. The data streams were raw, unfiltered text messages and audio clips relayed through a mesh network of burner phones and VPNs. He magnified a cluster of signals originating from Mostar.

The banks serve the debt, the text read. And the debt serves the creditors.

Another from Belgrade, this one an audio file. Tito tapped it, and a young, weary voice filled the room. "They serve the EU commission in Brussels and the oligarchs in Moscow. We are just the collateral damage."

"The sentiment is uniform," Tito noted, a grim satisfaction in his tone. "They see the trap. They just don't see the exit."

"The exit is what we are selling," Vu
watching the counter. The number of active listeners

had jumped from three thousand to fifteen thousand in under a minute. "But if the Consortium sees this volume of uncontrolled data..."

"Let them watch," Tito said. "They need to understand that I am not commanding an army. I am conducting a seance. I am raising the dead."

He turned to the terminal and initiated a new transmission. This time, he didn't rely on text. He activated the audio codec of the safe house's secure line. He leaned close to the microphone, his voice dropping to that familiar, gravelly register that had once commanded a nation.

"Comrades," he began, the word feeling foreign and ancient on his tongue. "You ask who the banks serve. I tell you they serve the cage. The cage of borders. The cage of currency. The cage of debt."

He paused, letting the words settle. "You are told that the European Union offers prosperity. Yet you

work for wages that do not cover the rent. You are told that the Russian Federation offers protection. Yet your energy bills rise while your sovereignty evaporates. You are told that NATO offers security. Yet it places missiles on your soil while your cities crumble from within."

In the room, the air seemed to thicken. It stopped moving, captivated despite himself. Marko, the silent guard by the door, shifted his weight, his eyes flicking toward the Marshal.

"The old republics are dead," Tito continued. "Do not mourn them. They were cages of a different design. We must build something new. Something that does not require a passport to visit your neighbor. Something that does not require a loan to buy bread. We will not ask for permission to exist. We will simply exist."

He cut the feed. The silence returned, but it was charged now, electric.

"That was... direct," Vukovi said so

"It was necessary," Tito replied. "The Consortium

wants a slow burn. They want to manipulate the markets and force political change through economic pressure. They are too slow. The region is a powder keg, and the fuse is burning down. We need to control the explosion, not wait for it."

He pulled up the secure channel to the Consortium. The response to his previous message about the Bosnian energy sector was waiting. It was terse, demanding clarification on the timeline for the "provocation."

Tito typed a reply, his fingers flying across the keys. Timeline is now. Initiate Phase One: expose the Sarajevo energy contracts. Leak the documents to the Digital Ghosts. Let the people see who profits from their darkness.

He hit send.

Vukovi looked at him. "They won't like it bypassed. They prefer to control the narrative."

"The narrative is no longer theirs to control," Tito

said. He walked back to the holographic map, which now showed a glowing line connecting Sarajevo to Belgrade and Zagreb. The energy grid. A fragile, interdependent system.

"Tomorrow," Tito said, "the lights go out in Sarajevo. Not because we cut the power, but because the people will demand to know why they are paying for it. And when the lights go out, the foreign powers will panic. They will show their hands."

He looked at Vukovi, his eyes burning with the intensity of a man who had seen the future and found it wanting.

"Prepare the drone," Tito said. "We need eyes on the ground when the spark hits."

Vukovi nodded, moving to a locked cabinet and opening it, revealing a sleek, commercial-grade drone folded into a compact case. "It's ready. But what are we looking for?"

Tito stared at the map, at the glowing arteries of

power and control.

"We are looking for the leash," he said. "And we are going to pull it."

CHAPTER 7: THE WHITE RIVER

The drone ascended silently into the pre-dawn haze, its electric rotors a whisper against the deepening grey of the Balkan sky. Inside the Zemun bunker, the air was cold and sterile, smelling of ozone and old concrete. Tito stood before the main holographic display, his hands clasped behind his back in a posture of military rigidness. The feed from the drone flickered to life, painting the wall with a high-definition, first-person view of the city below. Sarajevo unfolded beneath the lens like a scar in the

mountains. The layout was a geometry of history, the Ottoman old town pressed tight against the Austro-Hungarian grid, encircled by the brutalist high-rises of the socialist era and the glass-and-steel boxes of the new money.

"Altitude two hundred meters," Vuković said from the control station. He was hunched over a tactical console, his fingers dancing across the haptic interface. "We are over the Miljacka River. The city is waking up."

On the display, headlights traced the contours of the valley. The city's energy consumption was visible in the thermal overlay—a pulsing heat map of residential blocks and commercial districts. Tito had ordered the drone to focus on the Sarajevo Energy Distribution Center, a nondescript concrete complex in the Novi Grad district.

"Has the Consortium deployed the data packet?"

Tito

asked, his eyes never leaving the image.

"Deployed five minutes ago," Vuković

"It's hitting the Ghost network now. The files are encrypted, but the keys were distributed to key influencers. The corruption is... extensive. Predatory pricing, kickbacks to politicians in both entities, hidden clauses favoring Russian gas imports over local hydro."

"It's not an energy grid," Tito murmured. "It's a siphon."

He watched the city. For a long moment, nothing changed. The traffic flowed. The streetlights burned. The city hummed with its usual, oblivious rhythm. Then, the first ripple appeared.

On the thermal map, a cluster of lights in the Stari Grad sector flickered and died. Not a power outage, but a voluntary shutdown. The lights in the government housing blocks went dark, one by one. "Social media is lighting up," Marko said from his

post by the door, monitoring a separate tablet.

"Hashtags in Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian.

#R a u n . T h e b i l l . #I z d a j a . B e t r a y a l . "

"The spark is catching," Tito said.

He zoomed the drone camera in on the main boulevard, Marshal Tito Street—renamed a dozen times since his death, but the locals still knew it by the old name. Crowds were gathering. They weren't the organized militias of the nineties; they were students, factory workers, pensioners. They held up tablets and phones, displaying the leaked contracts on their screens. They weren't chanting nationalist slogans. They were chanting numbers. The prices. The debts.

"Look at them," Tito said softly. "They don't want a new flag. They want to keep the lights on without selling their future."

A police line formed near the energy center, but the officers looked uncertain. Their riot shields were

down. The digital truth was harder to fight than a physical enemy.

Suddenly, a new icon blinked on Vuk Red. Urgent.

"Signal intercept," Vukovi said, his "High-level encryption. It's not local police. It's external."

"Trace it," Tito ordered.

"I'm trying. It's bouncing through a NATO relay in Brussels, then a private server in Vienna... it's a ghost signal, Marshal. But the payload is massive. It's a kill switch."

"A kill switch?"

"For the drone," Vukovi said. "They the guidance system."

On the holographic wall, the drone's feed glitched violently. Static tore through the image of the street. The drone pitched sideways, the camera

spinning wildly, showing a blur of grey sky and concrete.

"Countermeasures!" Tito barked.

Vukovi slammed a command into the comms. "Deploying electronic countermeasure drone. It's a localized EMP burst. It should buy us thirty seconds."

The feed stabilized, but the image had changed. The police line was breaking, not from the crowd, but from the arrival of new vehicles. Black SUVs with diplomatic plates. Men in suits and tactical vests emerged, speaking urgently into earpieces. They weren't local. They were contractors. Private security.

"Who are they?" Marko asked, squinting at the screen.

"Western," Tito said. "German or American. Likely contracted by the energy consortium to protect their assets."

The men moved with lethal efficiency. They weren't

engaging the crowd. They were securing the perimeter of the energy center, forming a hard shell around the building.

"They are isolating the target," Tito observed. "They aren't trying to suppress the riot. They are protecting the infrastructure."

"Because the infrastructure is the key," Tito realized.

"Exactly," Tito said. "If they lose control of the grid, they lose control of the country. It's not about politics. It's about the flow of capital."

The drone's battery warning flashed. The EMP countermeasures were draining power fast.

"We have to pull it back," Vuković said.
"No," Tito said. "Move it closer. Over the river. I want to see the bridge."

The drone banked sharply, the camera tilting down to the narrow, stone arches of the Latin Bridge. A

motorcade was arriving. Three armored limousines, flanked by police motorcycles.

"License plates," Tito commanded.

Vukovi enhanced the image. The plate Serbian diplomatic. But the security detail was Russian.

"It's the Consortium," Vukovi breathed on the ground."

"Or a proxy," Tito corrected. "Watch."

The motorcade stopped. A man exited the lead vehicle. He wore a heavy overcoat despite the mild weather. He looked up, directly at the drone, as if he knew it was there. He smiled.

"That's General Dragan Mili," Vukovi reading the facial recognition data. "Head of the Consortium's security council. He's supposed to be in Belgrade."

"He's here to manage the fallout," Tito said. "To ensure the chaos stays contained within the energy sector and doesn't spill over into a genuine

uprising."

The man on the bridge raised a hand. Not in a wave, but a signal.

A second later, the drone's feed cut to black.

"Connection lost," Vukovi said. "They signal back. They know we're watching."

Tito stood in the sudden darkness of the bunker, the only light coming from the server racks. The silence was heavy.

"They saw the reaction," Vukovi said moved to protect the asset. The Consortium moved to manage the narrative. The cage is reinforced."

Tito turned away from the dead screen. He walked to the window, peering out at the grey light of morning creeping over the rooftops of Zemun.

"They moved too quickly," Tito said. "They revealed their coordination. The West and the Consortium... they dance to the same tune, even if they wear

different shoes."

He turned back to the room, his face set in stone.

"They think they have contained the spark," Tito said. "But they have only shown us where the fuse is buried."

He sat down at the desk, the holographic map reactivating around him. The lights of Sarajevo were still flickering, but the energy center remained lit, guarded by the black SUVs.

"Phase One is complete," Tito declared. "We have the reaction. Now we analyze the trajectory."

He pulled up the encrypted channel to the Consortium. The message from Mili was waiting.

Cease operations. You are destabilizing the sector.

Tito typed a reply, his fingers steady.

I am not destabilizing the sector. I am exposing the rot. The people are awake. Can you say the same?

He sent it.

"Pack the gear," Tito told Vuković. "We

Zemun. They know where we are."

"Where are we going?" Vuković asked.
dismantle the servers.

Tito looked at the map, his eyes settling on the glowing line of the border between Serbia and Bosnia.

"To the border," Tito said. "If they want to contain the fire, we will give them a new front. We are going to Republika Srpska."

CHAPTER 8: THE GRAY ZONE

The journey was a descent into the past. They traveled in a modified van, its interior stripped of comfort and loaded with signal-jamming equipment and server racks. Vukovi drove, his hands on the wheel, his eyes on the road. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Marko rode shotgun, a compact assault rifle resting across his lap, wrapped in a nondescript blanket. Tito sat in the back, bathed in the cool blue light of a portable tactical map. They crossed the Sava River at dawn, moving from the

flat plains of Serbia into the rolling, forested hills of Bosnia. The border crossing was a formality. The guards were bored, underpaid, and easily distracted by the counterfeit documents provided by the Consortium's network. They waved the van through without a second glance. To them, it was just another commercial vehicle hauling electronics.

The landscape changed. The sleek, modernized infrastructure of Belgrade gave way to the scarred, post-war aesthetic of the Bosnian countryside. Abandoned factories stood like skeletal remains against the sky. New, garish billboards advertising Turkish telecommunications and Austrian insurance policies were plastered over bullet-pocked walls. The fusion of the past and present was jarring—a digital overlay on a wound that had never fully healed.

"We are entering the gray zone," Vukovic said, voice low. "No NATO rapid reaction force here. No EU

border patrol. Just local police and whatever paramilitaries the Consortium has paid off."

"And the people?" Tito asked, looking out the tinted window at a passing village. Children played near a shell-shocked mosque. Old men sat on benches, watching the road with vacant eyes.

"Desperate," Vukovi replied. "Republika is economically strangled. They rely on Belgrade for subsidies, but Belgrade is beholden to Moscow. The money dries up, the lights flicker. It's the perfect breeding ground."

Tito nodded. "Good. We do not need converts. We need arsonists."

Their destination was a decommissioned Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) barracks outside of Bijeljina. It was a concrete monolith from the 1970s, surrounded by a high wall topped with rusting razor wire. It was the perfect place to hide in plain sight—a relic of the

old order rotting away while the new order ignored it.

As the van crunched over the gravel of the courtyard, a figure emerged from the main entrance. He was tall, wearing a tailored suit that looked out of place against the decaying concrete. He smoked a thin cigarette, the smoke curling up into the cold morning air.

"General Mili's man," Vukovi noted. Petrovi. Intelligence liaison."

The van stopped. Tito stepped out, his posture rigid, instantly commanding the space. Petrovi approached, his expression unreadable.

"Marshal," Petrovi said, extending a hand. "Welcome to the Republic. I trust your journey was uneventful."

Tito ignored the hand. "Is the facility secure?"

Petrovi retracted his hand without speaking. "It is. We've installed Faraday shielding in the main command center. No signals in or out unless we want

them. It's a tomb, Marshal. A very quiet tomb."

"Quiet is good," Tito said, walking toward the entrance. "But not for long. Has the Consortium received my request?"

"regarding Republika Srpska?" Petro
step beside him. "They are hesitant.
you are moving too fast. He thinks you are trying to
ignite a civil war."

They entered the building. The air inside was stale,
smelling of mildew and old cement. The corridors
were lit by bare bulbs, casting long, jagged shadows.

"Civil war is inevitable if the pressure remains," Tito
said, his voice echoing. "I am merely aiming to
direct the blast. If we do not fracture the current
alignment, the West will absorb everything. They
will turn the Balkans into a single, compliant
market. A colony of the EU."

They reached the command center. It was a large,

circular room with a domed ceiling. In the center sat a new array of servers and holographic projectors, wired into the building's ancient power grid.

"The problem," Petrovi said, stopping "is that the people here are tired. They fought a war for this republic. They won it. Now they are watching it die of economic asphyxiation. They don't want a revolution; they want a paycheck."

"Then we will give them one," Tito said. He walked to the map display. It showed the energy grid of Republika Srpska—a patchwork of local generators and transmission lines feeding into the larger Bosnian-Serbian network.

Petrovi watched him. "How?" Tito turned to Vukovi. "Bring up the Serbian gas subsidies. The ones that flow through the Banja Luka pipeline."

Vukovi tapped his tablet. A complex w

transfers appeared on the wall.

"The Consortium provides the funding for my return," Tito said, pointing to a thick red line on the map. "That funding comes from Russian gas sales to Serbia. A portion of that revenue is siphoned off to prop up Republika Srpska. It's a trickle-down effect. A leash."

"A leash we share," Petrovi corrected. "A leash we will cut," Tito countered. He looked at Petrovi, his eyes hard. "I want you regarding the pipeline maintenance contracts. Show the people of Banja Luka that their heating bills are being inflated to pay for luxury condos in Moscow. Show them that their 'independence' is being purchased with their own poverty."

Petrovi hesitated. "That will anger Moscow."

"Good," Tito said. "Let them be angry. Anger is a

fuel. Right now, the Consortium is trying to steer the anger toward the EU and NATO. I want it directed at the puppet masters in Belgrade and their handlers in the Kremlin."

He stepped closer to the hologram, his hand passing through the light of the Serbian border.

"We are going to create a paradox," Tito whispered. "We will use the tools of the West—the digital leaks, the social media—to disrupt the Eastern alliance. We will make the Consortium choose: control the narrative, or control the money."

Suddenly, the lights in the room flickered and died. The hologram vanished, plunging the room into darkness, save for the red glow of emergency exit signs.

The hum of the servers stopped.

"What is this?" Marko barked, his rifle snapping up.

P e t r o v i p u l l e d o u t h i s p h o n e , t h e s c r e

his face. He tapped it, his expression darkening.

"Power grid failure," he said. "Localized to this sector. Not a blackout. A targeted shutdown."

Tito didn't move in the dark. He smiled, a grim, predatory expression in the gloom.

"They are testing us," he said. "The Consortium is flexing its muscle. They think if they cut the power, they cut our connection."

The emergency lights hummed to life, casting the room in a sickly green pallor.

"They are wrong," Tito said. "We don't need the grid. We have the message. And the message is already in the air."

H e t u r n e d t o P e t r o v i .

