

THE MARSHAL'S RETURN

The dead do not negotiate.

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CHAPTER 1: THE ECHO OF SILENCE

The air in the bunker tasted of old concrete and ozone, a sterile fug that clung to the back of the throat. Dr. Elena Petrovi stood behind glass, watching the biometric monitors dance in frantic green rhythms. The hum of the cryogenic stabilization unit was the only sound, a low-frequency drone that vibrated through the soles of her shoes. It was the sound of a miracle, or perhaps, a catastrophic error in judgment. “He’s stabilizing,” said a voice from the comms unit

clipped to her lapel. It was Vukovi , the R&D division, his tone stripped of all emotion.

“Core temperature is rising. Neural activity is spiking in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. He’s dreaming.”

“He doesn’t dream, Director,” Elena corrected, her eyes fixed on the glass. “He processes. The implants handle the synaptic gaps. It’s just data retrieval.”

“Whatever it is, the algorithm says he’s conscious. Open the door, Doctor. We have a schedule to keep.”

Elena didn’t move. She looked at the figure suspended in the translucent gel, encased in a sarcophagus of polished steel and fiber optics. He looked smaller than the history books suggested. The lean, angular jawline was there, the distinct mustache, the shock of hair that had once been a defiant grey-white. But stripped of context, suspended in a nutrient bath, he was just a specimen. A relic of a world that had

burned itself out decades ago.

The year was 2026. Belgrade was a city of ghosts and drones. From the rooftop of the Institute, you could see the juxtaposition that defined the new reality: the brutalist shadows of the old federal ministries huddled against the shimmering, holographic facades of Russian and Chinese corporate towers. The Danube flowed sluggishly, carrying the silt of a continent that had fractured along ancient fault lines.

“E l e n a ,” V u k o v i ’ s v o i c e s h a r p e n e d .
door.”

She pressed her palm against the biometric scanner. The heavy steel door hissed, the pressure seal releasing with a sound like a dying breath. The smell of the room changed instantly, the sterile ozone replaced by the sharp tang of antiseptic and the biological musk of the nutrient solution.

The figure in the tank stirred.

It wasn't a violent awakening. It was a slow,

calculated return. The eyelids fluttered, revealing eyes that were dark, intense, and startlingly lucid. There was no confusion in them, no panic. There was only the immediate, predatory assessment of his surroundings.

Josip Broz Tito opened his eyes.

He blinked once, twice, the gel clearing from his vision. His gaze swept the room, cataloging the equipment, the lights, the glass. Then, it landed on Elena.

He spoke. His voice was a dry rasp, unused for nearly half a century, but the cadence was unmistakable. The heavy Slavic accent, the clipped, authoritative rhythm.

“Where is the Politburo?”

Elena froze. The question was so simple, so direct, it felt like a physical blow.

Director Vukovi stepped into the room
flanked

by two security personnel in tactical gear that looked more suited to a war zone than a medical facility. He held a tablet, his face illuminated by its cold blue light.

“ Marshal,” Vukovi said, the title drawing a strange mixture of reverence and irony. “There is no Politburo. Not the one you remember.”

Tito’s eyes shifted to Vukovi. He moved slowly, testing the resistance of the gel. He looked at his own hands—wrinkled, pale, but undeniably alive. He seemed to accept the physical reality before addressing the political one.

“No Politburo?” Tito repeated. He gripped the edge of the sarcophagus, his knuckles white. “Then who is managing the Five-Year Plan? Who is holding the line against the imperialists?”

Elena felt a cold shiver run down her spine. This was the crux of the problem, the variable they had debated

for months in sterile conference rooms. The procedure had worked. They had restarted the heart, repaired the cellular decay, and rebooted the brain. But the data was incomplete. The neural mapping showed a gap. A void.

He remembered the Cold War. He remembered the Non-Aligned Movement, the split with Stalin, the construction of the third way. But the last thirty years—the brutal dissolution of the federation, the wars of ethnic cleansing, the siege of Sarajevo, the fields of Srebrenica—were a blank slate. He had slept through the apocalypse.

“The Five-Year Plan is a memory, Marshal,”

Vuković said, stepping closer. He gestured toward the window. “Look. Outside.”

Tito pulled himself up, the gel dripping from his shoulders. He stood tall, his posture rigid, military-perfect. He walked to the glass, leaving wet

footprints on the floor. He looked out at the view
Vukovi offered—not the lush forests
the Adriatic coast of Dalmatia, but the grey,
sprawling expanse of 2026 Belgrade.

He saw the smoke rising from the industrial sector,
the drone patrols circling the skyline like mechanical
vultures. He saw the flags flying from the embassies.
The Russian tricolor. The Chinese red. The EU blue,
hanging limp on a building that used to house the
Yugoslav presidency.

Tito's face remained impassive, a mask of stone. But
his eyes narrowed. He wasn't seeing the city as it
was; he was seeing it as a tactical map.

“Slovenia?” he asked, his voice low.

“Member of the EU and NATO,” Vuk
“Since 2004.”

“Croatia?”

“Member of both. Since 2013.”

Tito turned slowly, his gaze locking

There was a terrifying stillness in him, the calm before a storm that had been brewing for decades.

“Montenegro? North Macedonia?”

“N A T O members,” Vukovi said. “Balkan treaty.”

“And Bosnia?” Tito asked. “And Kosovo?”

“Waiting in the lobby,” Vukovi said. “beg for entry. For protection.”

Tito processed this. He didn't look shocked. He looked vindicated, in a grim, fatalistic way. He stared at the Russian flag snapping in the wind on a building across the street.

“And us?” he asked. “The Serbs? The heart of the federation?”

Elena watched him, holding her breath. She saw the old fire returning, the strategic mind clicking into gear, analyzing the board. He wasn't seeing the tragedy of it yet. He was seeing the geometry of power. The betrayal.

“We are the Russian Federation's closest partner in

the Balkans,” Vukovi said. “We are Marshal. And we are the anchor.”

Tito let out a short, sharp breath. It might have been a laugh, but it held no humor. He turned away from the window, facing them. He looked at Elena, then at Vukovi, then at the armed guards. His symbol on Vukovi’s uniform—a stylized eagle—was a pale imitation of the old crest.

“Imperialists,” Tito murmured. He tested the word, tasting it. “All of them. The wolves in the West and the bear in the East.”

He took a step forward, his bare feet slapping against the wet floor. The guards tightened their grip on their weapons.

“Where is the Party?” Tito demanded, his voice rising, echoing off the sterile walls. “Where is the Central Committee? I need to see the reports on the border deployments immediately.”

Elena looked at Vukovi. The Director

unreadable, but his knuckles were white where he gripped the tablet.

“ Marshal ,” Vukovi said softly . “ There is no Committee. The country you built is gone. It was torn apart by the very brotherhood and unity you championed.”

Tito stopped. The phrase hung in the air, toxic and heavy.

Brotherhood and Unity.

To him, it was the foundation of everything. The shield against fascism. The promise of a third way. To the people of this city, it was a punchline. A bitter joke whispered in refugee camps and across divided cities. It was the slogan painted on the tanks that shelled Sarajevo. It was the lie that covered the mass graves.

Tito looked at Elena, searching for the lie in her eyes. He found only a profound, weary sadness.

“I don’t understand,” he said, and for the first time,

the Marshal sounded old. Not aged by time, but by the sudden, crushing weight of a history he had missed.

“You will,” Elena said, her voice barely a whisper.

“That is the tragedy of it. You will.”

CHAPTER 1: THE ECHO OF SILENCE (CONTINUED)

The silence that followed was heavier than the concrete walls. It was the silence of a tomb disturbed, of a secret exhumed. Tito stood there, dripping nutrient gel onto the polished floor, his mind racing through corridors that ended in brick walls. He was a chess master waking to find the board overturned, the pieces scattered, the very concept of the game altered.

He looked at the tablet in Vukovi's
the

tactical vests of the guards. The fabric was synthetic, matte black, absorbing the light. No insignia of rank, only the small, blinking cameras on their shoulders.

“Who are you?” Tito asked, his voice regaining its timber, the rasp fading into a resonant baritone. He wasn’t asking for names; he was asking for allegiances. “What branch of the armed forces are you?”

“We are the Institute for Strategic Continuity,”

Vuković said. “Civilian oversight. Technical.”

“Civilian,” Tito scoffed, the word tasting like ash.

He gestured toward the guards. “Armed civilians are a militia. Or a secret police. Which is it?”

“Security,” Elena interjected, stepping closer despite the danger she felt radiating from the man. She had studied his psychology for years, read every declassified file, every diary, every intercepted

cable. She knew the charisma that could sway a nation and the ruthlessness that could sign a death warrant without blinking. “Director answers to the Ministry of Interior. And the Ministry answers to Belgrade.”

Tito’s eyes flickered to the window again, to the skyline dominated by foreign corporate logos projected against the smog.

“Belgrade answers to Moscow,” he stated. It wasn’t a question. It was an assessment of the prevailing wind. “I see the architecture of submission. It is always in the skyline.”

Vukovi didn't deny it. He swiped a tablet, bringing up a holographic display that hovered in the air between them. It showed a map of the region, glowing in shifting colors. Red for the Russian Federation’s sphere of influence. Blue for the EU/NATO bloc. A fractured, pulsing yellow for the

contested territories.

“Look at it, Marshal,” Vukovi said, his face devoid of pride or shame. He was a man who dealt only in facts. “This is your legacy. A buffer zone. A playground for great powers.”

Tito stepped toward the hologram, his movements stiff but deliberate. He traced the borders with a finger that passed through the light. Slovenia, Croatia—solid blue. Bosnia, a jagged, wounded yellow. Kosovo, a spark of desperate blue trying to ignite. Montenegro and North Macedonia—firmly blue.

“The borders,” Tito whispered. “They held.”

“Some did,” Vukovi corrected. “Others in blood.”

Tito turned to him, the predatory gleam returning to his eyes. “The Party structure. The UDBA. The military intelligence. Where are the cadres? The men who knew how to handle pressure?”

“Dead,” Elena said softly. “Or old. Or retired. The

structures you built were dismantled in the nineties. The men who served them were hunted, or they became warlords. Or they sold their loyalty to the highest bidder.”

Tito looked at his hands again, flexing the fingers. The skin was papery, the veins prominent. A body rebuilt by machines. “And you brought me back. Why? To consult? To be a figurehead?”

“We brought you back because we are losing,”

Vuković said bluntly. He collapsed t
plunging the room back into the harsh clinical light.

“We are losing the narrative. We are losing the economy. We are losing the youth to the West or to the East. We needed... a symbol. A unifying principle.”

Tito let out a dry, rasping laugh. It was a sound devoid of joy, a mechanical rattle. “You wake me from a sleep of thirty years to find my country carved up by foreign powers, and you want me to be a symbol?”

Symbols do not fight wars, Director. They decorate graves.”

He walked to the steel sarcophagus he had just vacated. He ran a hand over the cold metal, tracing the rivets. “I was a soldier. A revolutionary. I built a nation out of the ashes of empires. I did not do it by smiling for cameras.”

“You built it on a fault line,” Elena said, unable to stop herself. The academic in her, the part that had spent a decade analyzing the fracture mechanics of the Yugoslav federation, overrode her fear. “You held the tension at a breaking point. When the pressure was released, it didn’t just snap—it exploded.”

Tito looked at her. For the first time, he seemed to see her not as a technician or a guard, but as a mind. He studied her face, the exhaustion etched around her eyes, the intelligence in her gaze.