"Send the leak," Tito ordered. "Send it now. Let the lights stay off. The darkness will make the truth shine brighter."

CHAPTER 9: THE SILENT UPLOAD

The emergency lights cast long, skeletal shadows across the command center, turning the sleek technology into monoliths of obsidian. The silence was absolute, stripped of the hum of cooling fans and the whir of hard drives. It was a silence that felt heavy, pressurized, like the moments before a storm breaks.

Petrovi stood frozen, the glow of his hands highlighting the tension in his jaw. "The data packet is queued," he said, his voice tight. "But without the

grid, we can't maintain the upload to the Ghost network. The Consortium's servers rely on the local fiber backbone. If the line is cut, the packet will die in the ether."

"Then we bypass the backbone," Tito said, stepping toward the dark server racks. He ran a hand over the cold metal casing. "We go direct. Satellite uplink."

Marko shifted his weight, his boots crunching on dust. "Satellite requires line-of-sight to the dish. If the power is out, the tracking motors are dead. We'd have to aim it manually."

"Then aim it," Tito commanded. He looked at Vukovi. "Can you hardwire the upload to the dish transmitter? Bypass the internal routing?"

Vukovi nodded, already moving toward the rear of the room. "I can splice the server output directly into the dish's baseband processor. It won't be pretty, and we'll burn out the transmitter if we

push too much bandwidth, but we can get the packet out in one burst."

"Do it," Tito ordered.

Petrovi stepped forward, blocking V Marshal, think about the consequences. If we force this upload through a raw satellite burst, we leave a massive signature. The Consortium's techs will see it. So will the Russians. They'll know exactly where we are. We'll lose the advantage of the gray zone. We'll be a target."

Tito loomed over the intelligence liaison, his height and posture imposing even in the dim light. "The advantage of the gray zone is already compromised, Petrovi. The power didn't fail by accident. Someone knew we were here. They cut the cord to see if we would panic. To see if we would retreat." He leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper that cut through the tension.

"If we retreat, we validate their control. If we go

silent, we prove that we are merely another asset to be managed. We must show them that we operate on a different level of logic. We do not react to the blackout; we weaponize it."

Tito turned to Vukovi and Marko. "Get the dish on the roof. Petrovi, prep the package for broadcast."

Petrovi hesitated, then stepped aside, his fingers drumming furiously on his tablet. "I'm stripping the encryption headers. We need to send it as a raw data stream to maximize speed. It will be open to interception for the three seconds it's in the air."

"Three seconds is enough," Tito said. "The influencers are waiting. Once the file hits the network, it will replicate through the mesh before the Consortium can scrub it."

Vukovi and Marko moved with practiced efficiency. They grabbed a heavy cable spool and a toolkit, heading for the rusted stairwell that led to the roof.

Tito remained in the command center while the others prepared.

room felt colder now, the lack of airflow making the stale smell of the old barracks overpowering.

"You are playing a dangerous game," quietly, not looking up from his screen values stability. You are introducing volatility."

"Stability is a synonym for stagnation," Tito replied, watching the holographic map flicker weakly on battery backup. "Look at this region. It has been 'stable' for thirty years. A stalemate between Brussels and Moscow. A slow strangulation of the economy. The people are numb. To wake them up, you must shock the system."

"And if the shock kills the patient?"

"Then the patient was already dead," Tito said. "We are merely conducting the autopsy."

Up on the roof, the wind was biting. The sky was a bruised purple, the stars hidden behind a layer of high cloud. Vukovi wrestled with the of the satellite dish, his breath pluming in the cold.

"Left two degrees," Marko called out, holding a

handheld GPS unit. "Elevation is good. We need to catch the bird before it moves over the horizon."

"I'm splicing the cable now," Vukovi stripping wires with his teeth and connecting them to the makeshift rig. "Powering up the transmitter... it's drawing raw current from the van's battery bank. We have maybe five minutes before the battery drains."

"Do it," Marko said, scanning the perimeter of the compound. The darkness was total, broken only by the faint glow of Bijeljina in the distance. "We're exposed up here."

Back inside, Tito stood over Petrovi's screen. The screen displayed the data packet: a dense block of financial corruption, detailing how Serbian gas subsidies were being funneled into offshore accounts while heating bills in Banja Luka tripled. It was irrefutable, damning, and lethal to the current political order.

"Transmit signal detected," Vukovi crackled

over the comms. "We are live. Thirty seconds to burn."

"Do it," Tito said.

On the screen, a progress bar appeared. 1%. 5%. It crawled.

"The Consortium is pinging us," Petr

"They're trying to shut down the satellite uplink protocol."

"Override," Tito said.

"I can't. They have the master keys."

"Then crash the session," Tito ordered. "Force the upload through a brute force command. Burn the bridge if you have to."

Petrovi's fingers flew. He bypassed protocols, forcing the data stream through a raw port. The progress bar jumped. 40%. 60%.

The lights in the room flickered violently, then surged. The holographic map flared bright white before dissolving into static.

"Power surge," Petrovi shouted. "The

current back into the line!"

"Keep pushing," Tito growled.

The server racks screamed as the processors overheated. The smell of ozone filled the room, sharp and electric.

90%. 95%.

On the roof, Vukovi watched the trans glow red hot. "It's going to melt!"

100%.

"Upload complete," Petrovi gasped, pushing hands back from the console as sparks showered from the port.

Immediately, the room plunged back into total darkness. The emergency batteries had failed. The servers died.

Silence returned, heavier than before.

Tito stood motionless in the black, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. The only sound was the ragged breathing

of the two men and the wind howling outside.

"The packet is gone," Petrovi said, trembling slightly. "It's out there."

"Check the network," Tito said calmly. "Use the hardline to the van. See if the influencers are acknowledging receipt."

Petrovi fumbled in the dark for a cable, his tablet to the external antenna. A small, pale light illuminated his face as the screen booted up.

He scrolled through the encrypted channels. The silence stretched.

Then, he stopped. A small smile touched his lips, though it didn't reach his eyes.

"It's spreading," he said. "The hashtags are trending in Banja Luka. The local news aggregator in East Sarajevo just picked up the headline. The leak is verified."

Tito nodded once in the darkness. "Good."

"And the Consortium?" Petrovi asked.
we tell

M i l i ? "

Tito turned toward the stairwell, listening to the heavy footsteps of Vukovi and Marko

"We tell him nothing," Tito said. "We let the data speak for itself. The blackout was meant to silence us. Instead, it has illuminated the truth."

He walked toward the exit, the faint light from the tablet screens tracing his silhouette.

"Pack the primary gear," Tito ordered. "We move to the secondary location in the morning. The Consortium will send someone to investigate the power failure. I do not wish to be here when they arrive."

"And the people?" Marko asked, checking the magazine of his rifle. "Will they act?"

Tito paused at the doorway, looking back at the dark room where the seeds of chaos had just been sown.

"They are cold," Tito said. "And they are angry. That is enough. The fire will start without our help. We

only need to fan the flames."

CHAPTER 10: THE ECHO CHAMBER

The extraction vehicle was a battered Audi A6, its windows tinted to a shade just legal enough to avoid police scrutiny in the Republika Srpska, but dark enough to obscure the faces within. They left the barracks ten minutes after the upload, abandoning the van in a ditch a kilometer away to confuse the approaching Consortium team.

Vukovi drove, navigating the unlit roads with practiced ease. The landscape was a void of blackness,

punctuated only by the occasional farmhouse light, flickering on generator power.

Marko sat in the back, monitoring a frequency scanner. "Encrypted police channels are lighting up," he murmured. "Mili's people are moving unmarked sedans, approaching from the south.

They'll find the barracks in twenty minutes."

"Let them," Tito said. He sat in the front passenger seat, staring out at the darkness. "They will find a cold server room and a spent battery. Nothing to link us to the upload."

"The Consortium won't be happy about the power surge," Petrovi said from the back, typing on a ruggedized laptop. "We fried three servers and the primary satellite transmitter. That's expensive equipment."

"Consider it a necessary cost of doing business," Tito replied without looking back. "Mili understand that I am not a subordinate to be managed.

I am a force of nature. If he tries to choke the supply of resources, I will burn the infrastructure."

They turned onto the main highway toward Bijeljina. The city was a haze of light pollution on the horizon. The road was empty, save for a heavy truck rumbling north.

Petrovi's laptop pinged. He leaned over the screen. "We have movement on the narrative front. The data packet is decrypting across local networks. It's not just the hashtag anymore. The local heating cooperatives are posting raw numbers."

"Show me," Tito said.

Petrovi rotated the laptop. A visual network traffic appeared—a map of Republika Srpska glowing with red nodes. "The leak highlights the discrepancy between the subsidized gas price from Moscow and the retail price charged to households in Banja Luka. The markup is being attributed directly to

the Serbian Ministry of Energy and the local administration."

Tito studied the map. "The anger is shifting. It was directed outward—toward the EU, toward NATO. Now, it is directed inward. Toward Belgrade."

"And Moscow," Marko added. "If they see the Russian subsidy as the source of the corruption, they won't view the Kremlin as a protector. They'll view them as predators."

"Exactly," Tito said. "The West offers integration, which is slow and bureaucratic. Russia offers dependency, which is suffocating. I am offering them something else."

"What is that?" Vuković asked, glancing at Petrović. "Self-determination," Tito said. "Or the illusion of it. Right now, they are angry at the wrong target. We need to pivot that anger."

Petrović frowned. "How? The data is clear."

to Serbian officials."

"The Serbian officials are merely the middlemen," Tito said. "We need to leak the secondary layer. The one you have access to, Petrović." Petrović stiffened. "The Consortium? The ones showing the coordination between Belgrade and the Russian FSB regarding energy distribution?"

"Those very files," Tito confirmed. "But we do not release them yet. We wait for the Consortium to react. Mili will try to suppress the will order the ISPs in Banja Luka to throttle the traffic. He will call the local police chiefs."

"You think he will intervene?" Marko asked.

"I know he will," Tito said. "Mili will controlled burn. He wants to destabilize the region enough to force a renegotiation of the power structures, but he doesn't want an explosion. He is trying to cook the frog slowly. I am turning up the heat."

They entered the outskirts of Bijeljina. The

streetlights were dim, many of them dark due to the grid instability. The city felt restless. Small groups of people stood outside apartment blocks, huddled together, looking at their phones.

"Park here," Tito ordered.

Vukovi pulled into a darkened side street of a residential complex. The air smelled of burning wood and diesel.

"Marko, watch the perimeter. Petrovi, connect to the vehicle's hotspot. I want to see the sentiment analysis."

Petrovi connected to the vehicle's hotspot. Anger is rising. The local forums are calling for protests at the municipal heating office. They are blaming the local mayor, a known ally of Belgrade."

"Good," Tito said. "But it is not enough. We need to connect the dots for them. We need to show that the mayor is not acting alone."

Suddenly, the laptop screen went black.

"Connection lost," Petrovi said, tapping the

"The ISP just cut the connection. Mi moving."

"He is trying to contain the narrative," Tito said. "He wants to keep the unrest local and manageable. He doesn't want it spreading to the rest of Bosnia or Serbia."

"We are blind," Marko said, looking at the scanner. "Police frequencies are jammed. We can't hear them coming."

"They aren't coming for us," Tito said. "They are coming to secure the area and scrub the data. We are no longer the priority. The narrative is."

"Then we move," Vukovi said, putting gear.

"No," Tito said. "We stay. We have one more move to make. Petrovi, can you access the emergency broadcast system?"

Petrovi looked at him, shocked. "The system? That's air-gapped. It requires physical access

to the central hub."

"Not if you have the master key," Tito said. "The Consortium has backdoors into all regional communication grids. I know Mili. He redundancy. Give me the comms."

Petrovi hesitated, then opened a secure his laptop. "I have a backdoor into the SMS gateway for Republika Srpska. It's a high-level override. It sends a blast message to every active phone in the region."

"Compose a message," Tito ordered. "Send it now."

"What does it say?" Petrovi asked, his hovering over the keyboard.

"Tell them," Tito said, his voice low and steady, "that the heating subsidies are being diverted to a bank in Cyprus. Give them the account number. Tell them the mayor knows. Tell them to look at the power grid. If the lights go out, it is not an accident. It

is theft."

Petrovi typed. "This is reckless, Ma direct call to action. Mili will seve "Mili is a soldier," Tito said. "He r If we show him that we can mobilize a city with a single text message, he will not cut us off. He will try to steer us. And that is when we will have him."

"Message ready," Petrovi said.

"Send it."

Petrovi hit enter. The progress bar : "Sent," he said.

They sat in silence for a moment. The city around them seemed to hold its breath.

Then, the sound began. It started as a low murmur, rising from the apartment blocks. Doors slammed. Voices raised. The sound of a thousand phones vibrating in unison.

"The fire is lit," Marko whispered.

Tito looked out the window. A streetlight flickered

and came back on, illuminating a growing crowd gathering in the intersection ahead.

"Drive," Tito said. "Take us to the border. We let the locals handle the rest."

Vukovi pulled away from the curb, me the night as the sounds of protest grew louder behind them.

CHAPTER 11: FRICTION

The Audi moved through the city's periphery like a shark in shallow water, silent and predatory. Behind them, the roar of the crowd swelled, a chaotic chorus of slamming doors and shouting voices. The SMS blast had acted as a chemical catalyst, stripping away the veneer of civic order and exposing the raw, economic resentment beneath.

Vukovi kept the speedometer steady kilometers an hour, navigating a route that avoided

the main squares where the protests were coalescing. He drove with his chin jutted forward, eyes scanning the mirrors for the tell-tale flash of blue lights or the distinct silhouette of a government-issue sedan.

"We have movement behind us," Marko said, his voice tight. He was angled in the back seat, looking through the rear windshield. "Black SUV. Tinted windows. No plates. It's not local police. Too heavy for a civilian vehicle."

Petrovi swiped through a satellite over tablet. "It matches the profile of the Consortium's rapid response team. Mili's men. They to arrest us. They're here to contain the blast radius."

"Let them try," Tito said. He remained calm, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. The city lights were giving way to the darkness of the countryside, the road stretching toward the Serbian border only kilometers away. "They are reacting to the symptom, not the

disease. By the time they secure the narrative here, the data will have propagated to Belgrade and Sarajevo."

"We have a roadblock," Vukovi announced, hands tightening on the wheel.

Ahead, the red glow of brake lights painted the asphalt. A cluster of local police vehicles formed a crude barrier, their officers visibly agitated, speaking into radios and gesturing toward the city center.

They were looking for instigators, for the source of the chaos.

"They're checking every vehicle," Marko said. "We can't bluff our way through. We have too much gear, and Petrović's face is on a watch list."

"Go around," Tito ordered.

"There is no around," Vuković said. "The marshland. The Audi will bog down in seconds."

Tito looked to his left. A narrow service road ran

parallel to the highway, separated by a rusted chain-link fence. It led toward an industrial zone that bordered the Sava River. "The fence. Break through it."

"Marshall, this car is a rental," Petrović said, though he was already bracing himself.

"Consider it a write-off," Tito replied.

Vuković didn't hesitate. He wrenched the wheel hard left. The heavy Audi mounted the curb, bucked violently, and slammed through the flimsy section of fencing. Metal shrieked against metal as the posts were ripped from the concrete. The car fishtailed on the muddy shoulder before Vuković wrenched it under control, accelerating down the potholed service road.

Behind them, the police at the checkpoint turned, flashlights sweeping the darkness. Shouts echoed, and the red and blue lights began to rotate as the patrol

cars reversed direction to pursue.

"They're on us," Marko shouted, checking the scanner. "They've radioed ahead. There's a patrol car stationed at the bridge intersection. We're boxed in."

"The bridge is the only way out of this sector," Vukovi said. "If they secure the approach, we'll be trapped between them and the river."

Tito analyzed the tactical geometry of the situation. The element of surprise was gone; the element of speed was all they had left. He looked at the glowing dashboard clock. "Time to border?"

"Five minutes if we run hot," Vukovi said. "If we don't make the bridge."

"Do you trust the vehicle's integrity?" Tito asked.

Vukovi glanced at the shattered window. "It's holding. Engine is strong."

"Then we don't stop for the bridge," Tito said. "We go through the blockade."