“You are a historian,” he deduced.

“I am a political psychologist,” she corrected.

“Specializing in post-conflict trauma.”

“And you think I am the cause of the trauma?”

“I think you are the ghost of the trauma,” Elena said.

“The memory of what was lost.”

Tito turned back to Vukovi. “I need
Not from a window. On the ground.”

“Impossible,” Vukovi said immediately. “Biometrics are unstable. The neural implants require calibration. And your presence... it would cause a panic. Or an incident.”

“I am not a prisoner,” Tito said, his voice dropping an octave, vibrating with a low, dangerous hum. “I am the Marshal of the Yugoslav People’s Army.”

“You are a patient,” Vukovi countered. The guards shifted, their hands moving closer to their sidearms. “And a state asset. You will follow protocol.”

The tension in the room spiked. The air felt electric,

charged with the static of history clashing with the present. Tito measured the distance between himself and Vukovi. He calculated the reaction of the guards. He assessed the structural integrity of the door.

Then, the violence receded from his posture, replaced by a cold, calculating stillness. He knew he was weak. He knew he was outnumbered. He knew the terrain was unfamiliar.

“Protocol,” Tito said, the word dripping with disdain. “Very well. Show me your protocol. Show me this... Institute.”

Vukovi nodded to the guards. “Escort me to the observation deck. The secure route.”

As they moved out of the room, the heavy door sealing behind them, Elena fell into step beside Tito. The corridor was narrow, lit by recessed LED strips that cast long, dancing shadows. The air here was

different—stale, recycled, smelling of industrial cleaning agents and dust.

They walked in silence, the rhythmic thud of boots echoing against the concrete. Tito walked with a gait that was unnatural for a man who had been immobile for decades—stiff, upright, his eyes scanning every corner, every vent, every ceiling panel. He was memorizing the route, mapping the facility.

“Doctor,” Tito said quietly, his voice barely audible over the hum of the ventilation. “Tell me. Was there a war?”

Elena hesitated. She looked at the guards ahead of them, their backs rigid. “There were many wars, Marshal.”

“Did we win?”

Elena looked at him. His profile was sharp in the dim light, the jaw set. He was asking about the collective ‘we’—the nation, the people, the federation.

“No,” she said. “We didn’t win. We just stopped

fighting. There is a difference.”

Tito absorbed this. He didn't look away from the path ahead. “There is always a difference. Usually, it is the difference between survival and extinction.”

They reached an elevator, a steel cage that rattled as it ascended. The journey was short, but the ascent felt significant. They were moving from the bowels of the earth, from the hidden depths where history was being resurrected, to the surface.

The doors opened onto a narrow corridor ending in a reinforced glass wall. Beyond it lay a viewing platform, overlooking the sprawling mass of Belgrade.

Vukovi gestured for them to enter. “The observation deck. No signals can enter or leave this room. You may look, but you cannot touch.”

Tito walked to the glass. He placed a hand against the cool surface.

Below him, the city stretched out like a wound. The

Danube and Sava rivers cut through it, dark and sluggish. The concrete blocks of the New Belgrade district rose like monoliths, their facades stained with soot. But interwoven with them were the bright, garish lights of advertisements in Cyrillic and Latin scripts, the neon glow of casinos and nightclubs.

Tito scanned the horizon. He looked for the landmarks of his memory. The House of Flowers—his final resting place. He found it, but it was dwarfed by a new glass skyscraper that loomed over it, a symbol of the new order crushing the old.

He looked for the Federal Executive Council building. It was there, but it seemed smaller, insignificant, swallowed by the urban sprawl.

Then he saw the flags.

From the rooftops of the government buildings, the red, white, and blue of the Serbian flag flew. But next to it, almost always, flew another. The Russian

tricolor. They snapped in the wind, identical in size and prominence.

Tito stared at those paired flags. He traced the line of the city, looking for the symbols of the West, of the EU. He found a few, flying from diplomatic missions, smaller, less defiant, tucked away in side streets.

“The balance of power,” Tito murmured. “It has shifted entirely.”

“C o m p l e t e l y ,” V u k o v i said from behind. “We are the last buffer. The last piece of land standing between the EU’s expansion and the Russian Federation’s southern flank. We are the hinge of the door.”

Tito turned from the window, his face a mask of stone. But his eyes were burning. The strategic mind, the one that had played the superpowers against each other for decades, was calculating. Weighing the odds. Finding

the weak points.

“Hinges break under pressure,” Tito said. “Or they swing the door shut.”

He looked at Elena, then at Vuković. A secure, soundproofed, a bubble of silence in a noisy world. But Tito felt the noise of the history he had missed pressing in on him. The screams of the nineties, the silence of the mass graves, the desperate prayers of a people trapped between empires.

He felt the weight of the phrase Vuković earlier.

Brotherhood and Unity.

He had believed it was the shield. The armor.

Now, standing in a city that looked like a scar, he began to suspect it had been the blade. The very thing that had cut the nation into pieces so small they could be devoured one by one.

“I need reports,” Tito said, his voice flat, devoid of

the earlier outrage. It was the voice of a commander accepting a hopeless tactical situation. “Economic. Military. Demographic. I need to understand the depth of the wound.”

“Those files are classified,” Vuković said. “I am the classification,” Tito replied, locking eyes with the Director. “Get them.”

Vuković held his gaze for a long moment, the blue of his tablet reflecting in his glasses. Then, he gave a slow, almost imperceptible nod.

“Welcome back, Marshal,” Vuković said to the aftermath.”

Tito turned back to the window. The sun was setting behind the mountains, casting long, distorted shadows over the city. The lights of Belgrade flickered on, one by one, like embers in a dying fire. He watched the city breathe. He watched it survive. And he began to plot.

CHAPTER 1: THE ECHO OF SILENCE (CONTINUED)

The holographic map dissolved into a single point of light, then vanished, leaving the sterile air of the observation deck feeling colder. Tito remained at the window, a statue carved from resilience and confusion. The city below was not the Belgrade of his memory, the socialist hub pulsing with industrial ambition. It was a digital necropolis, scarred by the ghosts of wars he had never fought.

“Economic,” Tito repeated, the word crisp, demanding.

“Military. Demographic. I need to understand the depth of the wound.”

Vukovi lowered his tablet. The screen mirroring the exhaustion in his eyes. “Those files are classified at the highest level, Marshal. Even within the Institute, access is segmented. What you’re asking for is the complete strategic picture of a failed state.”

“I am the architect of that state,” Tito countered, turning from the glass. The reflection in the pane showed a man whose face was a mask of controlled fury, his silver hair damp, his uniform—recreated from archival measurements—hanging slightly loose on a frame that had not yet regained its full bulk. “If you wanted a figurehead, you would have cloned a dog. You brought back a strategist. Do not complain when I strategize.”

The guards shifted, the synthetic fabric of their

vests whispering. They were young, Tito noted. Too young to remember the federation, old enough to have grown up in its ruins. Their eyes were hard, devoid of the ideological fervor he had once commanded. They looked at him not as a savior, but as a volatile variable.

“The Ministry of Interior authorized your revival as a p s y c h o l o g i c a l o p e r a t i o n ,” Vukovi pragmatic, stripped of reverence. “A symbol to rally the base. To remind the electorate of a time when we were not a vassal state. They did not authorize a coup from within the Institute.”

“Then tell your Ministry that the Marshal has returned,” Tito said, his voice dropping to that low, gravelly register that had silenced war rooms. “And tell them I am not interested in their internal politics. I am interested in the survival of the people.”

Elena watched the exchange, her heart hammering

against her ribs. She saw the shift happening in real-time. The disoriented patient was gone, replaced by the calculating commander. It was terrifying. It was exactly what the data suggested would happen, yet witnessing it was like watching a dormant volcano rumble to life.

“Director,” Elena interjected, stepping into the space between them. “He needs context. If he is to function, he needs to understand the timeline. The specific events.”

Vukovi hesitated. He looked at Tito, the secure door behind them. He knew he was losing control of the situation. The protocol was to keep the Marshal sedated, monitored, and fed information in controlled doses. But Tito was not a lab rat; he was a predator in a cage that was rapidly feeling too small.

“Fine,” Vukovi conceded, though his jaw clenched. “We proceed to the briefing room. I will authorize the

Level 3 archives. But understand, Marshal, the world you knew is dead. It died in a cellar in Belgrade in 2000, and it was buried in the ruins of the World Trade Center shortly after. You are walking into a graveyard.”

Tito walked past him, toward the door. “I have always lived in a graveyard, Director. I just knew how to keep the ghosts quiet.”

They moved through the corridors again, the silence broken only by the hum of the ventilation and the rhythmic tread of boots. Elena walked beside Tito, close enough to smell the sterile scent of the cryo-fluid that still clung to him, mixed with something else—ozone and old iron.

“Marshal,” she murmured, keeping her voice low. “The wars... they were not like the battles you fought. There was no front line. No clear enemy uniform. It was neighbor against neighbor. It was... intimate.”

Tito glanced at her. “War is always intimate, Doctor.

It is the act of killing the stranger you are told to hate. The only difference is the distance between the rifle and the target.”

“Here, the distance was zero,” Elena said. “They used to play football together. Then they burned their houses down.”

Tito absorbed this. He thought of the complex ethnic tapestry of the Balkans, the threads he had woven into a single fabric. He had believed the economic ties, the shared struggle against fascism, the socialist ideology, were enough to hold the tension. He had been wrong.

They arrived at a heavy blast door. Vu forward, allowing a retinal scanner to wash his eye in green light. A heavy lock disengaged with a pneumatic hiss.

Inside was the briefing room. It was stark, dominated by a large oval table made of dark wood—a relic of the

old world—and surrounded by high-definition screens that currently displayed the Institute's security protocols. The air here was drier, colder.

“Sit,” Vukovi said, gesturing to the table.

Tito did not sit. He stood behind the chair, his hands resting on the back of it, his knuckles white. He was reasserting his physical presence, claiming the space.

“Show me the 1990s,” Tito commanded. “Start with Slovenia. Then Croatia.”

Vukovi tapped his tablet. The screen came to life.

Elena watched Tito's face as the history unspooled. She had seen the archives a hundred times. She knew the grainy footage of the shelling of Dubrovnik, the satellite images of the siege of Sarajevo, the squalid refugee camps. She knew the statistics of the dead.

Tito watched with a terrifying stillness.

He saw the JNA—his Yugoslav People's Army—turning on

its own people. He saw the green uniforms, the unfamiliar flags, the faces of generals he had promoted, now leading ethnic cleansing campaigns. He saw the breakdown of supply chains. The hyperinflation. The sanctions. He saw the death of the idea.

“The JNA,” Tito whispered, his voice trembling with a cold rage. “They let the cities fall. They let the infrastructure crumble.”

“They were following orders,” Vuković a new generation of leadership. One that prioritized ethnic purity over economic survival.”

“Fools,” Tito spat. The word hung in the air, harsh and final. “They were not leaders. They were butchers with uniforms.”

He watched the timeline advance. The Dayton Accords. The fragmentation. The independence of Slovenia and Croatia, the recognition of Bosnia, the slow,

agonizing dissolution of everything he had built.

Then came the footage of Srebrenica.

Tito did not look away. He watched the trucks. He watched the men being separated. He watched the drone footage of the pits.

When the screen went black, the silence in the room was absolute. The air felt heavy, suffocating.

Tito closed his eyes. For a moment, he looked like a man in physical pain. Then he opened them, and the pain was gone, replaced by a void of pure, calculating darkness.

“I thought I was waking up to a betrayal,” Tito said, his voice eerily calm. “I see now I am waking up to a funeral. And the mourners are still fighting over the corpse.”

He walked around the table and sat down. The gesture was deliberate. It marked a transition. He was no longer the returning hero. He was the undertaker.

“Give me the tablet,” Tito said to Vu
Vukovi hesitated, then slid the devi

polished surface.

Tito caught it. He looked at the screen, his fingers moving over the surface with an innate familiarity, as if he had been born with a touchscreen in his hand. He navigated the directories, bypassing the user interface, digging into the file structures.

“Marshal,” Elena said, her voice tight. “What are you doing?”

Tito didn’t look up. “I am assessing the damage. You said I am a ghost. Fine. I will be a ghost that walks through the walls. I will see what you cannot show me.”

He stopped typing. He looked at the data streaming across the screen. Trade deficits. Debt-to-GDP ratios. Population statistics. Brain drain figures. He looked at the map of the region again, not as a political map, but as a resource map.

“The Russians,” Tito said, pointing to a cluster of

data regarding energy imports. “They own the heat. The electricity. The fuel.”

“And the EU owns the market,” Vukobratović and Elena are caught between the pipe and the port.”

Tito leaned back in his chair. The leather creaked.

He looked at the two of them — Vukobratović, the pragmatist, and Elena, the empathetic observer.

“You brought me back to be a symbol,” Tito said.

“To wave the old flag and make the people feel safe.”

“That was the mandate,” Vukobratović admitted. Tito smiled. It was a thin, bloodless expression.

“Symbols do not survive in a world of realpolitik. Only power survives. And you have none.”

He stood up again, the energy returning to him, a manic, focused drive. He began to pace the length of the room, his movements sharp, predatory.

“Brotherhood and Unity,” Tito mused, testing the phrase again. It tasted different now. It tasted of

ash and regret. “I used it to bind them together. I thought it was the glue.”

He stopped and faced them. “I see now it was the paint. It covered the cracks, but it did not fill them. When the rain came, the paint washed away, and the rot was exposed.”

“Then what do we do?” Elena asked, the question slipping out before she could stop it. She shouldn’t be asking him. She should be analyzing him. But the authority he radiated was magnetic, dangerous.

Tito looked at the screen, then at the window, where the lights of the city were burning against the encroaching dark.

“We stop mourning,” Tito said. “We stop looking backward with nostalgia. The past is a weapon the enemy uses against us.”

He turned to Vuković. “I want a list. Everyone in this city, in this country, who still remembers how to

organize. Not just soldiers. Bureaucrats. Engineers. Logistics officers. The ones who kept the trains running during the sanctions. The ones who maintained the power grid when the bombs fell.”

“Those people are scattered,” Vukov are old. Or they have left.”

“Find them,” Tito ordered. “And I want a meeting. Not with the politicians. With the people who actually make this city function. The dockworkers. The power plant operators. The telecom engineers.”

“You can’t just summon the working class,”

Vukovi protested. “This isn’t 1945.”

“It is always 1945,” Tito said softly. “Every day is the day after a war. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

He walked back to the window, looking down at the sprawling, fractured city. The Russian flags fluttered in the wind, stark against the twilight.

“They think they have leash on us,” Tito murmured.

“The Russians in the north, the Europeans in the south. They think we are a buffer.”

He placed his hand against the glass, feeling the vibration of the city’s distant hum.

“A buffer absorbs the shock,” Tito said. “But a buffer can also become a pivot. If the weight shifts correctly.”

He turned back to the room, his eyes gleaming in the clinical light.

“I am not a symbol,” he declared. “I am a tactical asset. And I intend to change the geometry of the board.”

Vukovi stared at him, realizing with a
that he had not resurrected a relic. He had
resurrected a storm.

“Get me the reports,” Tito said, his voice final. “And get me a map. A real one. Not digital. Paper. I want to feel the borders.”

Elena moved to the console, her hands trembling

slightly as she initiated the print request. She looked at the Marshal, standing there in the center of the room, a man out of time, yet terrifyingly present. She realized then that the trauma of the past wasn't just a memory to him. It was a blueprint. And he was already drawing the lines for a new structure.

“Brotherhood and Unity,” she whispered to herself. Tito heard her. He looked at her, and for a second, the predator vanished, replaced by something that looked like profound sorrow.

“Not the old kind,” he said quietly. “A new kind. One that doesn’t ignore the cracks. One that fills them with steel.”

The printer whirled to life, spitting out thick sheets of paper. The sound was loud in the silence, like the cocking of a gun.

The Marshal had returned. And the city, unaware, held its breath.

CHAPTER 2: THE ARCHITECTURE OF ASH

The map covered the entire table, a sprawling topography of ink and fiber that smelled faintly of the archive—dry dust and acidic decay. Tito stood over it, his shadow cast long and distorted by the overhead lighting, a dark continent moving across the paper landscape. He had stripped off his uniform jacket, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt to reveal forearms that were regaining their definition, the skin pale but taut over corded muscle. The cryo-revival had left

him gaunt, but the metabolism of a man who had once smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and drunk vodka like water was reasserting itself with terrifying speed.

He used a ruler—a heavy, steel instrument—to trace the line of the Sava River. The metal clicked against the paper, a metronome ticking off seconds of a history he was rapidly consuming and discarding.

“Here,” Tito said, tapping the ruler on the patch of green that represented the Serbian entity in Bosnia.

“This is a tumor. It connects to the host, but it functions independently, draining resources and inviting infection.”

Director Vuković stood by the door, and
He looked like a man who hadn't slept in days, his
tie loosened, the skin under his eyes bruised purple.
He was watching Tito dismantle the geopolitical
reality of the Balkans with the casual detachment of
a

mechanic diagnosing a broken engine.

“It is a sovereign entity recognized by the international community,” Vuković raspy. “A product of Dayton. To call it a tumor is... unhelpful.”

Tito didn’t look up. “Dayton was a ceasefire, Director. Not a peace. It was a pause in the violence to allow the combatants to rearm and reorganize economically. You mistook a truce for a settlement.”

Elena sat in the corner, a tablet on her lap, recording. She wasn’t just documenting his words anymore; she was documenting the atmosphere. The air in the room had changed. It was charged, ionized. The sterile smell of the Institute was being replaced by the scent of Tito—sweat, determination, and that lingering, ghostly ozone. She felt a primal urge to flee, a biological alarm bell ringing in her hindbrain. He was a predator, and the room was his

cage, and he was testing the bars.

“Explain the energy dependency,” Tito commanded, moving the ruler to the border with Hungary. “The data shows 80% of our natural gas comes through the TurkStream pipeline, routed through Bulgaria. Who controls the tap?”

“The Russians,” Elena answered, her voice sounding small in the large room. “Gazprom. The contracts were signed during the embargo years when we had no other leverage. We are locked in until 2035.”

Tito straightened, cracking his neck. The sound was like dry wood snapping. “Leverage is never permanent. It is a fluid dynamic. If the flow is blocked, you drill a new well. If you cannot drill, you seize the pump.”

“That would be an act of war,” Vuković stepping forward. “You cannot be serious. The Russian Federation has a battalion group stationed in Niš.

They have a strategic partnership with the government. You are talking about suicide.”

“I am talking about agency,” Tito corrected, his voice dropping to that gravelly timbre that vibrated in the chest. He turned his gaze to V
speak of war as if it is a distinct event. A declared state with a beginning and an end. Look at the map, Director. You are already at war. The enemy is simply using your own infrastructure to loot you, rather than tanks to breach your borders. It is a slower death, I grant you. More civilized. But just as final.”

He walked to the window. The night had fully settled over Belgrade, but the city was not dark. It was a blinding constellation of neon and LED. Corporate logos—mostly Russian and Chinese—bathed the Soviet Brutalist blocks in garish reds and blues. The silhouette of the Belgrade Waterfront, a massive development project funded by foreign capital, loomed

over the old city like a glass tombstone.

“They built that while you were sleeping,” Elena said, following his gaze. “The wealthy live there. The rest of us live in the old blocks, paying rent to foreign landlords.”

Tito watched a drone—a delivery unit, probably from a logistics company owned by a Western conglomerate—zip across the skyline, its red light blinking against the smog.

“Architecture is ideology made visible,” Tito murmured. “That tower is a declaration. It says the past is over. It says the collective is dead, and the individual consumer is king.”

He turned back to the table, his eyes scanning the personnel files Vukovi had reluctantly
These were the dossiers of the Institute’s staff, the security detail, the scientists. Tito flipped through them with one hand, his eyes scanning data points,

educational backgrounds, family histories.

He stopped on a file. Marko Vasi . H
Security.

“Vasi ,” Tito read. “Born 1995. Father
paramilitary commander in the Bosnian War. Mother
was a nurse in the KBC Bežanijska Kosa during the
NATO bombing.”

“He is one of our best,” Vukovi said
“Loyal. Efficient.”

“He is a product of the fracture,” Tito said. He
looked at Elena. “You said the war was intimate.

Neighbor against neighbor. Vasi ’s father
killed men who looked like me. Men who spoke my
language. And yet, he guards my sleeping body.”

“People adapt,” Elena said, defensive of the staff.

“They survive. They make choices based on the
reality in front of them.”

Tito closed the file. “Survival is not the same as

living. You survive an infection. You live a life. This city... this country... it has been surviving on antibiotics for thirty years. The infection is becoming resistant.”

He walked back to the map. He picked up a red pen. He drew a circle around Priština.

“Kosovo,” he said.

“A country,” Vukovi stated. “Recognized by the world. Not by us, de jure, but de facto, the border is open. They have their own government, their own army. They want EU membership. They want NATO protection.”

Tito’s hand tightened on the pen. “Protection. From whom? From the men who burned their villages? Or from the men who now control the pipelines running through their land?”

“From Serbia,” Vukovi said bluntly. “That’s the narrative.”

Tito threw the pen down. It skittered across the table

and fell to the floor. The sudden violence of the gesture made Elena flinch.

“There is no Serbia!” Tito roared, the sound exploding in the quiet room. He slammed his palm onto the map, right over the center of Belgrade.

“There is only a geographic location where Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, Albanians, and others are being squeezed between two empires that do not care if they live or die, so long as the gas flows and the markets remain open! You speak of narratives. I speak of sovereignty. And you have none.”

The silence that followed was heavy and suffocating.

The guards outside the door likely had stood frozen, his face pale.

Tito took a deep breath, visibly reining himself in.

The anger vanished as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by a cold, icy calm. He smoothed the map with his hand, erasing the crease his palm had made.

“I need to see the city,” Tito said softly.

Vuković blinked, confused by the sudden shift. “The

city? You saw it from the window.”

“Not through glass. Not from above. I need to walk it. I need to smell the air. I need to hear the voices in the street.”

“That is impossible,” Vukovi said. “The risk is catastrophic. The Institute is the only secure location. If the Russians find out you are alive—if the EU intelligence services detect you—it will trigger a crisis. You are a destabilizing element.”

“I am a destabilizing element sitting in a chair,” Tito countered. “Put me in the street, and I become a rumor. And rumors are harder to kill than facts.”

He walked over to Elena. He stood close to her, invading her personal space. She could see the flecks of grey in his blue eyes, the scar tissue near his hairline.