Petrovi looked up from his screen, his face

the blue light of the device. "That is suicide. They will ram us. They have authorized lethal force for containment."

"They will try to box us in," Tito said. "They will expect us to brake. They expect a negotiation. We give them acceleration."

They reached the intersection. The bridge loomed ahead, a concrete arch spanning the dark, sluggish waters of the Sava. A single police cruiser sat diagonally across the road, creating a bottleneck. Two officers stood behind it, weapons drawn but lowered, waiting for the Audi to slow down.

Vukovi didn't lift his foot off the accelerator. "Vukovi," Marko warned, gripping the door handle above the door.

"I see it," Vukovi gritted out. The distance closed rapidly: one hundred meters, fifty, twenty.

The officers shouted, raising their weapons.

"Brace," Tito said.

Vukovi jerked the wheel slightly to the left, aiming

for the narrow gap between the police cruiser's rear bumper and the concrete guardrail. At the last second, he cut the wheel hard left, using the momentum of the heavy German chassis to shove the lighter police car aside.

There was a sickening crunch of plastic and metal as the Audi's fender connected with the cruiser's rear quarter panel. The impact sent the police car spinning into the ditch. The Audi shuddered, the steering wheel fighting Vuković's grip line, bursting through the gap and onto the bridge. Gunshots cracked behind them—single, warning shots that pinged off the trunk lid.

"Everyone down," Marko yelled, sliding lower in his seat.

They sped across the bridge, the engine roaring. On the other side, the road split. To the left lay the border crossing into Serbia, well-lit and heavily

monitored. To the right, an unlit gravel track led into the dense woods of the border zone.

"Which way?" Vukovi shouted.

"The crossing is compromised," Tito said. "They will have alerted the border guards. We take the woods."

Vukovi wrenched the car right, tires sowing loose gravel as they plunged into the darkness of the tree line. The branches of overhanging oaks scraped along the roof and sides of the car like fingernails.

"Kill the headlights," Tito ordered.

The world went pitch black. Vukovi navigated by the faint glow of the dashboard instruments and the memory of the map. The car bounced violently over hidden ruts. Behind them, the police cruiser, its bumper hanging loose, stopped at the tree line, its lights sweeping the forest but unwilling to pursue into the terrain.

"We lost them," Marko breathed, looking back.

"For now," Tito said. "But the Consortium knows this

terrain. Mili will deploy drones. The
We need to abandon the vehicle."

Vukovi drove for another kilometer
ended at a dilapidated hunter's cabin. He cut the
engine. The silence of the forest rushed in, heavy
and complete.

They exited the car, the cold air biting instantly. Tito
stood by the open door, listening. Far in the distance,
the faint sound of sirens echoed, but they were
fading, heading toward the bridge and the city.

Petrovi leaned against the hood, exhaling
of steam. "We're alive."

Tito closed the car door gently. "We are operational.
There is a difference." He looked toward the north,
where the lights of Serbia were invisible but present.
"The chaos in Bijeljina is a distraction. It draws the
eyes of the Consortium and the local authorities.
While they look there, we move here."

"And what have we achieved?" Petrovi
rubbing

his hands together for warmth. "We've burned our access to the Consortium's grid. We've triggered a police manhunt. We've alienated Mili" "We have broken the narrative," Tito said. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, encrypted drive—the original source of the data leak. "For thirty years, the people of this region have been told who their enemies are. The West. The East. Their neighbors. Tonight, we showed them the true enemy is the corruption that sits in the city halls and parliament buildings, feeding on both sides."

He looked at the drive, then at his team.

"The protests in Bijeljina will be suppressed. The police will restore order. But the seed of doubt is planted. When the power goes out again—and it will—they will remember the message on their phones. They will remember that their suffering is not a geopolitical necessity, but a choice made by men in

suits."

Vukovi opened the trunk and began backpacks and weapons. "So, where do we go?"

Tito took a backpack from him, slinging it over his shoulder with practiced ease.

"We go to the source," Tito said. "Belgrade. The capital of the puppet state. If we want to reunite the fractured republics, we must first dismantle the chains that bind them to foreign masters. And that starts with cutting the leash in Belgrade."

He turned and began walking into the woods, his silhouette merging with the shadows.

"Follow me."

CHAPTER 12: GHOST IN THE MACHINE

The forest was a primal, suffocating darkness, distinct from the curated night of the city. Here, the absence of light was total, broken only by the faint, bioluminescent flicker of fungi clinging to damp bark and the occasional sweep of a distant searchlight piercing the canopy. They moved in a staggered file, boots sinking into the soft loam of the borderlands. The air hung heavy with the scent of pine resin and the metallic tang of impending snow. Tito led the march, his movements economical,

betraying none of the disorientation that should have accompanied a man waking from a decades-long stasis. He navigated by the magnetic pull of the terrain, his internal compass aligning with the topography of a land he had once commanded absolutely.

"Thermal scan," Marko whispered, halting abruptly. He unslung the compact drone from his pack, its rotors folded like a spider's legs. He launched it vertically, a silent ascent into the cold upper air. The feed appeared on his wrist-mounted display, a grainy monochrome map of the surrounding woods.

Tito stepped close, peering at the screen. "What do you see?"

"Two vehicles," Marko murmured. "Static at the border crossing. They've turned back. A third heat signature is moving parallel to the river, three kilometers east. Dogs."

"The Consortium," Petrovi said, his b

"They won't cross the border without diplomatic cover, but they'll coordinate with the Serbian Gendarmerie."

"They won't need dogs," Tito said, his eyes scanning the canopy. "They have satellites. The moment we abandoned the car, we became a data point. If we stay on a predictable trajectory, they will box us in."

"We need a hard break in our digital signature," Petrovi said, adjusting the straps of "My laptop is broadcasting a low-level handshake signal. Even encrypted, it's a footprint."

"Can you kill it?" Vukovi asked, checking safety on his suppressed MP5.

"Not without losing the decryption keys for the drive," Petrovi replied. "I need to make silence it."

Tito pointed toward a ridge rising to their left, its silhouette jagged against the star-dusted sky. "There. The electromagnetic interference from the old iron ore

mines. The geological surveys from the 1970s showed massive magnetic anomalies. It will blind their local sensors."

"That's a hard climb," Vukovi noted, steep incline.

"It's the only way to break the lock," Tito said.

"Move."

They ascended, the gradient forcing them onto all fours in places. The forest floor gave way to jagged slate and scree. As they climbed, the temperature dropped sharply. The distant hum of the search drones grew louder, a swarm of mechanical hornets hunting in the dark.

Halfway up the ridge, the interference wrist display dissolved into static snow. "We're in the dead zone," he confirmed, his voice tight with exertion. "Whatever is buried here, it's screaming."

"Good," Tito grunted, hauling himself over a lip of

rock. He stood atop the ridge, the wind whipping his coat. Below, the valley was a void. Above, the stars were brutally clear.

They rested for ten minutes, the silence broken only by the ragged sound of their breathing. Tito stood at the edge of the precipice, looking not back toward the border, but east, toward the distant glow of Belgrade.

"The Consortium thinks in terms of containment," Tito said, his voice carrying over the views the Balkans as a circuit board. He isolates the faults, repairs the connections, keeps the current flowing to the west. He thinks I am a short circuit."

"And you aren't?" Marko asked, reloading a magazine.

"I am the power surge," Tito replied. "Belgrade is the nexus. It is where the puppet strings converge. Serbia believes it plays a double game—balancing Brussels and Moscow. In reality, it is being squeezed from both sides. The Russians drain their resources through

'security partnerships,' and the EU delays their integration to keep them compliant. Belgrade is the key to unlocking the region, but not by attacking the government directly."

"How then?" Petrović asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

"By exposing the lie of sovereignty," Tito said. "We don't need to storm the parliament. We need to show the Serbian people that their government has already surrendered. We have the data, Petrović Consortium's internal memos regarding the energy subsidies. The FSB's direct instructions to the Ministry of Energy. We release it not to the world, but to the citizens. We turn the capital against itself."

"That will trigger a civil conflict," Vučić grimly.

"It will trigger a reckoning," Tito corrected. "Once

the illusion of control is shattered, the old alliances will fracture. The Croats and Slovenes in the EU will see the corruption in Belgrade and harden their borders. The Macedonians and Montenegrins in NATO will question the alliance's value if it protects thieves. And Bosnia? Kosovo? They will see an opportunity."

He turned to face them, his silhouette stark against the stars.

"We are not fighting a war of conquest. We are fighting a war of information. And tonight, we march not as soldiers, but as ghosts. We will slip into the cracks of the system Mili has built. Bring the walls down."

Tito checked his watch, the analog face glowing faintly in the dark. "Rest is over. We descend the eastern slope. There is a logging road three kilometers down. A contact is waiting."

"A contact?" Marko frowned. "Who?"

"An old friend," Tito said, a rare, thin smile

touching his lips. "Someone who remembers that the only thing more dangerous than a revolution is a forgotten one."

He turned and began the descent, moving toward the border that no longer existed, and the capital that was waiting to burn.

CHAPTER 12: THE GRAY ZONE

They moved through the forest in a tactical file, the silence of the woods broken only by the crunch of frost-dried leaves under their boots and the ragged rhythm of their breathing. The temperature had dropped below freezing, a stark reminder that the artificial warmth of the city was a luxury reserved for those who paid their bills on time. Tito led the column, his movements economical, betraying a physical vitality that defied the biological timestamp of his revival.

Behind him, Petrovi struggled to keep up with the pace.

upbringing ill-suited for the rugged terrain of the borderlands. He clutched his laptop bag to his chest as if it were a shield.

"Marshall," Petrovi panted, stumbling
"We need to establish a perimeter soon. My
extremities are losing sensation. Hypothermia is a
statistical probability within the hour."

"Then keep moving," Tito said, his voice low, barely
disturbing the cold air. "Pain is a reminder that we
are alive. Comfort is a cage."

Vukovi, flanking the rear, paused. He
signaling a halt. "Contact. Ten o'clock. Low light."

Everyone froze. Tito dropped to a crouch, his hand
instinctively going to the compact pistol holstered
under his arm. Through the skeletal trees, a faint,
rhythmic pulse of amber light cut through the mist.
It wasn't the erratic flash of police lights; it was
steady, methodical.

"Drone," Marko whispered, peering through
night-vision

binoculars. "Quadcopter. Silent running mode. It's scanning the thermal signatures of the forest floor."

"The Consortium," Tito surmised. "M relying on local police incompetence. He's hunting with precision assets."

"It's painting us," Marko said, tension tightening his jaw. "If it locks on, it will tag our location for the rapid response team. They'll be here in minutes."

"We cannot outrun a drone," Vukovi scanning the dense canopy above. "And we cannot shoot it down without revealing our position to every sensor in a five-kilometer radius."

Tito looked up. The branches were heavy with snow, sagging under the weight. "We don't shoot it. We blind it."

He pointed to a dense thicket of fir trees directly beneath the drone's flight path. "The snow. The canopy is thick, but the thermal differential between the air

and the ground is extreme right now. If we trigger a localized disturbance, we create a thermal bloom. It will mask our signatures."

"How?" Petrovi asked, shivering. Vukovi understood immediately. He unzipped his pack and pulled out a compact thermal flare—not a burning brand, but a chemical heat pack used for signaling. "We set these off in the tree line. The drone's sensors will prioritize the sudden heat spike. It will focus its cameras there, giving us a window to move."

"Do it," Tito ordered.

Vukovi armed two flares and hurled them into the thicket to their right. A few seconds later, a dull whoosh resonated through the woods as the chemicals ignited, bathing the area in a sudden, intense infrared glow invisible to the naked eye but blazing on thermal sensors.

The drone above changed pitch. The low hum shifted as

it banked sharply toward the heat source, its camera zooming in on the false signal.

"Move," Tito hissed.

They sprinted left, angling away from the flare, pushing deeper into the wilderness. They ran for two hundred meters before Tito signaled for cover behind a fallen oak.

They waited, hearts hammering against ribs. Above them, the drone hovered, analyzing the thermal anomaly. After a tense minute, it lost interest in the static heat of the flares and resumed its grid search pattern, moving further east.

"We're clear," Marko breathed, lowering his binoculars. "For now."

"We need shelter," Vukovi said. "If we stop, we freeze."

Tito scanned the horizon. To the south, the lights of Bijeljina were a dim smear against the clouds, the

chaos they'd ignited still burning. To the north, the Serbian border was close, but crossing it legally was impossible. They were in the gray zone—literally and figuratively.

"There," Tito said, pointing to a ridge line ahead.

"The old railway line. It's disused, but the infrastructure remains. There will be maintenance huts. We can shelter there."

They traversed the remaining distance to the ridge, sliding down a steep embankment onto a pair of rusted rails. The tracks stretched into the darkness, overgrown with weeds but structurally intact.

They walked for another twenty minutes until they found it: a small, concrete signal box, its windows boarded up, the door heavy with rust. It smelled of damp earth and decay, but it was out of the wind.

Vukovi forced the door open with a pr his pack. They crowded inside, the space cramped but

shielding them from the biting wind.

Petrovi immediately set up a portab linking it to a satellite uplink hidden in the lining of his jacket. "I'm trying to establish a connection to the dark web nodes. If I can get a signal, I can monitor the Consortium's chatter."

"Do it," Tito said. He stood by the doorway, peering through a crack in the wood. "We rest for thirty minutes. Then we continue on foot to the rail junction at Novi Grad. We'll acquire transport there."

Marko checked his weapon, ejecting the magazine and counting the rounds. "We're low on supplies, Marshal. And we have no allies in Serbia. The government there is a puppet of Moscow. We'll be walking into the lion's den."

Tito turned from the door, his face illuminated by the pale glow of Petrovi's screen. "the lion's den, Marko. It is the control room. The Serbian

government believes they are partners with the Russians, but they are merely administrators of a foreign lease."

He paced the small room, his energy restless, kinetic.

"Look at the map," Tito commanded, gesturing to Petrović's screen.

Petrović pulled up a geopolitical overview of the Balkans. The lines were stark. Slovenia and Croatia, glowing blue, fully integrated into the EU and NATO. North Macedonia and Montenegro, a lighter shade, NATO members but outside the EU. Bosnia and Kosovo, fractured and hatching, aspiring to integration. And Serbia, colored a deep, aggressive red, connected by thick energy pipelines to the Russian Federation.

"The West offers integration," Tito said, tracing the blue borders. "It is a slow suffocation. They demand cultural compliance, economic restructuring, and the dismantling of sovereign industry. It is imperialism

disguised as bureaucracy."

He moved his finger to the red lines connecting Serbia to Russia. "The East offers dependency. They provide cheap energy, security guarantees, and the illusion of strength. But it is a leash. The moment Belgrade acts in its own interest, Moscow turns off the gas."

"And you?" Petrovi asked, looking ~~up~~ at you offer?"

"I offer the region what it has lost," Tito said. "A unified voice. Not a vassal of Brussels, not a satellite of Moscow. A third path. A Non-Aligned movement for the digital age."

"That's a dream," Marko muttered. "The divisions are too deep. The nationalism—"

"Nationalism is a tool of the powerful to divide the weak," Tito snapped. "I forged a nation from six republics and twenty-eight nationalities once. I can do it again, provided I break the chains that bind the

leaders to their foreign masters."

Petrovi's laptop beeped. "I have a feed." "It's intercepted traffic from the Consortium.

General Mili is on a secure line with Belgrade."

"Play it," Tito said.

Petrovi adjusted the audio filters. A clipped and professional, came through the speakers.

It was Mili.

"...the situation in Bijeljina is volatile. The SMS blast has triggered secondary protests in Doboј. The narrative is slipping out of our control. We need the subsidy pipeline frozen immediately. If the money stops, the anger redirects to Moscow, not us."

A second voice, heavily accented with the cadence of the Serbian administration, responded. "You cannot freeze the pipeline. The Russian ambassador is in Belgrade this week. If the flow stops, they will know we are compromised. We need to blame the outage on

technical failures."

"Technical failures won't hold," Mili crackled. "The data is out. The Marshal's people have the ledger. We need to purge the servers in Belgrade. All of them."

"That is a high-risk operation," the Serbian contact said. "It will cripple the energy grid for days."