“You are a psychologist, Dr. Petrovi ,” understand the power of presence. A symbol on a screen

is propaganda. A man walking the streets... that is a miracle. Or a horror. Depending on who is watching.”

Elena swallowed hard. “Marshal, the trauma of the population... seeing you would be a shock. It would confuse them. They think you are dead. They think you failed them.”

“Then I will disabuse them of both notions,” Tito said. “But first, I need to confirm the state of the patient. I have read the charts. Now I need to examine the patient directly.”

He looked at Vukovi. “I am not asking permission. I am informing you of the operational plan. You have two hours to arrange a vehicle and a route. Non-descript. No motorcade. I want to move through the city like a ghost, as you suggested.”

Vukovi opened his mouth to protest, in Tito’s eyes, and closed it. He realized that the power dynamic had solidified. Tito was no longer the subject

of the experiment. He was the director.

“Two hours,” Vukovi said, his voice h
turned and left the room, the heavy blast door
hissing shut behind him.

Elena remained, clutching her tablet. She was alone
with him.

Tito walked back to the window. He looked down at
the city, the sprawling, wounded beast of Belgrade.

“They forgot,” he whispered, more to himself than to
her. “They forgot that the state is not a neutral
arbiter. It is a weapon. And for thirty years, it has
been turned against its own people.”

He turned to her, his expression unreadable.

“Doctor, when we go out there, stay close to me.
The world you live in is dangerous. You have just
forgotten how to see the danger.”

“I see it,” Elena said, her voice trembling. “I see it in
you.”

Tito nodded slowly. “Good. That means you are
finally

paying attention.”

He returned to the table, pulling a chair out and sitting down. He picked up the pen he had thrown, and on a blank sheet of paper, he began to sketch. Not a map of borders, but a map of infrastructure. Power lines. Railways. Fiber optic cables.

He was drawing the nervous system of a new body. “Brotherhood and Unity,” he muttered as he drew, the scratching of the pen the only sound in the room. “It was a promise. Now it must be a threat.”

Elena watched him, the clinical detachment she had trained for years to maintain crumbling into dust. She realized she wasn't observing history. She was witnessing the birth of a new conflict, and the man responsible was sharpening his pencil.

Outside, the city lights flickered, as if the grid itself sensed the shift in the current.

CHAPTER 3: THE PATIENT ON THE TABLE

The vehicle was a black Škoda Kodiaq, unremarkable and already dusty from the Belgrade smog. It sat idling in the subterranean garage of the Institute, its engine a low growl that echoed off the concrete pillars. Vukovi sat in the driver's seat, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. He had stripped off his tie entirely now, looking more like a chauffeur than a director of intelligence. Elena sat in the back, clutching a handbag that contained nothing more than

her phone and a panic button she doubted would work if things went wrong.

Tito entered the garage alone. He had refused a security detail, dismissing the armed guards with a wave of his hand. He wore a simple grey coat and a flat cap, items Vukovi had procured from a second-hand shop in Dorol. The clothes hung loosely on Tito's frame, but he wore them with an innate, military authority that made the disguise look like a uniform. He slid into the passenger seat, the suspension groaning slightly under his weight.

"Where to, Marshal?" Vukovi asked, his seatbelt tight.

Tito looked at the dashboard display, glowing with satellite navigation icons. He ignored it. "Head toward the Sava. The old industrial zone. Then, toward the railway station. I want to see the arteries before I look at the heart."

Vukovi put the car in gear and drove

emerging into the night.

Belgrade in 2026 was a city of sensory assault. The air tasted of diesel and stale yeast from the breweries that still operated, albeit under foreign ownership. The streets were crowded, but the crowd moved with a distinct lack of cohesion. People walked fast, eyes down, headphones sealing them off from one another.

As they crossed the Brankov Bridge, Tito leaned forward, his face close to the glass. To his left, the Belgrade Fortress stood illuminated, a stone relic guarding a river that had changed its allegiance a dozen times. To his right, the New Belgrade skyline was a jagged line of corporate logos—Gazprom’s orange bear, a Chinese telecom’s blue wave, an Austrian bank’s red square—projected onto the facades of Brutalist blocks that were slowly crumbling.

“The lighting,” Tito said softly. “It’s wrong.”

“It’s advertising,” Elena said from the backseat.

“Foreign capital.”

“It’s occupation,” Tito corrected. “Light is used to guide. This light is used to dazzle. It blinds the population to the architecture of their own imprisonment.”

Vukovi turned off the main thoroughfare into the depths of Savski Venac. The streets here were narrower, the buildings older, the neon replaced by flickering streetlamps. The vibrancy of the city center faded into a grim, gray exhaustion. Tito directed them to stop near a cluster of brutalist housing blocks known locally as “The Tinsels.” They were massive, concrete slabs pockmarked with black soot stains from heating fires. A group of young men stood around a burning trash can, the orange light flickering against their faces. They wore tracksuits and stared at the passing car with hollow eyes.

“Look at them,” Tito said, watching the men in the

rearview mirror. “In my time, youth were drafted into the People’s Army. They were taught engineering, discipline, a trade. They built roads. What are these men building?”

“Unemployment,” Vuković said. “The closed in the nineties. The state sold the land to developers. There is nothing for them to build.”

“Then they will unmake something,” Tito murmured. He tapped the glass. “Drive on.”

They moved toward the central railway station. The area was a chaotic mix of transient populations—refugees from the Middle East and Africa waiting for a train to the EU border, alongside local addicts and street vendors. The station itself, a grand Austro-Hungarian structure, was dark, its clocks stopped at different times. The grandeur was peeling away, revealing the rot beneath.

Tito’s eyes scanned the crowd. He wasn’t looking at

faces; he was looking at posture, at the way people held their bags, the way they scanned their surroundings.

“They are afraid,” Tito observed. “But not of me. Not yet.”

“They are afraid of losing what little they have,” Elena said. “The economy is a knife to the throat. Inflation is twenty percent. The currency is tied to the Ruble. If Russia sneezes, Serbia catches pneumonia.”

Tito turned his head slightly to catch her eye in the mirror. “Dependency is a voluntary state of being. It persists only because the alternative appears more painful. My job is to make the alternative seem like a mercy.”

Vukovi gripped the wheel tighter. “Welcome to the Russian Embassy.”

Tito looked to his left. The building was a fortress

of glass and steel, modern and imposing, set back from the street behind high fences and armed patrols. A massive banner hung from the facade, displaying the insignia of a Russian energy consortium.

“Stop the car,” Tito commanded.

“Marshal, we can’t—”

“Stop the car.”

Vukovi pulled over to the curb, fifty feet from the embassy gates. Tito exited the vehicle, standing on the sidewalk. He didn't look at the embassy directly. He looked at the people walking past it. A mother pushing a stroller. A businessman talking loudly on a Bluetooth headset. Two teenagers sharing a cigarette.

They walked past the seat of immense power without a glance. It wasn't fear; it was numbness. The presence of the foreign power was so ingrained in the city's fabric that it was invisible.

Tito got back into the car. He was silent for a long

moment. The engine idled.

“It’s worse than I calculated,” Tito said, his voice devoid of its earlier fire, replaced by a chilling, analytical coldness. “The occupation isn’t external. It’s internalized. They don’t see the fence because they are inside the cage with the guards.”

“We are a sovereign nation,” Vuković said, though the words rang hollow even to him.

“Sovereignty is the ability to say ‘no’ and enforce it,” Tito said. He looked at Vuković. “‘no’ to Moscow tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Can it say ‘no’ to Brussels?”

“No.”

“Then it is not a nation. It is a marketplace with a flag.”

Tito turned his attention to the rearview mirror, locking eyes with Elena. She flinched. His eyes were

bright, feverish.

“Doctor, you study trauma. What is the first step in treating a patient in shock?”

Elena hesitated, her training fighting against her terror. “Stabilization. Assessment of injuries.”

“No,” Tito said softly. “Pain. You must inflict controlled pain to wake them up. A slap. A shout. Something to pierce the numbness.”

“You’re talking about violence,” Elena said.

“I am talking about politics,” Tito replied. “The two are often indistinguishable in this region.”

He leaned back, closing his eyes for a moment. The car moved back into traffic, heading toward the Institute. The silence in the vehicle was heavy, suffocating.

“I have seen enough of the city,” Tito said, eyes still closed. “The diagnosis is confirmed. The patient is in a coma, kept alive by life support from foreign powers. The tumor in Bosnia is metastasizing. The

infection in the energy sector is systemic.”

He opened his eyes. They were clear, hard, and utterly devoid of doubt.

“We do not treat the symptoms,” Tito said. “We remove the cause. And we burn the infection site.”

Vukovi looked at him, a cold dread seeping into his stomach. “What are you going to do, Marshal?”

Tito looked out the window at the passing blur of lights and shadows.

“I am going to reorganize the state,” he said. “I am going to remind the world that a border is not a line on a map. It is a line drawn in blood. And I am going to redraw it.”

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, worn notebook he had requested earlier. He opened it to a blank page and began to write. Not a speech. Not a plan. A list of names.

Elena watched him, her heart hammering against her

ribs. She realized with a sudden, sickening clarity that Tito wasn't trying to save the Yugoslavia that was. He was preparing to bury it, and everyone who lived in its ruins, to build something new on top of the graves.

The car entered the underground garage of the Institute. As the darkness swallowed them, Tito finished his list and tucked the notebook away.

“Sleep, Doctor,” he said as he stepped out into the concrete gloom. “Tomorrow, we begin the surgery.” He walked toward the elevator, his footsteps echoing in the silence, leaving the two living humans standing in the exhaust fumes, paralyzed by the future he was already writing.

CHAPTER 4: THE SURGEON'S HANDS

The Institute's medical wing was a sterile purgatory of white tiles and humming ventilation, a stark contrast to the bruised twilight of the city outside. Here, the air smelled of antiseptic and filtered oxygen, a scent Tito found cloying. It lacked the grit of reality. He stood before a full-length mirror, stripped to the waist, while a nervous nurse adjusted the cuffs of a crisp, white dress shirt. The clothes were modern, synthetic, lacking the weight of the wool

and cotton he remembered. They felt like a costume.

Dr. Elena Petrovi stood by the door, held like a shield. She had not slept. The drive back had been a silent interrogation, her mind replaying Tito's words—burn the infection site—on a loop. “You're observing,” Tito said, his voice echoing slightly in the tiled room. He didn't turn from the mirror. He was studying his own reflection, tracing the lines of his face as if mapping a foreign territory. “Is there a clinical diagnosis you wish to share, Doctor?”

Elena flinched. “I'm monitoring your vitals. Your heart rate is elevated, but your blood pressure is stable. Physically, you are... resilient.”

“Physically,” Tito repeated. He turned, buttoning the shirt. His chest was a landscape of old scars, pale against the skin that had been regenerated. “But the mind is the engine. And the engine is running hot.” He walked toward her, moving with a predatory grace

that belied his age—or rather, the age he should have been. He stopped inches from her, invading the boundary she tried so hard to maintain.

“Tell me about the genocide,” he said. The words were flat, devoid of emotion, as if he were asking for a weather report.

Elena’s breath hitched. “Marshal... that is a complex historical trauma. It’s not a single event. Srebrenica, Sarajevo, the ethnic cleansing...”

“I am not asking for a history lesson. I have read the files Vukovi provided. Dry words on asking for the texture of it.” He gestured vaguely toward the window, toward the sleeping city. “I look at the faces on the street, and I see a collective wound. But I do not see the weapon that caused it. You were there. You lived through the aftermath. How does a people massacre each other after decades of sleeping in the same bed?”

Elena looked down at her shoes. “They didn’t see

neighbors. They saw... archetypes. Propaganda rewired their perception. It told them that the 'other' was a threat to their existence."

"Propaganda is a whisper," Tito countered.

"Violence on that scale requires a shout. It requires a structure. Who gave the orders?"

"The political leaders. Milošević. Karadžić. Mladić."

"Puppets," Tito scoffed. "Men like that do not invent hatred. They harvest it. Who provided the fertilizer? Who provided the guns? Who watched from the sidelines and calculated the cost-benefit analysis of intervention?"

He was looking for the architects, not the masons.

"The international community," Elena said, her voice hardening. "The UN. The EU. They watched. They debated. While we died, they drafted resolutions."

Tito nodded slowly, a flicker of dark satisfaction in his eyes. "Imperialism doesn't always wear a uniform."

Sometimes it wears a suit and carries a briefcase. It waits for the strong house to collapse so it can buy the bricks cheap.”

He finished buttoning his shirt and picked up the grey coat. “Where is Vukovi?”

“In the operations center. He’s been on secure lines all night. Trying to contain the rumors of your... awakening.”

“Let him try. The rumor is already stronger than the truth.” Tito opened the door. “Bring your tablet, Doctor. I require your analytical perspective on the next phase.”

They moved through the corridors of the Institute, a labyrinth of reinforced concrete buried deep beneath the Belgrade neighborhood of Vračar was a relic of the Cold War, retrofitted with modern surveillance tech. As they walked, they passed glass-walled offices where analysts stared at banks of

monitors, tracking data streams from across the Balkans. Tito glanced at them through the glass. He saw young faces, pale from artificial light, typing furiously. Soldiers of a different kind.

They entered the Operations Center. The room was circular, dominated by a massive holographic table that projected a 3D map of the region. stood at the edge of the light, his face bathed in the blue glow of data points. He looked exhausted, his eyes rimmed with red.

“ Marshal ,” V u k o v i said , straightening have a situation.”

Tito stepped up to the holographic map. He reached out, his hand passing through a glowing representation of Sarajevo. “Define ‘situation.’”

“ Intelligence chatter ,” V u k o v i said , t
“The Russians know something is wrong. The energy shipments from Gazprom have been delayed at the

border. Moscow is demanding a high-level meeting with the Serbian President. They suspect Western interference. And now..." He hesitated.

"Speak," Tito commanded.

"There are whispers in the diplomatic corps. A rumor that a 'special asset' has been activated in Belgrade. The CIA station chief has requested an emergency meeting with our Foreign Ministry. They think the Russians have moved a tactical unit into the city."

Tito laughed. It was a short, barking sound that startled the analysts in the room. "They are all looking for a weapon. A tank. A missile. They fail to realize the weapon is the man standing in front of the map."

He studied the hologram. It showed the borders of the successor states, glowing in different colors based on their alliances. Slovenia and Croatia, bathed in the cool blue of the EU and NATO. Bosnia, fractured, a

sickly yellow. Kosovo, a disputed smudge of gray. Serbia, a deep, ominous red, connected by pulsating lines to Moscow.

“Look at this,” Tito said, gesturing to the map. He addressed Vukovi, but his voice carried through the room. “You see sovereign states. I see a containment grid. Slovenia and Croatia are not independent; they are buffer zones for Austrian and Italian capital. North Macedonia and Montenegro are not allies; they are footholds for NATO artillery. And Serbia...” He traced the red line to Moscow. “Serbia is not a partner. It is a hostage. A lever to twist when the West gets too comfortable.”

“The government believes we are balancing East and West,” Vukovi said carefully. “A delicate neutrality.”

“There is no neutrality in a war,” Tito said. “Only sides. And right now, you are on the side of entropy.”

He turned to Elena. “Doctor, you studied the

psychology of the siege. What happens to a population when they believe they are the victims of a grand conspiracy?”

Elena swallowed, her throat dry. “They become paranoid. They retreat into tribalism. They trust no one outside their immediate group.”

“Exactly,” Tito said. “They fracture. And a fractured bone cannot bear weight.”

He looked back at the map. His eyes narrowed. He was seeing not just geography, but lines of force, pressures, stress points.

“Vukovi,” Tito said. “I need a list. Of grievances. I want the names of the factories sold for one Euro to foreign conglomerates. I want the names of the politicians who signed the deals. I want the names of the towns where the youth have left, leaving only the elderly to tend the graves.”

“That is... a very long list,” Vukovi
“I have time,” Tito said. He reached out and touched

the hologram, his finger hovering over the glowing representation of Belgrade. “You said I am a destabilizing element. You are correct. Stability is the anesthesia of the oppressed. I am here to restore sensation. Even if it is pain.”

He turned away from the map, facing the two people who were now his unwilling accomplices.

“Tomorrow morning, I want to meet with the leadership of the trade unions. The ones who still remember how to strike.”

Vuković paled. “Marshal, that is impossible. Security services monitor them. If you are seen with them—”

“If I am seen with them,” Tito interrupted, “they will remember they have power. That is the first incision. We cut off the blood supply to the brain of this corrupted state.”

He walked toward the exit, stopping only to look back

over his shoulder.

“Prepare the car again, Director. But this time, we go to the people. Not to look at them. To speak to them.”

As the door hissed shut behind him, Elena stood frozen in the center of the room, the blue light of the map casting long shadows around her. She looked at Vukovi, who was staring at the door expected Tito to return and dissolve into smoke.

“He’s not trying to save us,” Elena whispered, the realization settling into her bones like a chill. “He’s dismantling the entire reality we’ve built for ourselves.”

Vukovi looked down at his hands. T shaking.

“God help us,” he murmured. “He’s the surgeon. And he’s holding the scalpel.”

CHAPTER 5: THE WEIGHT OF DUST

The dawn broke over Belgrade not with a sunrise, but with a slow bleed of grey light filtering through a chemical haze. From the armored Audi, Tito watched the city wake. He saw the skeletal remains of the Genex Tower piercing the smog, a monument to a future that had died before it was born. He saw the crowds gathering at bus stops, their shoulders hunched against a cold that seemed to seep into the marrow of the city itself.

They were not the vibrant, optimistic masses he

remembered from the post-war reconstruction. These people moved with the heavy, shuffling gait of the defeated, their faces etched with a resignation that offended Tito's sense of order.

“The trade union headquarters is in a converted warehouse in Novi Beograd,” Vuković said from the front passenger seat. He was checking his weapon, the metallic clicks echoing in the quiet cabin. “It's a hotbed of dissent. The police raid it every few months. It's risky, Marshal. If the government learns you are there—”

“If the government learns I am anywhere, I will be a target,” Tito said. He adjusted the collar of his coat. It was a heavy wool garment, similar to his old field jackets but tailored to modern cuts. It felt foreign against his regenerated skin. “The question is not whether they will learn. The question is how quickly the information travels to Moscow and

Washington. We want them to know. We want them to watch.”

Elena sat in the rear, clutching a tablet to her chest. She hadn’t spoken since leaving the Institute. She looked out the window at the brutalist architecture of New Belgrade, the concrete blocks rising like tombstones along the Sava River.

“Why the unions?” she asked suddenly, her voice raspy. “The workers are broken. They have no money. No leverage.”

Tito turned his head slightly to look at her. In the dim light, his face looked carved from granite.

“Because a broken thing still has weight,” Tito said.

“And I need to feel how heavy this country has become. You speak of leverage. Leverage is not money, Doctor. It is the willingness to stop. To cease functioning. To let the gears grind to a halt.”

“The government will crack down,” Elena warned.

“Violently.”

“Let them,” Tito said. “Violence is the last resort of a system that has lost the capacity to persuade. It is the scream of a dying organism. I want to hear that scream.”

The car turned onto a wide boulevard, passing a row of kiosks where vendors sold cigarettes and lottery tickets. Tito’s eyes lingered on a group of young men huddled around a burning trash can. They wore expensive sneakers and tattered jackets, their eyes hollow.

“Look at them,” Tito murmured. “A generation without a war, yet they fight a battle every day just to exist.”

“They are the lost,” Vukovi said grimly. “No future. Just... waiting.”

“Waiting for a spark,” Tito corrected. “Or for a leader to tell them what they are waiting for.”

The car pulled into a narrow alley behind a massive,

graffiti-covered concrete structure. A rusted metal sign, barely legible, identified the building as a former electrical component factory. Now, it was the headquarters of the Independent Union of Serbian Workers—a loose coalition of angry, disillusioned laborers.

As the car stopped, Tito placed a hand on the door handle. He paused, looking at his reflection in the dark glass. For a fleeting second, he saw a ghost—a man in a uniform, surrounded by cheering crowds. The image vanished, replaced by the reflection of a man in a modern coat, sitting in a metal box in a city that had forgotten him.

“Stay close, Elena,” Tito said. “Observe. Do not intervene unless necessary.”

“I’m a doctor, not a political operative,” she said, her voice trembling.

“You are a citizen of this state,” Tito replied. “That

makes you a political operative whether you wish it or not.”

He opened the door and stepped out into the cold air.

The smell of diesel and damp concrete filled his

lungs. Vukovi and two security agents

their hands inside their coats, resting on their

weapons.

They entered through a steel side door that groaned

on its hinges. The interior was a cavernous open

space, dimly lit by hanging bulbs. The air was thick

with the smell of stale tobacco, cheap coffee, and

unwashed bodies. About fifty men and women sat

on rows of folding chairs facing a makeshift

podium—a wooden pallet covered with a red cloth.

As Tito entered, the murmuring died instantly. All

eyes turned to him. He recognized the look in their

eyes: confusion, then disbelief, then a flicker of

something dangerous—hope.

He walked toward the podium, his boots crunching

on

grit. Vukovi remained near the entrance of the room, while Elena trailed behind, her medical training warring with her fear. She noticed the workers' hands—calloused, stained with grease, clutching cigarettes or crumpled newspapers. They were hands that had built things, and now had nothing to do.

Tito reached the pallet and stopped. He didn't climb onto it. He stood at floor level, looking up at them, an inversion of the traditional power dynamic.

"I am told you have grievances," Tito said. His voice was not loud, but it carried in the acoustic trap of the warehouse.

A man in the front row, burly with a thick beard and a scar across his forehead, stood up. "Who are you? Really? Some actor? A clone?"

"I am Josip Broz Tito," he said simply. "And I am told you have grievances."

The man hesitated, then laughed, a harsh, bitter

sound. “We have grievances? We have nothing! The factory where I worked for thirty years—sold. The buyer stripped it and left. Now I fix bicycles for pennies. My son is in Germany, driving a taxi. My daughter is in Austria, cleaning hotel rooms. This is the Serbia you left behind.”

Tito listened, his face impassive. He let the anger wash over him, analyzing the cadence, the vocabulary, the target.

“You blame the foreigner,” Tito said. “The German who buys the factory. The Austrian who hires the cleaner.”

“We blame the politicians,” the man spat. “The thieves in the government who sold us out.”

“Good,” Tito said. The word hung in the air, surprising them. “Blame is a useful emotion if directed correctly. But you are missing the point.”

Tito stepped closer to the crowd. He could smell their sweat, their desperation.

“The politicians are not the architects. They are the

janitors. They sweep the mess into the corners and take a cut for their silence. But who pays them? Who owns the contracts?”

He scanned the room, locking eyes with individuals.