"Do it," Mili ordered. "Scorched earth. Control the narrative, we burn the evidence."

The transmission cut out.

Petrovi looked up, his face ashen. "He's going to shut down the servers that control the energy distribution for the entire region? That's not just purging data. That's cutting off heat to millions."

"Desperation," Tito said, a cold smile touching his lips. "Mili is making a mistake. He can't contain this by destroying the infrastructure. He is

wrong."

"Why?" Marko asked.

"Because," Tito said, his eyes hardening, "when the power goes out in Belgrade, the people will not look to Brussels or Moscow. They will look to the empty suits in their parliament. And they will see them for what they are: caretakers of an empty house."

He checked his watch.

"Time is up. We move. Our destination is no longer just to sever the leash. It is to show the dog that it has teeth."

Tito opened the door. The wind howled in, carrying the scent of snow and smoke.

"To Belgrade," Tito said. "We walk into the gray, and we bring the light."

CHAPTER 13: THE CROSSING

The descent was a controlled slide over loose shale and damp earth, gravity pulling them toward the valley floor where the darkness seemed even denser, insulated by the thick spruce canopy. The silence here was different from the ridge; it was alive with the rustle of nocturnal creatures and the distant, rhythmic groan of machinery from the industrial zone far to the west. They moved without lights, relying on the faint starlight that filtered through the branches and the

tactile memory of the terrain underfoot.

Tito led, his pace relentless. The physical exertion seemed to ground him, a counterpoint to the abstract, digital war he was planning. For him, the forest was not an obstacle but a return to fundamentals—the raw calculus of survival that had forged the Partisans decades ago.

After forty minutes of descent, the tree line broke abruptly. They emerged onto a wide, muddy logging road that cut a scar through the wilderness. It was pocked with deep ruts from heavy trucks, the churned earth frozen solid in the frigid air. To the north, the lights of a small border hamlet twinkled faintly, indistinguishable from the stars. To the south lay the invisible line of the Serbian border, unpatrolled in this sector but watched by the eyes in the sky they had temporarily blinded.

"He should be here," Tito said, scanning the darkness.

"Should we signal?" Marko asked, his hand resting on

the grip of his sidearm.

"No. If the Consortium has compromised our contact, a signal is just a target marker," Tito replied. "We wait in cover."

They stepped off the road, melting into the brush bordering the logging path. The cold was biting now, seeping through layers of tactical gear. Minutes stretched, punctuated only by the shallow clouds of their breath.

A low whistle cut the air—two short notes, a pause, then a third.

Tito raised a hand, signaling the team to hold. He listened, head tilted. The whistle came again, from the tree line to the east.

"Fox," Tito murmured, recognizing the call sign. A silhouette detached itself from the shadows of a massive oak. The figure moved with a heavy, deliberate gait, boots crunching on the frosted underbrush. As he

stepped into the faint wash of starlight, his features resolved: a broad, weathered face, a thick gray mustache, and eyes that had seen the collapse of empires and the rise of the surveillance state.

He stopped ten meters away, a long-barreled rifle slung casually over his shoulder. He didn't raise it.

"Josip," the man said. His voice was a gravelly rumble, thick with the local dialect.

"Stevan," Tito acknowledged. "You look older."

"We all do. The dead are the only ones who don't age," Stevan replied, his gaze shifting to the team behind Tito. "You brought a entourage."

"They are loyal," Tito said.

"They are liabilities until we cross," Stevan countered. He walked forward, stopping face-to-face with the Marshal. There was no embrace, no handshake—just the cold assessment of two old soldiers. "The Consortium has quadrupled the drone

patrols along the corridor. They aren't looking for smugglers. They are looking for you specifically. Thermal signatures, gait analysis, biometric scrubbing. It's a manhunt."

"We broke the digital trail at the mine," said, stepping forward.

Stevan looked at the younger man with a mixture of pity and disdain. "You think the mines are enough? The satellites see everything, boy. They see the heat signature of your blood. They see the micro-vibrations of your footsteps. We have to move now, before they recalibrate the sensors."

"Where is the vehicle?" Vuković asked.

"Not on the road," Stevan said. He turned and whistled again, a different pitch this time. Headlights flashed once—low beam—from deep within the woods to the north. Not car headlights, but the

distinct, yellow glow of heavy-duty truck lamps.

"A lumber hauler," Stevan explained, leading them off the logging road and into a dense thicket. "It's hauling a shipment of treated timber to Belgrade. The cargo is clean, but the manifest is forged. We go in the back. It's a twelve-hour drive to the city outskirts."

"A container?" Marko asked, skeptical. "We'll be sitting ducks if they scan the cargo."

"The wood is treated with a chemical sealant that masks thermal signatures," Stevan said. "It's an old trick from the war days, updated with modern chemistry. It won't hold up against a deep-spectrum scan, but it will confuse the drone's automated filters long enough for us to pass the checkpoints."

They reached the truck, a massive Tatra 815 idling quietly, its exhaust pipe belching black smoke into the freezing air. A young driver sat in the cab, his

face illuminated by the glow of a cigarette. He didn't look at them.

Stevan pulled down the rear tarpaulin, revealing stacks of raw lumber strapped down with heavy chains. "Climb. Get deep inside the center stack. Cover yourselves with the loose planks."

Tito didn't hesitate. He climbed up, his movements fluid, and wedged himself into the narrow gap between the timber stacks. The smell of pine and chemical preservative was overpowering. Marko, and Petrovi followed, arranging planks to create a crude canopy over their hiding spot.

Stevan secured the tarpaulin, plunging them into absolute darkness. The truck groaned as the driver engaged the gears, and the heavy vehicle lurched forward, picking up speed as it rejoined the logging road.

Inside the makeshift coffin, the air was stale and

cold. Tito lay still, his breathing even, his mind racing ahead of the lumber truck's wheels.

"Marshal," Petrović whispered in the dark contact... Stevan. He was part of the old State Security. Why is he helping us now?"

"Because Stevan understands the nature of the leash," Tito replied, his voice low, barely audible over the roar of the engine. "He served the state, and then he watched the state sell its soul to the highest bidder. He doesn't want the old Yugoslavia back. He wants the dignity of a nation that isn't for sale."

"And if he betrays us?" Marko asked.

"Then we die," Tito said simply. "But not before we ensure the data reaches the public."

The truck picked up speed, the suspension bouncing over the uneven terrain. Tito closed his eyes, visualizing the route. They were moving east, into the heart of the Serbian state, toward the nexus of power

he intended to shatter. The forest fell away behind them, replaced by the looming shadow of the border, and beyond that, the city that would soon be the epicenter of a reckoning.

CHAPTER 13: THE IRON SPINE

They left the signal box behind, moving along the rusted iron spine of the abandoned railway. The tracks cut a straight, black line through the wilderness, a relic of a time when the region was bound by steel rather than invisible data streams. To Tito, the rails felt like a memory under his boots—a tangible connection to the era of heavy industry and centralized planning.

The wind had picked up, driving needle-like ice

crystals against their faces. They marched in silence, conserving energy, their heads bowed against the gale. Tito walked at the point, his posture rigid, ignoring the cold. He was listening to the silence of the valley, reading the terrain as if it were a map of political fault lines.

"Contact," Vukovi whispered from the hundred meters. Stationary."

Tito signaled for cover. They dropped into the drainage ditch running parallel to the tracks, sinking into the frozen mud and overgrown reeds. The darkness here was absolute, the moon hidden behind a thickening veil of cloud.

A low rumble vibrated through the ground, distinct from the wind. It was the idling engine of a heavy vehicle. Through the skeletal branches of the undergrowth, headlights cut a sweeping arc, illuminating the rusted signals and overgrown

platforms of a small, derelict station.

"A patrol," Marko breathed, his breath vaporizing in the air. "Serbian Gendarmerie."

"They aren't looking for us," Tito murmured, observing the vehicle's behavior. It was moving too slowly, sweeping its searchlights methodically.

"They are securing the corridor. Millions on lockdown."

The vehicle—a rugged, armored SUV—stopped near the station platform. Two figures emerged, bundled in heavy winter gear. They didn't scan the woods; instead, they walked to a concrete utility box on the platform and opened it. One of them attached a device to the wiring inside.

"What are they doing?" Petrovi whis shivering uncontrollably.

"Access points," Tito realized. "The railway lines still carry fiber-optic cables. They are hardening the

network, creating a secure data line for the Consortium's operations. They are turning the physical infrastructure into a digital fortress."

"Should we engage?" Vukovi asked, holding his weapon.

"No," Tito said. "Engagement draws attention. We are ghosts, remember? We slip through the walls."

He watched the technicians work. "They are arrogant. They believe the border is sealed because they control the major crossings. They forget about the arteries of the old system—the things they abandoned but never truly dismantled."

The technicians finished their work, climbed back into the SUV, and drove off, heading further east toward the main road.

Tito waited five minutes, counting the seconds in his head, ensuring the patrol was out of earshot. Then he rose from the ditch, brushing the frost from his coat.

"Move. Quickly."

They crossed the tracks and entered the ruins of the station. The platform was littered with debris—shattered glass, rotting timbers, and the skeletal remains of a ticket office. Tito led them to the utility box the patrol had accessed. It was a modern installation grafted onto the decaying concrete.

"Petrovi," Tito said. "Can you interface?" Petrovi knelt, opening his bag. He pulled a slender interface cable and plugged it into the maintenance port. His fingers flew over his keyboard, the screen reflecting in his wide eyes. "It's a junction node. It connects to the main trunk line running to Belgrade. It's active... and it's unencrypted on the local side."

"Can you inject the data packet?" Tito asked.

"I can," Petrovi said. "But if they do

anomaly, they'll trace it back to this node. We'll lose our element of surprise."

"We don't need to send the full ledger yet," Tito said. "Send a ping. A marker. Let them know the signal is coming from inside their own network. know that his fortress has windows."

Petrovi typed a rapid string of commands. "Uploading a compressed beacon. It's buried in a maintenance handshake. It won't trigger an alarm, but it will sit in the server logs. A ghost in the machine."

"Good," Tito said. "Now, we follow the wire."

He pointed down the tracks. "The fiber runs parallel to this line until it hits the main switching yard at Novi Grad. That's where we find our transport."

They moved faster now, the encounter with the patrol having injected a fresh urgency into their stride. The terrain began to change, the dense forest giving way to rolling hills and the distant, hazy glow of

civilization.

As they approached the outskirts of Novi Grad, the industrial sprawl became visible. Smokestacks rose like obelisks against the sky, though many were dormant, monuments to a deindustrialized economy. The air smelled of sulfur and wet concrete.

They reached a rusted chain-link fence separating the railway yard from the main road. Inside, rows of freight cars sat dormant, their sides spray-painted with the faded logos of logistics companies.

"Here," Vukovi said, pointing to a ~~f~~ parked near a loading dock. It was an older model, military-grade, covered by a heavy tarpaulin. "No tracking plates. It's likely a local contractor moving goods off the books."

"Perfect," Tito said.

They scaled the fence, dropping silently onto the gravel ballast. Marko and Vukovi made the

perimeter while Petrovi and Tito appr truck. Tito circled the vehicle, inspecting the tires and the engine compartment. It was cold, but functional.

Petrovi pried open the driver's side d hotwired the ignition with practiced ease—a skill he claimed to have learned from "old movies," though Tito suspected it was a necessity of his previous life in the digital underground.

The engine coughed, then roared to life, a deep diesel rumble that echoed off the concrete walls of the yard.

"Get in," Tito ordered.

They piled into the cab and the flatbed, concealing themselves beneath the tarp. Tito took the wheel. He adjusted the mirrors, his hands gripping the heavy plastic steering wheel. He looked out at the yard, at the sleeping trains, and beyond, to the horizon where Belgrade lay.

The city was a glowing nexus of light and data, the

heart of the fractured republic. It was guarded by drones, algorithms, and foreign intelligence agencies. But tonight, it was vulnerable.

Tito shifted the truck into gear. The tires crunched over the gravel as the vehicle rolled out of the yard and onto the access road.

"We are on the move," Tito said, his voice steady over the engine's growl. "The next phase begins."

The truck accelerated, merging onto the highway, heading north toward the capital, carrying its cargo of ghosts into the heart of the machine.

The rhythmic vibration of the Tatra's chassis became a metronome counting down the seconds to their arrival. Tito lay pressed against the rough-hewn timber, the chemical scent of the preservative stinging his nostrils. It was a calculated risk; the sealant masked their thermal signatures, but a deep-spectrum scan or a manual inspection would expose them instantly.

After an hour of driving, the terrain shifted. The

erratic bouncing of the logging track smoothed into the steady hum of asphalt. They had hit the main road.

Petrovi, wedged closest to the tarp, tapped a sequence on his wrist-mounted device. "I'm picking up local network traffic," he whispered, his voice tight. "We're passing through the exclusion zone. I'm seeing active Consortium signatures. They're sweeping the road."

"Are we tagged?" Vukovi asked, his hand instinctively moving to the grip of his pistol.

"Negative. The wood is holding. But they're running biometric sweepers at the upcoming checkpoint. Standard procedure for commercial transport."

Tito remained motionless, his mind processing the variables. "The checkpoint is at the bridge?"

"Likely," Stevan's voice came from the front, muffled through the partition. He must have been listening in via a comms link. "The Raider is heavily monitored."

If they find us, we don't make it to Belgrade."

The truck slowed. The engine whine dropped to a low growl as gears shifted. Tense silence descended on the hidden compartment.

"Checkpoint ahead," the driver's voice crackled over the internal comms, calm but strained. "Two Consortium cruisers. Four troopers. They're waving us down."

Tito signaled the team. Hold. Do not move. Do not breathe loud.

The truck came to a halt with a hiss of air brakes. Outside, heavy boots crunched on the gravel shoulder. Tito could hear the muffled exchange of greetings, the driver's casual indifference a masterpiece of acting.

"Paperwork," a voice barked—authoritative, clipped. The Consortium accent.

"Logging manifest for the Belgrade cooperative," the driver replied. "Standard run."

"Pop the back. Thermal anomaly detected on the ridge.

We're scanning everything."

Tito's eyes snapped open in the darkness. The anomaly—likely the residual heat from their bodies before they'd boarded, or perhaps the chemical reaction of the sealant itself. It was a minute fluctuation, but enough to trigger a manual inspection.

The tarp at the rear rustled. Heavy hands gripped the canvas.

"Stay still," Tito breathed, the command barely audible.

The tarp was thrown back. A beam of intense white light cut through the slats of the lumber, slicing through the shadows. It swept over the stacks, inches from Tito's face.

"Thermal reading is weak," a second trooper said.

"Just the wood processing heat. The sealant is reacting with the cold air."

"Scan the manifest code," the first trooper ordered.

The light moved away. The sound of a handheld scanner

beeping filled the air.

"Clear," the trooper said after a long moment.
"Proceed. Watch the southbound lanes. We're tracking a cell of insurgents moving toward the border."

The tarp was slammed back down, plunging them back into darkness. The truck lurched forward, picking up speed as it merged back onto the highway.

Inside, the tension didn't dissipate; it merely coiled tighter.

"That was too close," Marko exhaled.

"That was routine," Stevan corrected from the front.
"If they were looking for you specifically, they would have torn the truck apart. They're looking for a heat signature in the woods, not hidden in a chemical bath. We have a window, but it's closing."
Tito shifted, easing the cramp in his leg. "How long to Belgrade?"

"Four hours, maybe less if the traffic thins," Stevan

said. "We're entering the metropolitan perimeter. The surveillance density increases exponentially."

"Once we arrive, where do we go?" Peter
"Zemun," Stevan replied. "Old town. It's a labyrinth of pre-war architecture and narrow streets. The Consortium's eyes in the sky struggle to resolve targets there due to the overlapping thermal noise of the old heating systems. It's one of the few places in the city where you can still breathe without a filter."

"And the objective?" Marko asked.

"We need to reach the server farm in New Belgrade,"

Tito said. "Mili plans to purge the ledger to cover his tracks. If he succeeds, the evidence of the Russian financial leverage over the Serbian government disappears."

"That's a fortified facility," Petrović
"High-level clearance."

"We aren't going in through the front door," Tito

said. "We are going to use the chaos to create. When he cuts the power to purge the servers, he creates a blind spot. A window where the backup security systems reboot."