“Does the Russian gas company care about your bicycle repair shop? Does the German investment bank care about your son driving a taxi? No. They care about the flow of capital. And you are merely an obstacle in the pipe.”

A woman stood up in the back. She looked exhausted, her eyes red-rimmed. “What do you want from us? We have nothing left to give.”

“I do not want your money,” Tito said. “I want your anger. I want your capacity to stop.”

He turned to the makeshift podium and picked up a microphone that lay there. He tapped it. The feedback screeched, making everyone flinch.

“You speak of neutrality,” Tito said, his voice

rising. “You speak of balancing East and West. But a man balancing on a tightrope has no freedom. He has only the fear of falling. You have been taught to fear falling to the East or falling to the West. I am here to tell you that the rope is an illusion.”

He looked at Elena. She was staring at him, mesmerized despite her fear. He saw the calculation in her eyes—the doctor observing the tumor being excised.

“Tomorrow,” Tito said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that carried to the back row. “I will present a list. A list of every factory sold for nothing. A list of every politician who signed the deals. A list of every foreign account where the money sits.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“I will give this list to you,” Tito said. “And I will ask you to do one thing. Do not work. Do not produce. Do not move the goods. Do not fuel the trucks. Do not

unload the ships. Let the machine stop.”

“That’s suicide,” the bearded man said. “The police will kill us. We’ll starve.”

“You are starving already,” Tito countered. “You are just dying slowly. I am offering you a death with meaning.”

He placed the microphone back on the pallet.

“I am not asking you to fight for a flag. I am not asking you to die for a border. I am asking you to starve the parasites that feed on your blood.”

He turned to leave. Vukovi moved toward the door. The crowd sat in stunned silence, the weight of his words settling over them like a shroud.

As Tito stepped back into the alley, the cold air hitting his face, Elena rushed to catch up with him.

“That was reckless,” she hissed, keeping her voice low. “You are inciting a riot. The government will crush them. You will have blood on your hands.”

Tito stopped and looked at her. His eyes were cold,

devoid of pity.

“Doctor,” he said softly. “My hands are already covered in blood. The difference is, for forty years, I made sure it was the blood of our enemies. Now, I must ensure it is the blood of the disease itself.”

He got into the car. As the engine started, he looked back at the warehouse. The door was opening. The workers were spilling out, talking animatedly, their postures changed. They were no longer slumped. They were standing straighter.

“Drive,” Tito ordered.

As the car pulled away, Tito pulled the small notebook from his pocket. He uncapped a pen and wrote a single word on a fresh page: Sensation.

He looked out the window at the passing city. In the distance, a siren wailed—a police car, or an ambulance, he couldn't tell. To him, it sounded like the first note of a symphony.

“Vukovi,” Tito said, not looking away

window. “Have you located the trade minister? The one who signed the deal with the Austrian supermarket chain?”

“Yes, Marshal. He is at a luncheon at the Hyatt.”

“Cancel his reservation,” Tito said. “I want to see him this afternoon. Alone.”

“On what grounds?”

Tito smiled, a thin, dangerous curve of his lips.

“On the grounds that the Marshal has returned, and he has questions about the price of bread.”

CHAPTER 6: THE PRICE OF BREAD

The Hyatt Regency Belgrade rose from the banks of the Sava like a shard of polished glass, a monument to the fragile illusion of prosperity that clung to the city's outskirts. Inside, the air was filtered, scented with lemon and disinfectant, a stark contrast to the diesel-and-damp-concrete perfume of the warehouse. As Tito stepped through the revolving doors, flanked by Vukovi and a silent Elena, he felt weight of surveillance pressing down on

him—not from the hotel’s security, but from the invisible eyes of the state, watching, waiting.

The lobby was a sea of muted tones and hushed conversations. Men in suits that cost more than a month’s wages sipped espresso, their eyes flicking toward the news screens embedded in the walls. The headlines scrolled in Serbian, English, and Cyrillic: Market Rally Continues, Gas Prices Stabilize, Protests in Novi Beograd Remain Peaceful—for now.

Tito noted the last headline with a grim satisfaction. His message had traveled faster than he anticipated. The machine was already creaking.

“Minister Markovi is in the private dining room on the second floor,” Vukovi murmured, resting lightly on the concealed holster beneath his jacket. “He’s with two aides and a representative from Gazprom.”

“Of course he is,” Tito said. He adjusted his coat,

the wool heavy against his regenerated skin. “The vultures always gather at the carcass before it’s cold.”

Elena walked a half-step behind him, her medical bag clutched tight. She had insisted on coming, citing the need for a medical professional in case things turned violent. Tito knew the truth: she was terrified of what he might do, and even more terrified of being left behind, alone with the consequences of his actions. She was a witness, and he intended to use her testimony.

They took the elevator in silence. The polished steel doors reflected Tito’s face—older than it should be, weary, but unyielding. He saw Elena’s reflection next to his: pale, dark circles under her eyes, but a resolve hardening in her jaw. She was beginning to understand that neutrality was a luxury of the dead. The private dining room was separated from the main

restaurant by a frosted glass partition. Inside, Minister Markovi sat at the head of a man in his fifties with a carefully curated tan and a suit that shimmered under the soft lighting. To his right sat a Russian in a sharp black coat—Gazprom’s regional director—and to his left, two Serbian aides who looked like they had been born in the minister’s shadow.

As Tito entered, the conversation died. He looked up, his expression shifting from annoyance to confusion, then to a flash of fear that he quickly masked with a smile.

“Marshal Tito,” Markovi said, standing and scraping against the floor. “An unexpected honor. I was told you were... indisposed.”

“I am fully disposed, Minister,” Tito said, walking to the table. He didn’t wait for an invitation. He pulled out a chair and sat opposite the Russian, locking eyes

with him. The Russian stared back, his face a blank mask of professional indifference.

“May I ask the purpose of this visit?” asked, sitting back down. He signaled to a waiter, who hovered nervously near the door. “Would you like a drink? Coffee?”

“I want nothing from this table,” Tito said. He placed his hands flat on the white tablecloth. The contrast between his rough, utilitarian hands and the pristine fabric was stark. “I want answers.”

The Russian cleared his throat. “This is a private meeting, Marshal. Perhaps you could schedule an appointment with the minister’s office—”

“I am the Marshal of Yugoslavia,” Tito interrupted, his voice low but carrying the weight of a command.

“I do not schedule appointments. I appear.”

The Russian fell silent. Markovishin shifted uncomfortably.

“Regarding what, exactly?” Markovishin asked.

“Regarding the price of bread,” Tito said.

The minister blinked. “Bread? That’s... a trivial

matter. The market determines—”

“The market determines nothing,” Tito said. “The market is a fiction you tell to justify theft. I am speaking of the Austrian supermarket chain that purchased the state-owned milling conglomerate last year. The deal you signed.”

Markovi's face tightened. “That was a privatization. It brought investment, jobs—”

“It brought cheap imports that undercut local farmers,” Tito said. “It brought the closure of five mills and the unemployment of two thousand workers. It brought bread that tastes of sawdust and costs three times what it should. And it brought a commission to a numbered account in Cyprus.”

The room went deathly quiet. The Russian's eyes narrowed, calculating.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Tito said, his voice rising. “These are baseless

accusations.”

Tito reached into his coat and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He smoothed it on the table. It was a printout of bank transactions, highlighted in red.

“Account number 45-8892-001,” Tito read. “A deposit of five hundred thousand euros, dated three days after the deal was finalized. The sender is a shell company registered in Liechtenstein. The beneficiary is your wife’s cousin.”

Markovi went pale. He looked at the Tito, then at the Russian. The Russian’s mask slipped for a fraction of a second, revealing a flicker of annoyance.

“This is... this is a fabrication,” Markovi stammered. “A forgery.”

“Is it?” Tito leaned forward. “I have the original files. The Institute has been busy. We have the emails, the recordings, the minutes of the meetings

where you discussed the ‘incentives.’ You sold your country for a fraction of its worth, and you didn’t even have the sense to hide the money well.”

Elena watched from the doorway, her heart pounding. She saw the terror in Marko’s cold calculation in the Russian’s. She saw the aides shrinking into their chairs, wishing they were invisible.

“What do you want?” Markovi whispered. “I want you to resign,” Tito said. “Publicly. You will state that you can no longer serve a government that allows foreign interests to bleed the people dry. You will return the money. You will stand trial.”

Markovi laughed, a hysterical, panicked laugh. “You’re insane. The government will never allow it. The Russians—”

“Will do nothing,” Tito said. He looked at the Russian. “Gazprom is interested in stability, not in a

corrupt minister who draws attention to their operations. They will cut you loose, are a liability.”

The Russian remained silent, but his silence was agreement.

“And if I refuse?” Markovi asked.

“Then the people will know,” Tito said. “The list of every factory sold, every deal signed, every bribe taken will be published. Not in the newspapers—those are owned by the same people. On the streets. On the walls. In the factories. And the workers will stop. The trucks will stop. The ships will stop. And you will be the one they come for.”

Tito stood up. The chair slid back smoothly.

“You have until dawn,” he said. “Resign. Return the money. Or I will dismantle you, piece by piece.”

He turned to leave, then paused. “Oh, and Minister? The bread. It’s terrible. Fix it.”

As they walked out, Elena could hear

hyperventilating. The Russian was already on his phone, speaking in low, urgent Russian.

In the elevator, Elena leaned against the wall, her legs weak. “You can’t do this,” she said. “You can’t just threaten a minister and expect the system to collapse.”

“I’m not expecting it to collapse,” Tito said. “I’m expecting it to bleed. A system this corrupt has no immune system. It can’t heal. It can only die.”

Vukovi was waiting in the lobby. He looked at Tito’s face and knew immediately how it had gone.

“Back to the Institute?” Vukovi asked.
“Not yet,” Tito said. “Take me to the old city center. I want to walk.”

“Marshal, that’s not safe—”

“I need to see the people,” Tito said. “I need to feel the weight of dust on my skin.”

They walked out into the fading light of the

afternoon. The air was colder now, the chemical haze thickening into a fog that swallowed the tops of the buildings. Tito walked with his hands behind his back, the way he used to walk through the ruins of post-war Belgrade. He saw the same desperation, the same hunger, but this time there was no Marshall Plan, no brotherly nations to lend a hand. There was only the cold calculus of global capital and the bitter resentment of a people left behind.

Elena walked beside him, her medical bag swinging at her side. She watched the faces of the passersby—hollow, suspicious, but when they saw Tito, a spark of recognition ignited in their eyes. They didn't know how he had returned, or why, but they saw a man who did not look away.

“Doctor,” Tito said softly, not looking at her. “When you were a child, did you ever build a house of cards?”

“Yes,” she said, confused. “It always fell.”

“Why?”

“Because the foundation was weak. One wrong move, and

the whole thing collapses.”

Tito nodded. “We are building a house of cards, Elena. But we are not the ones building it. We are the wind.”

He stopped in front of a bombed-out building, a relic from the 1990s that had never been repaired. The walls were pockmarked with bullet holes, the windows boarded up. Graffiti covered the concrete: Tito lives, someone had written, and below it, in a different hand: Tito is dead.

Tito reached out and touched the rough wall, his fingers tracing the outline of a bullet hole.

“Brotherhood and Unity,” he whispered, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. “A family that fights itself is no family at all.”

He turned to Elena, his eyes burning with a sudden, fierce intensity.