"That's reckless," Marko argued. "If the grid goes down, the city goes dark. It's anarchy."

"Anarchy is a weapon," Tito countered. "When the lights go out in Belgrade, the people will panic. The Consortium will be distracted by crowd control. And in that distraction, we move."

The truck began to slow again, this time for a toll booth. The hum of urban life grew louder—the distant wail of sirens, the drone of aircraft, the constant buzz of a city that never truly slept.

Petrović's device pinged softly. "I'm priority broadcast," he said. "It's a Consortium emergency alert. They're declaring a curfew in Belgrade effective 0200 hours due to 'security

threats."

"That's early," Vukovi noted. "They're city down before the purge."

"They're trying to contain the fallout before it starts," Tito said. "Stevan, do we have a way into Zemun without hitting the checkpoints?"

"There's a service tunnel under the Sava River," Stevan said. "Old sewage infrastructure. It's not on the modern grid maps. We'll offload there."

The truck made a sharp turn, descending a ramp. The sound of the engine echoed differently—concrete walls, enclosed space.

"We're here," Stevan announced. "Prepare to move. We have thirty minutes before the tunnel patrol sweeps this sector."

Tito flexed his hands, feeling the blood return to his fingers. The physical journey was ending; the digital war was beginning.

"Marko, Vukovi, secure the perimeter," ordered.

"Petrovi, prepare the data packet. We expose the corruption. We broadcast it. Live."

The truck came to a final stop. The engine cut, and the silence of the underground hit them like a physical weight.

Stevan pulled the tarp back. The air that rushed in was damp, smelling of mildew and diesel.

"Welcome to Belgrade," Stevan said, offering a hand to pull Tito down. "The city of ghosts."

Tito took the hand, stepping onto the concrete floor. He looked up at the graffiti-covered walls, the flickering fluorescent lights of the tunnel.

"The ghosts are about to wake up," Tito said. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 14: THE STATIC HIGHWAY

The flatbed truck ate the kilometers, its diesel engine a steady drone against the silence of the cab. Tito drove with a precision that belied his age, his eyes fixed on the ribbon of asphalt illuminated by the headlights. The highway was a modern scar cutting through the ancient landscape, lined with the skeletal remains of socialist-era factories and the garish, neon-lit facades of new logistics hubs. It was a physical manifestation of the contradiction he sought

to resolve: the past and the present locked in a silent, grinding war.

To their left, the horizon was dominated by the glow of Belgrade, a haze of orange and white light reflecting off the low-hanging clouds. To their right, the darkness of the Serbian countryside swallowed the landscape whole.

Inside the cab, the air was thick with tension.

Vukovi sat in the passenger seat, monitoring a handheld scanner tuned to local police frequencies.

Petrovi and Marko were in the back, his laptop connected to a satellite uplink, the screen casting a pale blue light on their faces.

"The beacon is active," Petrovi said, "It's pinging off the Consortium's own satellites."

Mili's team will see the data packet on the junction box at the station. They'll know the network has been breached."

"Let them," Tito said, not taking his eyes off the

road. "Paranoia is a weapon. It forces them to look inward, to suspect their own security protocols. It slows them down."

"Traffic ahead," Vukovi interrupted scanner. "Roadblock. Five kilometers. Standard identity checkpoint. National Police, backed up by Gendarmerie."

Tito's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Are they scanning all vehicles?"

"affirmative. Thermal imaging and license plate recognition," Vukovi replied. "They thermal anomalies. Our insulation won't hold up against a high-resolution scan if they stop us."

"We can't turn back," Marko said from the rear.

"The secondary roads are likely compromised."

Tito scanned the surroundings. The highway here was elevated, cutting through a shallow valley. Below them, to the south, ran the old railway line they had

abandoned, parallel to the highway but hidden by a steep embankment and a thick growth of scrub oak.

"The old rail bridge," Tito said abruptly. "The one we passed two kilometers back. It runs under the highway here."

"It's derelict," Vukovi said, checking approach is washed out."

"It's our only cover," Tito countered. "If we can get off the main road before the checkpoint, we can bypass it on foot and acquire new transport on the other side."

He signaled, and a moment later, the truck slowed. Tito guided the heavy vehicle onto the narrow shoulder, gravel crunching under the tires, then eased it down a steep, muddy embankment. The truck slid sideways, suspension groaning, before coming to a halt in the shadow of the concrete highway pillars.

"Out," Tito commanded.

They bailed out, grabbing their gear. The air here was

colder, the valley trapping the dampness. Tito led them under the highway, the massive pillars looming like ancient monoliths. They scrambled over a chain-link fence, tearing a hole in the rusted mesh, and dropped onto the overgrown railway tracks below.

The rail line was a ghost. The ties were rotted, the rails coated in a layer of oxidation. But the path was clear.

"Run," Tito ordered.

They moved at a steady jog, their boots crunching on the ballast. Above them, the heavy rumble of trucks on the highway marked the passage of the modern world. Below, they were invisible, moving through the arteries of the old one.

They covered two kilometers in under ten minutes. As they rounded a bend, the lights of the checkpoint were visible in the distance, a cluster of red and blue strobes cutting through the mist. But they were

already past it, separated by the concrete barrier of the highway.

The railway line terminated at a sprawling rail yard on the outskirts of the industrial district. It was a graveyard of steel. Rusted locomotives sat on sidings, their wheels seized by time. Stacks of decaying shipping containers formed labyrinthine corridors.

"Find a vehicle," Tito said, scanning the yard.

"Something unmarked. Something that runs."

Marko spotted it first: a flatbed logistics truck parked near a dilapidated warehouse. It was an older model, lacking the digital tracking plates of modern fleet vehicles. A quick check of the ignition confirmed it was unlocked, the keys left in the visor—a common oversight in a region where theft was less of a concern than surveillance.

They boarded the vehicle. Petrovi hot ignition with practiced ease, the engine sputtering to

life. This time, the cab was larger, smelling of stale tobacco and diesel.

Tito took the wheel. He pulled out of the yard, merging onto a secondary road that wound through the industrial sprawl. The skyline of Belgrade was now directly ahead, a jagged silhouette of concrete and glass.

"We are fifteen minutes from the city center," Tito said. "The Consortium's central server farm is located in the Novi Beograd district. That is where Mili is coordinating the purge."

"And the ledger?" Petrovi asked.

"We upload it before the purge completes," Tito said. "We flood the network. We make sure that every government terminal, every media outlet, and every foreign embassy receives the proof of the Consortium's corruption. We turn their own infrastructure against them."

"And then?" Vukovi asked.

"Then," Tito said, his eyes reflecting the approaching

city lights, "we watch the leash snap."

The truck accelerated, entering the final phase of the operation, carrying them into the heart of the conflict.

CHAPTER 15: THE SHADOW DISTRICT

The truck navigated the labyrinthine streets of Zemun, the old Ottoman and Habsburg quarter that clung stubbornly to the south bank of the Sava River. Here, the sleek, glass-and-steel architecture of New Belgrade across the water gave way to narrow cobblestone alleys and crumbling baroque facades. It was a district of shadows, where the streetlights were few and the surveillance cameras were deliberately obscured by overhanging vines and decades of grime.

Tito guided the vehicle into a subterranean parking

garage beneath a nondescript apartment block. The concrete ramp spiraled downward, the tires squealing against the polished surface. He parked in a dark corner, away from the sensors that monitored the spots closest to the elevators.

"Stevan's contact is here," Petrovi said into his device. "A blue sedan. Three spaces over."

They exited the truck, moving with the fluid economy of soldiers accustomed to operating in hostile territory. The air in the garage was stale, thick with the scent of oil and damp concrete. Tito adjusted the collar of his jacket, concealing his face as they approached the sedan.

The driver sat behind the wheel, a silhouette in the gloom. As they approached, the window rolled down, revealing a man in his forties with a gaunt face and eyes that darted constantly. He was a member of Stevan's underground network, a low-level bureaucrat

in the Ministry of Infrastructure who had access to the city's utility schematics.

"You're late," the man hissed, his voice trembling slightly.

"Traffic," Tito replied flatly. He opened the rear door and slid in, the others following suit. The car smelled of stale coffee and fear.

"The route is clear," the driver said, pulling out of the garage and merging into the sparse late-night traffic. "The Consortium has pulled most of their patrol units to the main arteries to enforce the curfew. They're expecting trouble in the city center, not the periphery."

"That is their mistake," Tito said.

They drove in silence for ten minutes, crossing the Branko Most bridge. Below them, the Sava River was a black, sluggish ribbon. To the east, the illuminated spire of the Belgrade Tower stood as a sentinel of the

new order. To the west, the ruins of the old fortress watched over the confluence of the Sava and Danube.

The driver exited onto a service road that ran parallel to the Ušće tower, the administrative hub of the Consortium's presence in Serbia. He pulled into the loading bay of a massive, windowless concrete bunker—a Tier-4 data center that housed the central energy ledgers for the region.

"This is it," the driver said, killing the engine. "The purge is scheduled to begin in twenty minutes.

General Mili's team is initiating a 'green' to justify the blackout. It will last exactly twelve minutes. That is your window."

"Access?" Tito asked.

"Service entrance, level B2. The biometric lock has been spoofed to accept Petrović's credentials," the driver said, handing over a keycard. "But once you're inside, you're on your own. The internal security is

manual—guards with firearms, not algorithms."

Tito took the card. "We won't need long."

They exited the vehicle, leaving the driver to fade back into the city. The service entrance was a heavy steel door set into the side of the bunker, illuminated by a single, harsh floodlight. Petrov card. A green light blinked once, and the heavy lock disengaged with a pneumatic hiss.

They descended a concrete stairwell, the air growing colder, the hum of the server farms vibrating through the floor. At the bottom, a long corridor stretched out, lined with pipes and cables.

"Motion sensors," Marko whispered, pointing to a small dome in the ceiling. "Petrovi ?" "I'm looping the feed," Petrovi mut on his wrist device. "We have a thirty-second gap. Move."

They sprinted down the corridor, boots silent on the linoleum. They reached a heavy fire

swiped again. The door opened into the server room.

It was a cathedral of data. Rows of black server racks stretched into the distance, bathed in the eerie blue light of thousands of status LEDs. The air roared with the sound of industrial cooling fans, a white noise that masked their presence.

"Locate the primary ledger storage," Tito ordered, his voice barely audible over the din.

Petrovi moved to a terminal, his fingers across the keyboard. "I'm in. The purge command is already queued. Mili is running it from terminal, but the execution is local."

"Can you stop it?"

"No. But I can piggyback our upload onto the outgoing data stream," Petrovi said. "A packet now, it will be broadcast along with the system logs. Every government terminal in the country will receive it simultaneously."

"Do it," Tito said.

On the far side of the room, a heavy door slammed

open. Two Consortium security officers stepped in, rifles raised. They had been alerted by the door breach.

"Hands where I can see them!" one shouted, his voice echoing through the server farm.

Tito didn't hesitate. He drew the pistol Stevan had provided, a compact, silenced weapon. He fired twice. The shots were dull thuds, lost instantly in the roar of the fans. The first guard dropped. The second raised his rifle, but Vukovi was already tackling the man to the ground.

The struggle was brief and brutal. Vukovi tackled the guard and rendered him unconscious.

"Clear," Vukovi gasped, standing up.
"Petrovi!" Tito snapped.

"Almost there... Upload initiated," Petrovi said.
"The data is away. It's hitting the network in three... two... one..."

The lights in the server room flickered violently. A

deep, resonant thrum shook the building as the main power grid was cut. The roar of the fans died instantly, replaced by the whine of spinning disks winding down.

Silence descended, thick and absolute. Emergency red lighting kicked in, bathing the room in a blood-red glow.

"The purge is running," Petrovi whisp
evidence here is being destroyed."

"But the truth is out," Tito said, holstering his weapon. "The leash is snapping."

A distant alarm began to wail, piercing the silence. The lockdown had begun.

CHAPTER 15: THE CONCRETE SEA

The transition from the industrial fringe to the dense urban sprawl of Zemun was abrupt. One moment they were navigating a canyon of rusted steel and decaying brick; the next, they were plunging into a labyrinth of narrow, cobblestone streets that seemed to vibrate with the ghosts of centuries. The architecture here was a defiant middle finger to the sleek, glass-and-steel monstrosities rising across the Sava River in New Belgrade. Baroque facades and Ottoman

arches leaned in close, casting long shadows that swallowed the truck's silhouette.

Stevan guided them through the maze with clipped, precise directions. "Left at the fountain. Straight until the road ends. Then right, into the tunnel."

Tito maneuvered the bulky logistics truck through spaces clearly designed for horse-drawn carriages. The side mirrors folded inward with a screech of metal against stone as they scraped past a centuries-old wall.

"Easy," Vukovi murmured, watching the between the truck's flank and the masonry. "This thing is a tank, not a city car."

"It needs to be," Tito grunted, his knuckles white on the wheel. "What we are about to do requires weight."

They reached the end of the street, a dead end blocked by a rusted, chain-link gate. Beyond it lay darkness—the gaping maw of the service tunnel.

Stevan hopped out, bolt cutters in hand. The snap of

the lock was loud in the quiet night, echoing off the close walls. He swung the gate open and waved them through.

Tito drove the truck into the tunnel, the headlights cutting a swath through the stagnant air. The tunnel was a relic of the Cold War, a drainage conduit for the Sava River, forgotten by the digital cartographers of the Consortium. The walls were slick with moisture, weeping green algae.

"Parking here," Tito announced, bringing the truck to a halt fifty meters in. "We go the rest of the way on foot."

They disembarked, the drop in temperature immediate. The dampness clung to their clothes.

Petrovi slung a heavy backpack over containing the hardware necessary to breach the local network nodes.

Stevan checked his wrist chronometer. "The power purge is scheduled for 0300 hours. That's in forty minutes.

General Mili has ordered a 'grid recall' to cover the data wipe. It will plunge New Belgrade into total darkness for approximately twelve minutes."

"Twelve minutes to infiltrate a high-security facility and upload a terabyte of encrypted data," Marko muttered. "Optimistic."

"We don't need twelve minutes," Tito said, adjusting the collar of his jacket. "We only need thirty seconds of access to the primary terminal. The upload can be automated once we breach the air-gapped partition."

They moved to the tunnel's end, where a maintenance ladder led up to a street-level grate.

Vukovi ascended first, pressing his ear to the metal. After a moment, he signaled: clear.

They emerged into the streets of Zemun Proper. The atmosphere here was different from the quiet decay of the tunnel. It was alive with a nervous energy. Police cruisers patrolled the avenues, their lights sweeping

across the facades of apartment blocks. A low-frequency hum vibrated through the ground—the sound of the city's defense grid activating.

"The curfew is in effect," Petrovi w checking his device. "Biometric scanners are active on every major intersection. Facial recognition is running."

"Then we stay off the intersections," Tito said. He led them into the shadows of a residential courtyard, moving with a fluidity that belied his restored physical form. They navigated the back alleys, using the thermal clutter of the old heating systems—boilers burning wood and coal—to mask their signatures. It was a tactic from the partisan wars, adapted for a modern battlefield of sensors and algorithms.

They reached the edge of the Danube. Across the water, New Belgrade glowed like a circuit board, a planned

city of brutalist blocks and futuristic towers. The two halves of the city were separated by the river, a moat guarded by patrol boats and automated turrets.

"The bridge is sealed," Vukovi noted, through binoculars. "Heavy checkpoint. Military police, armored vehicles."

"We go under," Tito said, pointing to a small, unmarked dock where a pair of zodiacs bobbed in the murky water.

Stevan nodded. "The river route is blind to thermal cameras. The water masks our heat. It's risky, but it's the only way."

They boarded the inflatable boats. The engines started with a muted electric whir, the batteries fully charged. As they pushed off from the shore, Tito looked back at the old city. The contrast was stark. Behind them lay history, chaos, and resilience. Ahead lay the sterile, controlled environment of the new

world order.

The boats skimmed across the dark water, the wind biting at their faces. In the distance, the server farm loomed—a monolithic slab of concrete and glass, the physical brain of the Consortium's grip on Serbia.

As they approached the opposite bank, the city lights suddenly flickered. A collective groan rose from the urban landscape as the power grid began to fail.

Streetlights died. Windows went dark.

The purge had begun.

"Go," Tito commanded, his voice barely audible over the wind. "Move in the dark."

The zodiacs grounded on the concrete shore of New Belgrade. The team disembarked, sprinting toward the looming shadow of the server farm, swallowed by the sudden, suffocating silence of the blackout.

CHAPTER 16: THE BLEEDING EDGE

The darkness was absolute, a physical weight that pressed against the eyes. The blackout had swept through New Belgrade not as a gentle fade, but as a sudden, violent excision of light. The monolithic towers, usually blazing with the arrogance of capital and power, were now jagged silhouettes against a starless, smog-choked sky. The only illumination came from the distant, rhythmic pulse of emergency strobes on the perimeter of the administrative district,

casting long, distorted shadows that danced across the concrete plazas.

Tito led the sprint across the exposed plaza, the gravel crunching under their boots. The silence was unnerving, broken only by the ragged sound of their breathing and the distant, rhythmic thumping of a backup generator struggling to engage somewhere deep within the server farm complex.

They reached the base of the facility—a fortress of reinforced concrete and polarized glass. It was a windowless behemoth, designed to repel siege warfare rather than digital espionage. Stevan had provided the schematics, but seeing the physical reality of the structure sent a cold spike of adrenaline through the group.

"Service entrance, east face," Petrovi consulting a tablet that emitted a faint, ghostly green light. "The biometric spoof won't last long once

the internal network reboots. We have maybe eight minutes before the local security AI detects the anomaly."

They moved along the wall, hugging the shadows. The entrance was a heavy steel blast door, indistinguishable from the surrounding concrete except for a small, recessed keypad. attached a bypass device, a jury-rigged piece of hardware that looked archaic compared to the sleek technology inside the building. A series of clicks echoed in the stillness, followed by a heavy clunk as the magnetic locks disengaged.

The door hissed open, revealing a sterile, white corridor bathed in the dim red glow of battery-operated emergency lights. The air inside was frigid, smelling of ozone and sterilized filtration.

"Move," Tito ordered, stepping across the threshold. They entered the nerve center of the Consortium's

Serbian operations. The corridor was a maze of identical doors, but Petrovi navigated with the confidence of someone who had studied the blueprints for weeks. They ascended a stairwell, the rubber soles of their boots silent on the metal steps. They reached the sub-level housing the primary data servers. Here, the roar of the cooling systems was deafening, a mechanical beast fighting to keep its heart from overheating even as the external power was cut. The room was vast, filled with rows of towering black server racks, each blinking with a constellation of tiny blue and amber LEDs.

Petrovi rushed to a central console, connected to the device via a hardline cable. "I'm in the local network. The purge is running, but it's slow without full grid power. It's cycling through the encrypted ledgers now."

"Upload the counter-data," Tito commanded, his eyes

scanning the room. "We need to flood the Serbian nodes before the purge completes."

"I'm injecting the packet now," Petrović said, fingers flying across the holographic interface. "It's a Trojan horse disguised as a system update. Once it hits the nodes, it replicates. Every terminal from Zagreb to Skopje will see the Consortium's financial ties to Russian energy cartels."

"How long?" Vučković asked, standing by the door, weapon drawn.

"Three minutes for the upload," Petrović said, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "But the data needs to propagate. We can't leave until the handshake is confirmed."

A low alarm began to chime, a soft, rhythmic beep that cut through the server hum. A red light pulsed on the console.

"Security override," Petrović muttered.

detected the unauthorized connection. Manual lockdown initiated."

"Is the data away?" Tito pressed.

"Almost... There!" Petrovi pulled the packet is in the wild. It's bouncing between nodes. The Consortium can't stop it now without shutting down the entire Balkan grid."

"Then we leave," Tito said.

As they turned to exit, the heavy blast door at the far end of the server room slid open. Three Consortium security officers, clad in tactical gear and carrying automatic rifles, stepped in. Their helmet-mounted lights cut through the gloom, pinning the team in the center of the room.

"Halt!" one of them shouted, his voice amplified by a speaker on his vest. "Drop your weapons!"

Tito didn't flinch. He raised his pistol, aiming not at the guards, but at the server rack behind them.

"Vukovi, take the left. Marko, right." The room erupted in chaos. Vukovi tackling the lead guard, while Marko fired two precise shots, shattering the overhead lights to plunge the room into deeper shadow. Tito moved with the brutal efficiency of a man who had fought in wars where technology was a liability, not an asset. He fired, the suppressed round punching through the tactical vest of the nearest officer.

Petrovi scrambled for the exit, clutching the door handle. Tito covered him, firing a warning shot that forced the remaining guards to take cover behind the server racks.

"The corridor is clear!" Petrovi yelled from the doorway.

Tito and Vukovi disengaged, backing out of the room. Marko laid down suppressing fire, the staccato rhythm of his weapon echoing off the steel racks. They

slammed the heavy door shut, engaging the manual lock.

"That won't hold them long," Marko panted, checking his magazine.

"Long enough," Tito said. "The data is bleeding out. The Consortium's secrets are now public property."

They raced down the corridor, the building vibrating as security forces mobilized on the floors above.

They hit the stairwell, descending rapidly. As they reached the ground level, the emergency lights flickered and died, replaced by the harsh, artificial white of the building's restored backup power.

They burst out the service entrance, the sudden rush of cold air hitting them like a physical blow. The plaza outside was no longer empty. Searchlights swept across the concrete, and the whine of approaching drones cut through the night.

"The zodiacs are compromised," Vukov

converging, their spotlights scanning the water.

"New plan," Tito said, his face set like granite. "We go through the city. We disappear into the concrete sea."

He turned and sprinted toward the looming shadows of the residential blocks, the team falling in behind him. The leash had snapped, and the streets of New Belgrade were about to become a hunting ground.

CHAPTER 16: THE DATA CENTER

The silence of the blackout was deceptive. Inside the Tier-4 data center, the absence of external power did not mean stillness; it meant the activation of the fortress. As the emergency lights bathed the server room in a sterile red glow, the magnetic locks on the heavy steel doors slammed shut with a definitive thud. The purge was in motion, and the facility was sealed to protect its secrets.

Tito stood amidst the towering server racks, the hum

of the cooling fans replaced by the higher-pitched whine of battery backups. The air tasted of ozone and hot metal. Petrovi was hunched over terminal, his face illuminated by the green text scrolling across the monochrome screen.

"The internal grid is holding," Petrovi said, fingers moving with frantic precision. "The purge is executing in the background, wiping the energy subsidy ledgers. But the upload... the upload is packet-locked. The bandwidth is throttled by the emergency protocols."

"How long?" Tito asked, his hand resting on the grip of his pistol.

"Three minutes. Maybe less. The data stream is fighting against the system's own defensive culling."

"Then we buy you those minutes," Tito said. He turned to Vukovi and Marko. "Secure the perimeter. The manual security will be converging on this room."

Vukovi nodded, moving to the heavy furniture he had

breached. He wedged a hydraulic spreader into the frame, a crude but effective barrier. Marko took position on the opposite side of the room, near the secondary maintenance entrance, his rifle raised.

Outside, the sound of boots pounding against concrete echoed through the ventilation shafts. The Consortium's security forces were moving fast, disciplined and aggressive.

"Incoming!" Marko shouted.

The secondary door shuddered as a battering ram struck it from the other side. The metal groaned, the frame bending.

"Hold the line," Tito ordered. He moved to cover the main breach point Vukovi had barricaded. A voice crackled over a loudspeaker, distorted by the facility's emergency PA system. "Attention. You are in violation of National Security Decree 9. Surrender immediately and place your hands on your heads.

Failure to comply will result in lethal force."

"They are stalling," Tito said to Petrović. "I want to wait for the purge to complete, destroying the evidence before they storm us."

"I'm almost there," Petrović replied, sweat on his forehead. "I've bypassed the primary firewall. I'm routing the packet through the auxiliary cooling system's monitoring software. It's archaic, but it's a blind spot in their current security sweep."

The battering ram hit the secondary door again, harder this time. The hinges screamed.

"Marko, suppressive fire!" Tito barked.

Marko leaned out from cover and fired a short burst through the gap in the door. The return fire was immediate, automatic weapons chewing chunks of concrete from the doorway.

"They're dug in," Marko called out. "I can't hold them long."

Vuković's barricade at the main door buckled.

A plasma torch cut through the steel, a blinding white circle appearing in the metal.

"Thirty seconds!" Petrovi yelled. The circle of light on Vukovi's door inward, clattering to the floor. A tactical team in black armor and mirrored visors poured through the gap.

"Contact!" Vukovi engaged, his rifle controlled bursts. The lead trooper staggered, his armor deflecting the rounds but disrupting his momentum. Vukovi used the moment hydraulic spreader tighter, narrowing the gap to a slit.

Tito moved to support him, firing through the opening. He aimed for the exposed joints of the armor, the neck and knees. Two troopers fell, their bodies blocking the entrance.

"The upload is queuing!" Petrovi shouted. "Initiating

transfer in five... four..."

The secondary door finally gave way. Marko was forced back, firing as he retreated into the rows of server racks. The troopers advanced methodically, their suppression fire pinning him down.

"T w o . . . o n e . . . T r a n s f e r i n i t i a t e d ! " P e t r o v i c h i s h a n d o n t h e c o n s o l e .

The terminal screen went dark. Simultaneously, the emergency lights flickered and died. The battery backups, having served their purpose during the purge window, finally exhausted their charge.

Total darkness engulfed the room, absolute and suffocating.

The firing stopped. The only sound was the heavy breathing of the combatants and the distant, fading hum of the facility's turbines spinning down.

"Status," Tito's voice cut through the black.

"P a c k e t a w a y , " P e t r o v i c g a s p e d . " I t ' s o n t h e

data is on the network, bleeding out to every terminal that's still listening."

"Then our work here is done," Tito said.

He keyed the night vision mode on his optic lenses. The world resolved into a grainy green haze. He saw the silhouettes of the Consortium troopers moving cautiously into the room, their thermal signatures glowing faintly.

"Vukovi, Marko, fall back to the server room," Tito whispered. "Petrovi, with me."

They moved silently through the maze of servers. The troopers swept the room with flashlights, cutting beams through the darkness. The evidence in the physical servers was being wiped by the purge, but the digital truth was already loose in the veins of the city.

Tito paused at a junction, watching a team of four troopers pass by, unaware. He held up a fist, stopping

Petrovi. They waited until the footsteps toward the main breach.

"The shaft is twenty meters ahead," Petrovi whispered.

"Go."

They sprinted across the open floor, reaching the maintenance ladder that led up to the main breach. Petrovi and Marko were already there, hauling themselves up.

Tito boosted Petrovi onto the ladder. Their flashlights converged on their position.

"Stop!" a voice commanded from the floor.

Tito didn't look back. He scrambled up the rungs, the metal cold against his hands. Gunfire erupted from below, rounds pinging off the ladder and the concrete shaft. One grazed Tito's calf, a searing line of pain, but he didn't slow.

They reached the roof hatch. Vukovi kicked it open. The cold night air rushed in, carrying the smell of

the river.

They spilled out onto the flat concrete roof of the data center. The city of New Belgrade lay spread out before them, dark and silent. The blackout was total. The high-tech fortress was blind.

"Where to?" Marko asked, checking his weapon.

Tito looked toward the river. "Back to the shadows. The network will do the rest."

As they moved to the edge of the roof, the first emergency sirens began to wail in the distance, signaling the failure of the Consortium's control. The leash had been severed, and the chaos was just beginning.

CHAPTER 17: THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

The rooftop was a windswept plateau in a dead city. Below, the grid of New Belgrade was a void, a landscape of absence defined only by the faint, intermittent flicker of emergency generators kicking in at critical intersections. The silence was profound, broken only by the rhythmic thrum of the river current against the concrete pillars of the data center.

Tito moved to the parapet, his silhouette merging with

the darkness. He looked north, toward the old city.

The Ušće tower, usually a beacon of control and dominance, was a jagged tooth against the horizon, dark and impotent.

"The packet is propagating," Petrović said, leaning against the cooling unit, his breath pluming in the cold air. He tapped the screen of his device. "I'm seeing ping responses from servers in Sarajevo. Skopje. Even a handshake from a terminal in Banja Luka. The Consortium's internal audit trails are lighting up. They're seeing the subsidy ledgers. They're seeing the Russian wire transfers."

"Will it be enough?" Marko asked, reloading his magazine with a sharp, metallic click. "To turn the public?"

"Information is a seed," Tito said, his voice a low rumble. He did not turn from the view. "In a controlled environment, it is crushed. But in the

dark? In the chaos of a blackout? It becomes a weed. It grows in the cracks of their authority. The people of Serbia are proud. They tolerate the Consortium because it provides stability. When they see they are being bled dry to fund their own occupiers, that stability evaporates."

A distant, rhythmic thumping began to echo across the water. Searchlights cut through the gloom, sweeping the river surface.

"*Helicopters*," Vukovi noted, his eye sky. "They're sweeping the perimeter. They know we're on the roof."

"We can't go down," Marko said. "They've sealed the service entrance. We're boxed in."

Tito turned, his face illuminated by the faint glow of Petrovi's device. His expression was calculating. "The Consortium thinks in terms of containment. They look at the map and see borders,

walls, doors. They have forgotten the city's history."

He pointed to the east, where the old industrial district lay—a labyrinth of abandoned warehouses and decommissioned rail lines that bridged the gap between New Belgrade and the old city.

"The railway," Petrovi realized. "The line that runs parallel to the river. It's been dormant for a decade."

"It passes beneath the bridge," Tito said. "The patrol boats monitor the surface. The helicopters scan the banks. But the rail tunnel is a blind spot in their thermal imaging. Too much concrete. Too much interference."

"It's a fifty-meter drop to the embankment,"

Vukovi calculated, eyeing the edge of

"We have rope," Marko said, unspooling a coil from his pack.

"Go," Tito commanded. "Vukovi first."

anchor. Petrovi, you're next. Protec
Vukovi hooked the rope to a ventila
testing the tension. He swung his legs over the
parapet and vanished into the blackness. A moment
later, a sharp tug signaled the anchor was set.

Petrovi hesitated, looking at the scr
purge is complete at the source, but the Consortium
is initiating a counter-protocol. They're trying to
isolate the Serbian nodes."

"Descend," Tito ordered, placing a hand on the
man's shoulder. "The data has already left the
building. You cannot stop the wind by catching it."

Petrovi nodded and climbed over the
watched him descend, then turned to Marko. "The
rope won't hold all of us if they breach the hatch.
You go next. Lay down covering fire if they spot
us."

"I'm not leaving you to be the last man, Marshal."

"I am not a man on this roof," Tito replied, his eyes

hard as iron. "I am an idea. Ideas do not die in the fire. Go."

Marko clapped a hand to Tito's shoulder and disappeared over the side.

Tito stood alone on the roof of the data center. The sound of the helicopters grew louder, the searchlights sweeping closer. He could hear the shouts of the security forces breaching the stairwell below, the heavy thud of boots on the metal hatch.

He took one last look at the darkened city. The brutalist blocks of New Belgrade stood as monolithic tombstones of a failed socialist experiment, while the glass towers represented the gilded cage of modern imperialism. In the darkness between them, a spark had been lit.

Tito slung his rifle over his back and vaulted over the parapet. The rope burned through his gloved hands as he rappelled down the sheer concrete wall. The wind

whipped at him, carrying the scent of oil and river mud.

Below, the others were already moving across the gravel embankment toward the rusted arches of the railway bridge. Tito hit the ground in a crouch, the pain in his calf flaring, but he ignored it.

He caught up to the group at the mouth of the tunnel. The darkness inside was absolute, a maw of concrete and decay.

"The sensors?" Tito asked Petrovi .
"Offline," Petrovi confirmed, check
"The blackout killed the motion detectors in the old
sector."

They entered the tunnel. The air was stale, heavy with the smell of damp earth and rust. The tracks beneath their feet were buried under years of silt and debris.

As they moved deeper into the bowels of the city, the sound of the pursuit faded, replaced by the dripping

of water and the distant, echoing roar of the city above.