“Tell me, Doctor. What happened here? While I was... away. Why is this building still standing like a

scar?”

Elena looked at the building, and the memories rose unbidden—images she had tried to lock away. The shelling, the snipers, the camps, the mass graves.

“It wasn’t a war of armies,” she said quietly. “It was a war of neighbors. Brothers. They didn’t fight for a flag. They fought because they were told the man next door was a monster.”

Tito stared at the building, and for the first time since his return, he felt a tremor of doubt. He had faced armies, spies, and politicians. But how do you fight a poison that has already seeped into the blood of a nation?

“I missed it,” he said, and his voice was heavy with a grief he hadn’t yet allowed himself to feel. “I missed the war.”

Elena said nothing. She simply stood beside him, sharing the silence of the dead.

Behind them, Vukovi watched the storm on

his weapon. He knew that the government response would not be long in coming. The minister would not resign. The Russians would not cut him loose. They would send men. They would send guns.

And Tito would be ready.

But as Tito stood there, touching the scars of a city he no longer recognized, Vuković would Marshal was ready for the ghosts that waited inside the walls.

The wind picked up, carrying the smell of burning trash and the distant wail of sirens. The symphony was beginning.

CHAPTER 7: THE ECHO IN THE DUST

The fog off the Sava was a physical presence, a wet gray shroud that clung to the concrete canyons of Old Belgrade. It muffled the sounds of the city, turning the distant traffic into a dull pulse and the neon signs of the few functioning businesses into smears of bleeding color. Tito walked through it like a ghost revisiting his own grave.

The bomb-scarred building stood behind them now, a jagged silhouette against the bruised twilight. Its

silence felt accusatory. Elena walked a few paces back, her breath visible in the cold air, her mind replaying the images she had just summoned. She had seen the war not as a historian or a strategist, but as a doctor who had spent weeks in a basement clinic, stitching together children torn by shrapnel that bore the serial numbers of factories they had once built together.

Vukovi moved like a shadow, his gaze the rooftops, the alleyways, the parked cars that might hide waiting eyes. He didn't trust the quiet. In his experience, the silence before an attack was always louder than the gunfire that followed.

They turned onto Knez Mihailova, the main pedestrian artery. It was a ghost of its former self. The grand Austro-Hungarian facades were intact, but the shop windows were either shuttered with plywood or displayed mannequins dressed in clothes that hadn't

been fashionable for a decade. The air smelled of damp wool, roasted chestnuts, and despair.

Here, the crowds were thinner, hunched against the wind. Tito watched the people. He saw the way they walked—shoulders hunched, eyes downcast, moving with a defensive crouch that spoke of a lifetime of expecting the blow to come from behind. It was a posture he recognized from the liberation of '45, but then it had been followed by the slow, determined straightening of spines. Now, they remained bent.

A group of teenagers loitered outside a shuttered cinema, their faces pale under the streetlights. They wore clothes that were too expensive for the neighborhood but too cheap to be genuine. One of them, a boy with a sharp, angular face, saw Tito. His eyes widened. He nudged his friend. Whispers rippled through the small group like a current.

Tito kept walking, but he felt the weight of their

stares. It wasn't the adulation of the rally, nor the fear of the minister. It was curiosity laced with a deep, cynical bitterness.

" Marshal , " V u k o v i m u r m u r e d , h i s h a n d T i t o ' s e l b o w . " W e a r e e x p o s e d h e r e . "

" W e a r e a l w a y s e x p o s e d , V u k o v i , " T i t o s o f t l y . " T h e q u e s t i o n i s w h e t h e r w e a r e s e e n . "

He stopped at a newsstand. The papers were filled with the usual diet of sensationalism and state-sanctioned optimism. The headline on Politika w a s i n n o c u o u s : T r a d e M i n i s t e r M a r k o v E c o n o m i c S u m m i t . T i t o p i c k e d u p a c o p y . T h e p a p e r f e l t f l i m s y , b r i t t l e .

"The ink is cheap," he said to Elena. "And the truth is cheaper."

He handed the vendor a few coins. The man took them without looking up, his face etched with a resignation that went bone-deep. Tito unfolded the paper and scanned the financial section. He saw the names:

Austrian supermarket chains, German energy conglomerates, Russian gas giants. It was a map of conquest written in balance sheets. He had fought tanks and armies; here, the invaders had arrived with contracts and credit ratings.

"He won't resign," Elena said quietly, stepping closer to him to share the warmth of his coat.

"Markovi. He's too terrified of the him."

"I know," Tito said. He folded the paper and tucked it under his arm. "That's why I gave him a deadline. Desperation makes men sloppy. It makes them reach out to the wrong people for protection. And when they reach out, we listen."

He looked at her, his eyes reflecting the dim light. "You think I enjoy this? The threats? The intimidation?"

"I think you see it as a tool," Elena said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Like a scalpel. Necessary,

but cold."

"A scalpel cuts both ways," Tito admitted. "But sometimes, you must cut deep to remove the rot."

They continued walking, the silence stretching between them. The fog thickened, reducing visibility to a few meters. The city seemed to be withdrawing into itself, hiding its wounds.

As they approached Republic Square, a sudden noise shattered the stillness—the sharp, metallic pop-pop-pop of a backfiring exhaust pipe. It was a common sound in a city of aging vehicles, but

Vuković reacted instantly. He spun, shielded and Elena against the wall of a building, his body shielding them, his weapon drawn in a fluid motion that was pure muscle memory.

The street froze. The teenagers from the cinema vanished into the shadows. A woman walking a dog pulled the animal close and hurried away.

For three seconds, there was absolute silence, heavy

with the anticipation of violence.

Then, a cat darted from a dumpster, chasing a scrap of paper.

Vukovi slowly lowered his weapon, eyes remained scanning the rooftops. He holstered the gun under his coat, his breathing steady but shallow.

"Your nerves are frayed, Vukovi," Tito straightening his coat. He felt the adrenaline spike in his own blood, a familiar rush that he had missed more than he cared to admit.

"My nerves are calibrated, Marshal," corrected, his voice tight. "That was a warning. They know we are here. They are letting us know they can touch us whenever they want."

"Let them watch," Tito said. "Let them see that I do not flinch."

But as they moved on, Tito felt a cold knot in his stomach. The sensation was unfamiliar. It wasn't

fear—it was the heavy burden of causality. Every step he took, every word he spoke, sent ripples through a pond that was already turbulent. He was disrupting a fragile, corrupt equilibrium. And nature, in all its forms, abhors a vacuum.

They reached the edge of the square, near the Narodni Muzej. The museum was closed, its grand columns dark and imposing. Tito looked up at the statue of Prince Mihailo, its bronze surface dulled by pollution and time. The Prince pointed his sword toward the south, toward Kosovo, toward a history of loss and longing.

"History is a loop," Tito said, more to himself than to the others. "We think we are moving forward, but we are just circling the same old wounds."

Elena hugged herself, shivering. "Is that why you came back? To break the loop?"

Tito didn't answer immediately. He looked at his hands—strong, capable hands that had held the reins of

a nation. Now they felt empty.

"I came back because the project was incomplete," he said finally. "We built a house, Elena. But we forgot to check the foundation. We forgot that the soil was full of old bones and older grudges. Now the house is crumbling, and the new landlords are renting out the rooms to the highest bidder."

He turned to her, his expression grave. "I cannot rebuild the house. Not alone. And perhaps not at all. But I can clear the rubble. I can expose the termites."

"And if the house collapses on top of us?" Elena asked.

"Then we are buried with our history," Tito said. "Better to die standing than to live on our knees."

A black sedan slowed down on the street beside them. It moved with predatory silence, its windows tinted dark. For a moment, Tito thought it would stop. He

tensed, ready to move, ready to fight.

But the car accelerated, disappearing into the fog, its taillights bleeding red into the gray.

Vukovi let out a breath he hadn't really holding. "They're marking us," he said. "Logging our movements. Building a profile."

"Let them," Tito said. "They will find that I am a difficult subject to profile."

He started walking again, heading toward the car parked a few blocks away. As he walked, his mind was already racing, processing the intel The Institute had gathered, the patterns of corruption, the network of bribes and threats that held the current regime together. He saw the system not as a monolith, but as a series of fragile connections. If he pulled the right thread, the whole tapestry might unravel.

But the image of the bombed-out building returned to him. A war of neighbors.

He looked at Elena, seeing the trauma etched into her

eyes, the scars on her soul that no medical degree could heal. He looked at Vukovi, who was born of a war that had never truly ended for men like him.

These were the people he was fighting for. Broken, haunted, but still alive.

They reached the car. Vukovi opened the door. Tito slid into the back seat. The leather was cold. Elena got in beside him, closing the door with a soft thud that sealed them off from the fog and the watching eyes.

As Vukovi started the engine, the radio came to life. It was a news bulletin, the announcer's voice crisp and urgent.

"Breaking news. Trade Minister Markovic announced a press conference for eight PM tonight. Sources say he will address recent allegations of corruption and outline a new initiative for economic

sovereignty."

Tito smiled, a grim, humorless expression. "He's going to try to spin it. He's going to claim he's the victim. The patriot."

"He's panicking," Vukovi said, pulling traffic. "He's showing his hand."

"Exactly," Tito said. "And now, we know where he'll be. We know who he'll be talking to."

He looked out the window as the car sped up, leaving the Old Town behind. The city lights blurred into streaks of color through the wet glass.

"Vukovi," Tito said. "Take us to the I time we had a proper war room."

"And the minister?" Vukovi asked.

"We let him speak," Tito said. "And then, when he's done, we cut the strings."

The car merged onto the highway, heading toward the industrial outskirts where the Institute was hidden

among the factories and warehouses. The symphony was building, the movements shifting from the slow, mournful adagio of the past to the frantic, violent staccato of the present.

Tito closed his eyes, not to rest, but to visualize the board. The pieces were moving. The pawns were sacrificed. The king was exposed.

And the ghost of Yugoslavia sat in the dark, preparing to strike.

CHAPTER 8: THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENED

The Institute was not a place of gleaming chrome and sterile white light. It was a repurposed textile mill on the banks of the Danube, a hulking brick behemoth from the 19th century that the state had forgotten to sell. The air inside smelled of cold stone, mildew, and the faint, metallic tang of old machinery. It was a fitting cathedral for the resurrection of a ghost.

Tito stepped out of the car, the gravel crunching under his boots. The fog was thinner here, pushed back

by the ambient heat rising from the river and the scattered, low-wattage glow of the industrial zone. He looked up at the building's facade. Arched windows, dark as pupil-less eyes, stared back.

"Home sweet home," Vukovi muttered, car with a sharp chirp. He kept his hand near his coat, scanning the perimeter. The isolation was a double-edged sword; it offered privacy, but it also offered cover for an ambush.

Elena shivered, pulling her coat tighter. "It feels... heavy."

"It is," Tito said, walking toward the heavy steel doors. "It holds the weight of everything we chose to forget."

Inside, the mill had been transformed into a tactical nerve center. The vast open space of the main floor was partitioned by movable walls and thick curtains. Banks of monitors glowed in the semi-darkness,

displaying feeds from security cameras, financial tickers, and maps of the city grid. The hum of servers was the only sound, a constant electronic drone that masked the silence of the dead machinery.

Several operatives—men and women in nondescript civilian clothes, their faces tired but alert—looked up as Tito entered. There was no applause, no salutes. Just a quiet nod of acknowledgment, a collective intake of breath. They were The Institute's skeleton crew: former intelligence officers, disillusioned journalists, and tech specialists who had survived the purges of the 90s by disappearing into the shadows.