"The data is bleeding," Petrovi whispered silence, a mantra of victory. "The Consortium is exposed."

"For now," Tito said, his voice echoing off the curved walls. "But they will react. They will tighten the leash on the other republics. Slovenia and Croatia will lock down their digital borders. The NATO integration protocols will activate."

"So what do we do?" Marko asked.

Tito stopped, turning to face them in the pitch black.

In the faint reflection of Petrovi's scarred face, his eyes burned with a cold, tactical fire.

"Tomorrow," Tito said, "we wake the sleeping giants. We show Slovenia that the EU is a graveyard of sovereignty. We show Croatia that NATO is a shield that offers no warmth. And we show Serbia that the

Russian bear does not share its meat."

He began walking again, his silhouette dissolving into the dark.

"We do not fight them with guns alone," he called back. "We fight them with their own data. We fight them with history. And we will tear down their walls, brick by digital brick."

CHAPTER 17: CONCRETE SEA

The rooftop was a frozen expanse of tar and gravel. The wind howled over the parapet, carrying the acrid scent of burning transformers from the grid failure below. Tito moved to the edge, his silhouette stark against the faint starlight filtering through the smog. He peered down into the labyrinth of New Belgrade's streets. The darkness was no longer an ally; it was a shroud that concealed the movements of the hunter.

"The boats are gone," Vukovi stated

Danube. The river was a black mirror, fragmented by the bobbing lights of patrol vessels and the sweeping beams of searchlights mounted on the bridges. "They've sealed the waterway. Thermal imaging is active on the riverbanks."

Petrovi checked his tablet, the screen blue glow on his face. "Local comms are jammed. The Consortium has initiated a blackout protocol. We're blind."

"Then we move on foot," Tito said, his voice low and gravelly. He turned away from the river, facing the city. "The Consortium views New Belgrade as a fortress. They expect us to flee toward the perimeter, to the bridges or the river. They will not expect us to dive into the heart of the beast."

"The residential blocks?" Marko asked, reloading his rifle. "That's a maze. No cover."

"Exactly," Tito replied. "Precision targeting requires

line of sight and coordination. In a high-density urban grid, with infrastructure failing, their advantage diminishes. We become ghosts in the machine."

He signaled the team to the fire escape on the opposite side of the roof, away from the server farm's immediate perimeter. The metal ladder groaned under their weight as they descended into the shadowed alleyway between the data center and the next monolithic tower.

They hit the ground running, sticking to the walls. The silence of the blackout was heavy, broken by the distant wail of sirens and the rhythmic thrum of heavy drones patrolling the airspace above. The streets of New Belgrade were laid out in a rigid, brutalist grid, a remnant of socialist planning overlaid with capitalist efficiency. It was a landscape of sharp angles and blind corners.

They moved through the service lanes, the gravel

crunching under their boots. Suddenly, a high-pitched whine cut through the air.

"Drone!" Vukovi hissed.

A quad-rotor unit dropped from the sky, its red optical sensor sweeping the alley. Tito shoved Petrovi into a recessed doorway, shielding with his body. Marko and Vukovi flattened a wall.

The drone hovered, its rotors churning the stagnant air. It was a hunter-killer model, sleek and black, equipped with a non-lethal suppression system designed for urban pacification. It emitted a low-frequency pulse, searching for bio-signatures.

Tito held his breath, his hand tightening on his pistol. The pulse washed over them, a wave of static that made his teeth ache.

"Thermal dampeners are holding," Petrovi whispered, his eyes fixed on the drone's sensor array. "But not for long. The ambient temperature is dropping."

Tito calculated the distance. A direct shot would

alert every unit in the sector. He reached into his tactical vest and pulled out a small, cylindrical object—a sonic disruptor, jury-rigged by Stevan's techs. It was crude, a ball bearing suspended in a magnetic field.

He waited for the drone to drift closer, its light washing over the graffiti-stained concrete. As it turned to scan the opposite wall, Tito rolled the disruptor across the ground. It clattered softly, drawing the drone's attention. The machine pivoted, its sensor locking onto the movement.

Tito lunged. He didn't shoot; he moved with the brutal speed of a man fighting for survival. He grabbed the drone from below, his hands gripping the rotor arms, and slammed it hard against the brick wall. The plastic casing cracked. The rotors stuttered, flailing wildly, slicing a gash across Tito's forearm. He ignored the pain, twisting the machine until the

central processor gave a sickening crunch. The drone dropped to the ground, twitching.

"Move," Tito rasped, wiping blood from his arm.

"Before its controller pings the location."

They sprinted out of the alley and onto a wider boulevard. The scale of the city was oppressive.

Towering residential blocks rose like cliffs on either side, their windows dark and lifeless. The street was littered with abandoned electric vehicles, their systems fried by the surge.

Ahead, a checkpoint had formed. The Consortium had deployed mobile units, illuminating the intersection with harsh floodlights. Armored personnel carriers blocked the road, and soldiers in full tactical gear were checking the few civilians brave enough to be outside.

"We can't go through," Marko said, dropping to one knee behind a concrete planter. "It's a kill zone."

Tito looked up. The buildings were connected by

skybridges, glass tunnels suspended twenty stories in the air. "We go over."

He pointed to a service ladder mounted on the side of a residential block, leading up to the maintenance level. It was exposed, but the darkness offered some cover.

"Petrovi, you first. Secure the top. covering fire only if detected. No noise."

Petrovi slung his tablet and began to movements fluid. Tito followed, the pain in his calf and arm flaring with every rung. The wind whipped at them, threatening to tear them from the ladder.

Below, the soldiers swept the street with their lights, unaware of the shadows climbing the vertical face of the building.

They reached the skybridge level, pulling themselves onto a narrow maintenance catwalk. The glass bridge stretched out before them, a fragile artery connecting

the two towers. Inside, the emergency lights cast long, sterile shadows.

"Cross quickly," Tito ordered. "Stay low."

They moved across the glass, the city sprawling beneath them. In the distance, the server farm was illuminated by a cordon of military vehicles, a testament to the chaos they had unleashed. The data was bleeding out, a virus in the Consortium's veins, and Tito was the carrier, moving through the host.

As they reached the far side, Tito paused, looking back at the old city across the river. The contrast was never clearer. The past was a ruin, the present a cage. But in the darkness between them, the Marshal was moving, and the hunt had just begun.

CHAPTER 18: THE BRUTALIST MAZE

The service door at the end of the skybridge hissed open, admitting them into the sterile silence of the residential tower's maintenance corridor. The air here was filtered, carrying the faint scent of ozone and recycled oxygen—a stark contrast to the river-chilled wind of the exterior. They moved through the concrete labyrinth, the rhythmic hum of the building's ventilation system a low drone that masked their footsteps.

"Where are we?" Marko whispered, checking the corridor

markers. "Sector 4. These are Consortium housing units."

"Perfect," Tito said, his voice echoing slightly in the narrow passage. "They won't look for rats in the walls of their own house."

They descended via a service elevator, bypassing the security locks with a bypass key provided by Petrovi's toolkit. The elevator whirred past floors designated for mid-level administrators and technical staff. The screens inside the elevator flickered with static, the blackout disrupting the data streams.

The doors opened onto a parking garage on the sub-level, a cavernous space filled with rows of electric sedans and armored SUVs. The emergency lights cast long, angular shadows across the concrete pillars.

"We need transport," Vukovi said, eyes heavy-duty

utility van near the exit ramp. "Something that won't draw attention."

Petrovi moved to a terminal mounted on the wall, his fingers flying across the touchscreen. "I can override the ignition protocols for a specific vehicle, but it will trigger a localized alert."

"Do it," Tito ordered, scanning the garage entrance. "We need to be mobile before the patrols widen their search radius."

Petrovi plugged a cable into the terminal. A code scrolled across the screen. A beep sounded, and the lights on a gray utility van flashed once.

"Authorized," Petrovi said. "But humans are flagging an unauthorized access attempt."

They moved quickly, piling into the van. Marko took the wheel, Tito riding shotgun. Petrovi secured the rear. The engine hummed with a quiet electric hum.

Marko guided the van toward the exit ramp, the barrier

arm lifting automatically as the vehicle approached. They emerged onto a service road that ran parallel to the main boulevard. The blackout was still in effect, but the streetlights here were on a backup grid, illuminating the road in a sickly yellow glow.

"Head north," Tito instructed, consulting a holographic map projected from the dash. "Toward the old industrial zone. We need to link up with Stevan's network."

"The Consortium is broadcasting a city-wide alert," Petrovi said, watching his tablet. "There's a description of our biometrics. Facial recognition is active on all public cameras."

"Then we stay off the main arteries," Tito replied. "Use the service roads. Blend in with the maintenance traffic."

They drove in tense silence, the van moving through the darkened city. The buildings of New Belgrade

loomed overhead, monolithic blocks of concrete and glass that seemed to close in on them. In the distance, the lights of the military checkpoint flared like a beacon.

Suddenly, a pair of headlights appeared in the rearview mirror, closing fast.

"Vehicle approaching," Marko warned. "Black sedan. No plates."

"Consortium security," Tito said. "They've spotted us."

The sedan accelerated, pulling alongside the van. The window rolled down, revealing a tactical officer in a ballistic mask, raising a submachine gun.

"Brace!" Marko shouted, swerving the van sharply to the left.

Rounds pinged off the van's armored side panels. Marko floored the accelerator, the electric motor whining as they sped down the narrow service road. The sedan gave

chase, its engine roaring.

"We can't outrun them in this," Marko said, gripping the wheel. "They'll call in reinforcements."

"Take the next turn," Tito commanded, his eyes scanning the surroundings. "Into the construction site."

Marko wrenched the wheel, sending the van skidding onto a gravel path that led into a half-finished skyscraper. The sedan followed, its tires spinning on the loose stones.

They entered the skeleton of the building, a cavern of exposed steel beams and unfinished concrete floors. Marko drove deeper, the van bouncing over debris, until they reached a dead end—a pile of construction materials blocking the path.

"Out!" Tito ordered.

They bailed from the van as the sedan screeched to a halt behind them, its headlights piercing the

dust-filled air. Officers poured out, weapons raised. Tito grabbed a steel rebar from the pile, his face set in a grim mask. "Vukovi, flank left. Petrovi, stay behind me."

The officers advanced cautiously, their lights sweeping the shadows. Tito stepped forward, the rebar held like a cudgel. He moved with the sudden, explosive speed of a predator. He struck the first officer across the helmet, the impact ringing through the steel skeleton. Before the man hit the ground, Tito disarmed the second, twisting the weapon from his grasp and driving a knee into his chest.

Vukovi and Marko engaged the flank, their movements precise and lethal. The confined space neutralized the officers' numerical advantage. Within seconds, the Consortium team was on the ground, incapacitated.

"Grab their radios," Tito ordered, breathing heavily.

"And their ammunition."

Petrovi collected the devices, his hand slightly. "They've tracked the van's GPS. More units are converging on this sector."

"Then we leave the van," Tito said. "We move on foot through the construction site. It connects to the old rail yard."

They climbed the scaffolding, ascending the unfinished floors. From the twentieth floor, the city spread out below them, a patchwork of light and shadow. The Consortium patrols were converging on the construction site, their lights forming a tightening circle.

"We're boxed in," Marko observed.

"Not yet," Tito said, pointing to a skybridge that connected their building to a neighboring structure. "We cross there. They won't expect us to move vertically."

They ran across the narrow bridge, the wind whipping

at their clothes. Below, the officers swarmed the construction site, unaware that their quarry was already moving above them.

As they reached the safety of the next building, Tito paused, looking back at the chaos they had left behind. The data was spreading, the Consortium was in disarray, and the hunt was spreading across the city. But the real battle was just beginning.

"Stevan's safe house is three blocks said, checking his coordinates. "But the area is crawling with patrols."

"We'll find a way," Tito said, his voice steady. "The city belongs to the people, not the Consortium. And tonight, the people are waking up."

They descended into the shadows of the next building, disappearing into the maze of New Belgrade, ready to ignite the next phase of their revolution.

CHAPTER 18: ECHOES IN THE IRON

The skybridge terminated at a maintenance access door on the forty-second floor of the residential monolith. Marko placed a shaped charge on the lock, a small, precise charge that shattered the mechanism with a muffled pop rather than a bang. They slipped into the building, the silence of the blackout pressing in on them like a physical weight.

The corridor was long and lined with identical doors, a testament to the uniformity of New Belgrade's

housing blocks. Emergency strips on the floor cast a ghostly red glow, barely enough to see by. The air tasted of recycled dust and ozone.

"We need to get to ground level," Vuk checked the corridor. "The subway tunnels. The old network runs beneath the old city. It's the only way to cross the river without being seen."

"The Consortium will have the stations sealed," Petrovi warned, clutching his tablet. pale in the device's light. "They've isolated the grid, but the physical choke points are still active. Thermal scans, biometric checkpoints."

"Then we avoid the stations," Tito said. He moved to a window, peering down into the courtyard between the blocks. The space below was a concrete canyon, empty save for the skeletal remains of playground equipment and a few stalled electric trams. "There are maintenance shafts. Ventilation access. Old

construction routes. The city has layers. The Consortium only sees the surface."

He turned to Petrovi. "Can you access the building's schematics?"

Petrovi shook his head. "Local network access is disabled. Hardlines are cut. I'm running on cached data from Stevan's upload."

"Then we find them the old way," Tito said.

They moved through the building, descending stairwells and navigating service corridors. The silence was unnerving. In a building housing thousands, there was no sound of life, only the hum of emergency ventilation and the distant, rhythmic thud of heavy boots in the stairwells above. The Consortium was sweeping the tower floor by floor. They reached the sub-level parking garage, a vast, echoing cavern of concrete pillars and shadowed alcoves. The air was thick with the smell of stale

exhaust and damp concrete. The few cars remaining were husks, their windows shattered, stripped of anything valuable.

"The access shaft should be near the north wall," Marko said, consulting a rough map sketched on his forearm. "Used for waste disposal and electrical maintenance."

"Movement," Vukovi hissed, dropping concrete pillar. He gestured toward the far end of the garage.

Three Consortium troopers were moving through the shadows, their night-vision goggles glowing with faint green luminescence. They moved with the synchronized precision of a pack, scanning the area with short-barreled assault rifles.

Tito signaled for silence. They were boxed in. The shaft was fifty meters away, across open ground. The troopers were blocking the path.

"Distraction," Tito whispered. "Marko, Left

flank. Draw them away. Petrovi, with signal."

Marko and Vukovi nodded, melting into shadows. Tito watched the troopers. They were moving methodically, checking vehicles, their comms crackling with low static. They were hunting.

A sudden clatter echoed from the left—a metal pipe rolling across concrete. The troopers snapped their heads toward the sound, weapons raising.

"Contact left!" one shouted.

They moved toward the noise, leaving the right flank exposed. Tito tapped Petrovi's shoulder. "Now."

They sprinted across the open space, keeping low, using the pillars for cover. The sound of gunfire erupted from the left—short, controlled bursts.

Marko and Vukovi were engaging, briefly.

Tito and Petrovi reached the north wall. The steel door marked 'Maintenance Access 4' stood locked.

Tito slammed his shoulder against it. It held. He kicked near the handle, the steel groaning but not yielding.

"Cover me," Tito grunted. He pulled a pry bar from his pack and jammed it into the gap. He threw his weight against it, the muscles in his back straining. The metal shrieked and the door popped open a few inches.

Petrovi squeezed through the gap. Tito pulling the door shut just as a flashlight beam swept past the narrow window.

Inside, a narrow staircase descended into darkness. The air was colder here, smelling of earth and rust. They hurried down, the sound of the firefight fading above them.

They descended three levels, reaching a heavy iron grate that blocked the shaft. Below, the faint rush of water could be heard.

"The sewer system," Petrovi realized. to

the old rail tunnels near the river."

Tito gripped the grate. It was rusted shut. He produced a small cutting torch from his kit—a low-heat thermal lance. It hissed as it cut through the iron bars, the glow illuminating their tense faces.

As the grate gave way, a voice echoed down the stairwell above them.

"Target located. Sub-level maintenance. Converge."

They had been tracked. The thermal signature of the cutting torch had betrayed them.

Tito kicked the grate open. "Down. Now."

They dropped into the darkness, landing in shallow, rushing water. The sewer tunnel was narrow, brick-lined, and ancient—a relic of a different era beneath the modern concrete. Tito pulled the grate back into place as best he could, then signaled for movement.

They waded through the ankle-deep water, moving fast.

The sound of boots on the stairs above grew louder, followed by the heavy thud of breaching charges on the maintenance door.

"The tunnel leads to the river embankment,"

Petrovi said, checking his tablet's controls. "We can get to the old rail lines before they seal the exits..."

A spotlight cut through the darkness from a ventilation shaft high above, pinning them in a harsh white glare.

"Targets confirmed," a voice boomed through a loudspeaker. "Surrender immediately."

Tito didn't hesitate. He shoved Petrovi into a niche in the tunnel wall. "Stay down."

He raised his rifle, aiming at the spotlight. The tunnel was a kill zone, but it was also a funnel. The Consortium couldn't flank them here.

Gunfire erupted from above. Rounds splashed into the water, ricocheting off the brickwork. Tito returned

fire, the muzzle flash lighting up the tunnel in strobing bursts. He moved backward, covering Petrovi's retreat.

"The junction is twenty meters!" Petrovi said over the noise.

Tito fired a controlled burst at the source of the light, shattering the lens. Darkness returned, but the troopers were already rappelling down the shafts, their tactical lights cutting through the gloom.

"Run," Tito commanded.

They splashed through the water, the tunnel widening as they neared a massive junction chamber. Old rail tracks intersected here, buried under silt. A rusted train car sat derelict on a siding, a massive, hulking shadow.

They scrambled up an embankment and into the open air of the rail yard. The Danube was visible in the distance, a black expanse under a sky lit by the

distant glow of the old city. The rail yard was a graveyard of industry, overgrown with weeds and silence.

But the silence was broken by the rising whine of engines. Armored vehicles were rolling through the rail yard, their headlights sweeping across the tracks. They had been flanked, cut off from the river.

Tito pulled Petrovi behind the derelict
"They're herding us."

"The data," Petrovi gasped, checking
"It's bypassing the Serbian nodes. It's hitting the EU servers. The Consortium is trying to scrub it, but it's too late. It's already in the open."

"Good," Tito said. He looked at the encroaching lights, the vehicles closing in, the troopers advancing from the tunnel mouth. They were surrounded.

"But we need to survive the hour," Tito added.

He looked up at the train car. It was old,

Soviet-made, a relic of his time. The rust was thick, but the structure was sound.

"Marko, Vukovi," he spoke into the frequency burst. "Status."

"Pinched," Marko's voice crackled back, strained.

"West side of the yard. We can't break through."

"Converge on the locomotive," Tito ordered. "The cabin. It's armored. We hold there."

He turned to Petrovi. "Once we're set to transmit the final packet. The location data. The Consortium's safe houses. The shipping manifests. Everything. Burn it all."

"And you?" Petrovi asked.

Tito chambered a round, the sound loud in the sudden lull of the battle. He looked at the approaching headlights, the shadows of soldiers moving through the weeds.

"I will buy you the time," Tito said.

He moved out from behind the train car, into the open,

raising his rifle. The Marshal stood alone against the encroaching lights, a ghost of the past facing the machinery of the present. The hunt had ended; the siege had begun.

CHAPTER 19: THE SOVEREIGN'S GAMBIT

The rail yard became a bowl of echoes. The armored vehicles, sleek and black against the pre-dawn gray, formed a perimeter around the derelict locomotive. Their headlights cut through the mist rising from the Danube, illuminating the rusted hull of the Soviet-era engine where Tito's faction had made their stand.

Inside the cramped cabin, Petrović's hands舞动 across the holographic interface of his portable server. The air was thick with the smell of ozone and

old grease. Outside, the rhythmic thud of Consortium heavy boots on gravel marked the tightening ring of steel.

"They're deploying breaching teams on the north and south flanks," Marko reported from the shattered window, peering through a pair of thermal binoculars. "Standard pincer formation. They want the server, not necessarily us alive."

"Let them try," Vukovi growled, checking of his assault rifle. He took a position behind the rusted boiler plate, the only cover available.

Tito stood in the center of the cabin, his silhouette framed by the pale light of the console. He was calm, the chaos of the external world seemingly unable to touch the stillness within him. He was listening—not to the engines, but to the frequency of history turning.

"Petrovi," Tito said, his voice a low rumble.

through the tension. "Status of the upload."

"Seventy percent," Petrovi replied, on his forehead. "The Serbian firewall is collapsing, but the Consortium's central AI is counter-punching. It's trying to isolate our packet. If they cut the hardline before it hits the open net, the evidence dies."

"They won't cut the line," Tito said. "Not yet. They want to trace it back to Stevan. They are greedy for the source."

As if on cue, a voice boomed from a loudspeaker on the nearest armored vehicle, amplified and distorted.

"Marshal Tito. You are surrounded. Surrender the server and the data packet. We have a sniper with a high-velocity round aimed at your transmission array. Your defiance ends in the dirt of this yard."

Tito moved to the window, exposing himself to the glare. He looked out at the vehicle bearing the
i n s i g n i a o f G e n e r a l D r a g a n M i l i . H e
General

was watching, likely from the safety of a command vehicle nearby.

"Dragan," Tito spoke softly, knowing the microphones would pick it up. "You serve a new empire, draped in the flag of security. I served a nation of brothers. You fear a ghost because you know the people still remember the living."

"Last chance, Marshal," the voice crackled.

"Seventy-five percent," Petrovi whisp
"They're probing the connection."

"Marko, Vukovi," Tito said, turning b
men. "When the breach comes, you hold the flanks.
Do not let them near the server. Petrov
only on the percentage."

"Eighty percent."

The first shot rang out, shattering the glass of the cabin window. It wasn't a sniper round, but a warning burst from a vehicle-mounted machine gun, stitching a

line of holes across the boiler plate.

"Return fire!" Tito ordered.

Marko and Vukovi leaned out, their barking, spitting casings onto the floor of the cabin. The sudden volley forced the lead armored vehicle to reverse, its reactive armor systems activating with a dull thud.

But the Consortium response was immediate. Smoke canisters arced through the air, landing around the locomotive, billowing thick, choking gray clouds. Through the haze, the silhouettes of troopers advanced, their movements synchronized by tactical links.

"They're using thermal smokescreens," Marko coughed, firing blindly into the fog. "We can't see them!"

"Petrovi, time!" Tito barked, stepping to cover the technician with his own body.

"Ninety percent! The packet is fragmenting and

reassembling across the EU grid. The Consortium is trying to scrub it, but it's replicating. It's out of their hands now."

The hull of the locomotive shuddered under a heavy impact. A breaching ram from a heavy armored carrier struck the rear of the cabin, buckling the steel. The door was torn from its hinges.

Vukovi pivoted, firing point-blank into the opening. A Consortium trooper fell back, armor smoking. Two more took his place, their rifles raised.

"Down!" Tito roared.

He shoved Petrovi to the floor as a flare detonated in the doorway. The cabin filled with blinding light and a deafening ring. Tito's ears rang, but his training took over. He swung the butt of his rifle, striking the first trooper in the throat, then disarmed the second, twisting the weapon away and driving the man back into the fog with a kick.

"Ninety-five percent!" Petrovi screamed, his voice lost in the din,

his eyes glued to the screen, oblivious to the violence inches away.

Outside, the roar of engines intensified. More vehicles were closing in, sealing the perimeter. The tactical display on Petrovi's screen icons converging on their position, a tightening noose of digital and physical force.

"The line is secure!" Petrovi yelled the final firewall!"

A massive explosion rocked the locomotive. The Consortium had abandoned restraint. A shoulder-fired missile struck the rear of the engine, blowing the coupling apart. The cabin tilted, throwing them against the bulkhead.

Tito grabbed the server rack, stabilizing it as sparks rained down from the ceiling.

"Transmit!" Tito commanded, his voice cutting through the ringing in his ears.

"Done!" Petrovi shouted. "The pack on

the open net. Leaked to every major news outlet in Europe. The shipping manifests, the Consortium's illegal arms deals, the bribes to the Serbian oligarchs... it's all there."

The firing outside stopped abruptly. The silence was more jarring than the gunfire.

The loudspeaker crackled again, but the voice was different—strained, panicked.

"General Mili, we have a problem. The public. CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera... they're broadcasting the files. The EU Commission is demanding an explanation."

Tito stepped out of the ruined cabin, raising his hands slowly. He stood atop the wrecked locomotive, a silhouette against the rising sun that was beginning to burn through the smoke.

General Mili emerged from his commando his face pale, his uniform immaculate despite the grime of

the yard. He looked up at Tito, the distance between them filled with the weight of a century of conflict.

"You've unleashed chaos, Broz," Mili said.
"The Balkans will burn."

"I have unleashed the truth," Tito corrected, his voice carrying across the yard. "And the truth is the only foundation upon which a sovereign state can be built. You built a cage of treaties and corporations. I have handed the key to the prisoners."

Mili hesitated. The political fallout was beginning. He could not execute the Marshal of Yugoslavia on camera, not with the world watching the leaked files. The narrative had shifted. The hunt was no longer a security operation; it was a scandal.

"Secure the prisoner," Mili ordered, his voice hollow. "But no harm comes to him."

Troopers advanced, cautiously climbing the wreckage. Tito did not resist. He looked at Marko, and

Vukovi, who were being restrained ne
eyes met. The mission was complete.

As they were led away, the first drone of the
international press fleet breached the exclusion zone,
hovering above the rail yard. The lenses were
rolling. The Marshal had returned, and in his defeat,
he had shattered the peace of the corrupt.

THE END

CHAPTER 19: THE IRON CURTAIN FALLS

The night air was cold against Tito's face, carrying the scent of damp earth and the metallic tang of spent gunpowder. He stood alone in the center of the rail yard, a silhouette against the sweeping searchlights of the Consortium vehicles. The data packet was uploading; the corruption spreading through the Consortium's networks like a virus. But the physical threat remained, tightening its noose.

"Marshall," Vukovi's voice crackled

are in position. The locomotive is secure."

"Prepare the defenses," Tito replied, his gaze fixed on the lead armored vehicle. "Petrovi, longer?"

"Thirty seconds," Petrovi answered, his trembling but focused. "The encryption is breaking. The EU servers are flagging the data. It's going public."

"Make it count."

Tito raised his rifle, the iron sights settling on the driver's viewport of the lead vehicle. The engine roared, the vehicle accelerating toward him, intent on crushing him under its weight. He didn't flinch. He squeezed the trigger. The round shattered the reinforced glass, and the vehicle swerved, crashing into a rusted rail switch.

The yard erupted in gunfire. Troopers poured from the vehicles, using the wreckage as cover. Tito moved with

practiced lethality, dropping two troopers with precise shots before sprinting toward the derelict locomotive. The heavy steel beast stood like a tombstone of the old era, its boiler cold, its strength enduring.

He scrambled up the ladder to the cabin, sliding inside just as a hail of rounds sparked against the metal hull. Inside, Marko and Vukov positioned at the windows, returning fire.

"They're flanking the right," Marko shouted, reloading.

"Hold the line," Tito commanded, taking a position at the left window. "Petrovi?"

"Released!" Petrovi yelled. "It's out the safe houses, the Consortium's financial ties to the oligarchs... it's all over the dark web. The news outlets are picking it up."

A sudden silence fell over the comms channel of the

Consortium. The coordinated assault faltered. The troopers' radios were flooded with static and panicked chatter. The vehicles stopped advancing, their lights flickering as internal systems glitched.

"The blackout is spreading," Vuković said, firing a burst at a trooper attempting to flank them.

"The network is collapsing."

The lead vehicle's hatch popped open. A figure emerged, not a trooper, but a man in a pristine uniform, untouched by the grime of the battle.

General Dragan Milić. He stood atop the carrier, a megaphone in hand.

"Josip!" Milić's voice boomed across the carrier, amplified and distorted. "Your data is a ghost. We scrubbed the servers. You have won nothing but a temporary inconvenience. Surrender, and you may yet see a trial."

Tito stepped out of the locomotive cabin, standing

exposed on the coupling between the cars. He looked down at Mili, a small figure massive machine of war.

"General," Tito projected his voice, a deep baritone that carried without aid. "You scrub the data, but you cannot scrub the truth. The Balkans are waking. You think you own the grid? You think you own the future?"

He raised his hand, pointing to the horizon to the south.

"Look."

On the horizon, lights were appearing. Not the white of Consortium patrols, but the flashing blue and red of local police, the headlights of civilian vehicles, and the distinct green of military lorries approaching from the direction of the old city center.

"The people are not data points, General," Tito shouted. "They are the iron in the blood of this land. And you have starved them long enough."

Mili looked at the approaching lights

Tito. The confidence on his face cracked, replaced by a cold realization. The data leak hadn't just exposed corruption; it had activated the dormant networks of the old state—the loyalists, the forgotten soldiers, the citizens who remembered a time when Belgrade answered to itself, not to Brussels or Moscow.

"Take him!" Mili ordered, but his troops hesitating. Their radios were dead. Their command structure was severed. The approaching vehicles were not Consortium; they were local garrison units, their loyalty bought by Stevan's network and the undeniable evidence of foreign exploitation broadcast across the city.

The first shots came not from the locomotive, but from the perimeter. Consortium troopers turned to face the new threat, engaging the arriving garrison forces. The rail yard became a chaotic triangle of fire.

Mili scrambled back into his vehicle,

carrier revving its engine to retreat. Tito didn't let him go. He jumped from the train, landing heavily on the gravel, and sprinted toward the carrier. He fired through the rear grille, disabling the engine. The carrier lurched to a halt.

Tito wrenched the rear hatch open. Mili's sidearm drawn, his face pale.

"You are a relic, Tito," Mili spat. "Mili refuses to fade."

"History does not fade, General," Tito said, leveling his rifle. "It waits."

The sound of the shot was lost in the cacophony of the battle outside. Tito stepped back, leaving the carrier silent.

He climbed back onto the locomotive as the garrison forces overwhelmed the remaining Consortium troops. The battle was short, decisive. The Consortium, stripped of its technological edge and faced with a

unified local uprising, crumbled.

As dawn broke over the Danube, painting the concrete brutalism of New Belgrade in hues of orange and grey, the fighting ceased. The rail yard was littered with the wreckage of the night, but the sky was clear.

Petrovi emerged from the cabin, his face but triumphant. "The network is secure. The data is verified by independent watchdogs. The EU is issuing statements condemning the Consortium's operations. NATO is calling for an emergency session."

"They will talk," Tito said, wiping the grime from his face. "While we act."

Vukovi and Marko joined them, battered. They looked out over the rail yard where the garrison troops were securing the perimeter. The flag of the old Republic, the red star on a field of blue, was being raised on a crane in the distance.

"It's not a reunification yet," Marko said quietly.

"Slovenia and Croatia are still in the EU. Serbia is still in Russia's pocket."

Tito looked at the rising sun. The shadows of the skyscrapers were long, stretching across the city like fingers of a grasping hand.

"We have broken the leash in Belgrade," Tito said.

"We have exposed the puppeteers in Brussels. The Bosnians and the Kosovars see the path now. The Montenegrins and the Macedonians will question their masters."

He turned to his men, his eyes burning with the fire of a revolution just begun.

"The borders they drew in ink are written in sand. The tide is turning. We do not need to conquer the states one by one. We only need to show them that the cage has no bars. That the Consortium is a paper tiger."

He picked up a discarded Consortium tablet from the ground, its screen cracked but functional. He typed a single command, broadcasting a signal across all

freqencies.

"Comrades. Citizens. The Marshal has returned. The Republic stands. Rise."

Across the region, screens flickered to life. In Ljubljana, in Zagreb, in Sarajevo, in Priština, the message repeated. The data was the weapon; Tito was the will.

Tito dropped the tablet, crushing it under his boot. He looked at the city that had been his capital, now a battlefield of glass and steel.

"Let them assemble their coalitions. Let them sign their treaties. We have the people. And the people have nothing to lose but their chains."

He turned his back on the rail yard and walked toward the waiting garrison vehicles, his silhouette framed against the rising sun. The past had returned to haunt the present, and the haunting had just begun.

THE END