Tito moved through them, his presence commanding the space without a word. He stopped before a large central screen displaying a live feed of the government district. The image was grainy, distorted by the low-light cameras hidden in the architecture. "Status," Tito said.

A woman in her forties, her hair cut short in a severe

bob, stepped forward. Her name was Jelena, the head of signals intelligence. She held a tablet like a shield.

"Markovi is en route to the Press Cen
her voice clipped and professional. "Motorcade, two vehicles. Heavy security. The Russian attaché, a man named Volkov, is not with him. That confirms our assessment that the Russians have cut him loose."

"Or they are letting him dangle," Tito countered. He approached the screen, his eyes narrowing. "Volkov is a chess player. He doesn't sacrifice a piece unless he gains a positional advantage."

"Markovi doesn't look like a man play
Vukovi said, joining them. He poured
of black coffee from a thermos on a nearby table.

"He looks like a man running from a bear, hoping to find a higher tree."

Tito turned to the map of the city projected on an adjacent wall. It was a layered overlay: current

political boundaries, ethnic demographics from the last census, and—most importantly—infrastructure grids. Power, water, fiber optics.

"Where are the flashpoints?" Tito asked.

Jelena tapped her tablet. Red dots bloomed across the map. "Here. The dormitories at the University. The students are restless. They've been organizing via encrypted channels—Signal, Telegram. They call themselves the 'Unfinished State.'"

"And the paramilitaries?" Tito asked.

"Quiet," Jelena said. "Too quiet. The 'Guardians of the Drina' have pulled back to their compounds in the suburbs. It's like they're waiting for a signal."

"Or for the smoke to clear," Elena suggested, stepping up to the map. She traced a line from the city center to the industrial zone. "I think there will be a power vacuum. The Russians won't let it go to a democratic vote. They'll prop up a hardliner. Someone

who doesn't bother with press conferences."

Tito nodded slowly. "The transition from soft power to hard power. It's a classic maneuver. Create chaos, then offer order as a commodity."

He looked at the operatives gathered around. They were watching him, waiting. He saw the hope in their eyes, but he also saw the fear. They had seen leaders rise and fall. They had seen promises turn into ash.

"You are looking at me," Tito said, his voice low and resonant, "expecting me to provide a miracle. To wave my hand and make the corruption vanish. To bring back the prosperity of the 1970s."

He paused, letting the silence stretch.

"I cannot do that," he continued. "The world has changed. The economics have changed. The very soil has changed. What I can offer you is a strategy. Not a salvation."

He walked to the central table, where a physical map

was spread out, weighted down with stones. He placed his hands on the edges, framing the territory of the old Yugoslavia.

"Markovi thinks he is fighting for h
Tito said. "He is wrong. He is fighting for a narrative. And narratives can be hijacked."

"Plan Alpha?" Vukovi asked, setting
"Plan Alpha is too crude," Tito said. "Arresting him now would make him a martyr. The state would paint us as traitors, and the public, weary of instability, might believe them."

He looked at Jelena. "You have the audio logs from the minister's secure line? The ones intercepted yesterday?"

"Encrypted," she said. "But we have the metadata. He spoke to three numbers. Two are local oligarchs. The third..." She zoomed in on the map, highlighting a location in Republika Srpska, the Serb entity in

Bosnia. "A private airstrip. Unregistered traffic."

"Away flight," Tito murmured. "He's planning to run. He'll take the heat at the press conference, create a diversion, and slip across the border during the chaos."

"So we let him speak," Vukovi said, c

"And then we let him run?"

"No," Tito said. "We let him speak. And then we cut the runway."

He turned to the room, his presence expanding to fill the vast space. The skepticism in the room began to dissolve, replaced by a tense focus. The Marshal was not offering hope; he was offering a plan. And in a city that had lost faith in everything, a plan was a rare and precious thing.

"Jelena," Tito commanded. "Patch the feed from the Press Center into the main screen. I want to hear every word, see every face in the crowd."

"Vukovi, mobilize the extraction team
capture

Markovi, but to secure the perimeter of the Institute. If the government decides to strike while the Minister is distracting the cameras, they will come here."

"And you?" Elena asked, looking at him.

Tito pulled a heavy wooden chair to the center of the room, positioning it directly in front of the large screen. He sat down, the leather groaning under his weight. He looked like a king on a throne of wires and static, a monarch of the ruins.

"I," he said, "will watch. And I will wait for the moment the Minister makes his mistake."

The screens flickered. The live feed from the Press Center stabilized. The room was filling with journalists, their faces illuminated by camera flashes. The air in the Institute seemed to thicken, charged with the anticipation of the collision that was about to occur.

Tito leaned forward, his chin resting on his hand. His

eyes, sharp and calculating, reflected the cold blue light of the monitors. He was no longer the man touching the bullet holes in the wall, mourning a past he hadn't witnessed. He was the strategist again, the puppeteer, the ghost in the machine.

Outside, the fog swirled around the old mill, hiding it from the city. Inside, the war was already being fought, not with guns, but with information, timing, and the brutal psychology of power.

And Tito, the man out of time, was perfectly at home.

CHAPTER 9: THE BROADCAST

The press center was a glass-and-steel monolith in the government district, a stark contrast to the decaying brick of the Institute. On the main screen, it looked like a beacon of modernity, but Tito saw the cracks immediately. The security cordon was thin, the police officers looked bored, and the journalists were packed too tightly, a swarm of anxious insects drawn to the flickering light of a dying flame.

"He's here," Jelena announced, her voice cutting

through the hum of the servers.

The feed shifted. A black sedan pulled up to the curb. The door opened, and Trade Minister

Markovi stepped out. He was a man in a suit dressed in a suit that looked slightly too large for his frame. His face was pale, his movements jerky. He didn't look like a patriot preparing to defend his honor; he looked like a gambler who had just realized he was playing with marked cards.

Tito watched him with the detachment of a pathologist examining a specimen. He noted the way

Markovi's eyes darted toward the sky, the drones, the way his hand trembled as he adjusted his tie.

"Look at him," Tito said softly. "A man terrified of his own shadow."

"Or a man who knows exactly who is casting it," Elena murmured. She stood slightly behind Tito, her arms crossed. She was watching the screen, but her gaze

kept drifting to Tito's profile, studying the lines of his face, the intensity of his focus.

Markovi entered the building. The interior of the press room. It was a sterile space, white walls and rows of folding chairs. The air was thick with the smell of stale coffee and cheap cologne. The journalists were already shouting questions, their voices overlapping into a cacophony of demands.

Markovi took his place at the podium, the sides of it, his knuckles turning white. He leaned into the microphone, and for a moment, the room fell silent.

"Citizens of Serbia," he began, his voice cracking slightly before finding its footing. "Tonight, I stand before you not just as a minister, but as a target."

Tito leaned forward. "Here it comes."

"For months," Markovi continued, "working

tirelessly to secure our economic sovereignty. To break the chains of foreign dependency. And for this, I have been targeted. By shadowy forces. By those who wish to see our nation weak and divided."

"Projection," Tito muttered. "He's describing himself."

"He's playing the victim card," Vuković was standing near the door, his hand resting on the grip of a pistol hidden beneath his coat. His eyes were fixed on the perimeter monitors, watching the streets outside the Institute. "He's trying to rally the nationalists."

"It won't work," Jelena said, her fingers flying across her keyboard. "The sentiment analysis on social media is already turning against him. The hashtags are trending toward #MarkoviRun."

"Good," Tito said. "Let him dig his own grave. But we need to make sure he stays in it."

He turned to Jelena. "Do you have the audio file

ready?"

"Loaded and encrypted," she confirmed. "It's set to broadcast on a loop through the emergency broadcast system. We'll override the local networks."

"And the location?"

"Transmitting to the screen now."

A red pin appeared on the map overlay, blinking over a small airfield in Republika Srpska. A private jet was flagged on the tarmac, its transponder active.

"Excellent," Tito said. "Now, we wait for the right moment. Let him incriminate himself further. Let him promise the moon. Then, we drop the anvil."

On the screen, Markovi was gaining
He spoke of new trade deals, of a revitalized
economy, of a future where Serbia stood tall. He was
weaving a narrative of resilience, painting himself as
the sole defender of the national interest.

It was a masterful performance, Tito had to admit.
The

man had a talent for rhetoric. But it was hollow. Tito could hear the emptiness in the pauses, the desperation in the emphasis.

"He's winding down," Vukovi observe about to open the floor to questions."

"Wait," Tito commanded.

Markovi took a sip of water. His hand worse than before. He looked at the assembled press, his eyes wide.

"I am prepared to answer any questions," he said.

"But I must warn you, the attacks on my character will not stand."

A journalist in the front row stood up. A woman, young, with sharp eyes. Tito recognized her from the files. She worked for an independent outlet, one of the few that hadn't been bought out.

"Minister," she said, her voice clear and steady.

"You speak of foreign dependency. Yet records show that

your family owns property in Moscow and St. Petersburg. You also speak of economic sovereignty, but you have been negotiating the sale of our national railway to a Russian consortium. Can you explain this contradiction?"

The room erupted. Markovi's face went to crimson.

"Lies!" he shouted, pointing a finger at her.

"Baseless lies! This is exactly the kind of smear campaign I was talking about!"

Tito smiled. It was the opening. The moment of panic.

"Now," Tito said.

Jelena hit a key. The screen flickered. The live feed from the press center was suddenly interrupted. For three seconds, the image cut to static. Then, a new feed appeared. It was an audio waveform, pulsing on the screen, accompanied by a transcript.

It was the audio log from Markovi's
The

conversation with the oligarch in Republika Srpska. The audio was distorted, but the words were clear.

"The jet is fueled. I'll be there by midnight. The press conference is at eight. It'll buy me enough time. Don't wait for me."

"What about the money?"

"It's already moving. The accounts are set. I'm not staying to watch the house burn."

The audio looped. Once. Twice. The journalists in the press room were in chaos. Phones were raised, recording the broadcast that was now echoing through the room's speakers. Markovi at the podium, his mouth open, his eyes wide with horror.

He knew. He knew immediately what was happening. He knew he was exposed.

"This is... this is fabrication!" he stammered, but his voice was drowned out by the noise.

At the Institute, Tito watched the chaos unfold with

cold satisfaction. He saw the moment
composure shattered. He saw the security detail
closing in, not to protect him, but to contain him.

"He's finished," Elena whispered. She looked at
Tito, a mix of awe and fear in her eyes. "You didn't
just stop him. You destroyed him."

"I exposed him," Tito corrected. "I let the people see
the rot for what it is."

"Movement," Vukovi barked. He was
perimeter monitors. "Three vehicles. Black sedans.
No markings. They're moving fast toward the
industrial zone."

"Government retaliation?" Tito asked, not taking his
eyes off the main screen.

"Or Russian cleanup," Vukovi replied
heading for the press center. They're coming here."

"Jelena," Tito said calmly. "Seal the perimeter.
Activate the electronic countermeasures. Scramble

their comms."

"Done," she said. "But they'll be at the gate in two minutes."

"Vukovi," Tito said. "Take the extract. Meet them at the perimeter. Do not engage unless fired upon. I want them to see that we are not afraid. I want them to see that the Institute is not a target. It is a fortress."

Vukovi nodded, a grim smile touching his face. "With pleasure."

He turned and moved toward the door, his posture shifting from observer to warrior. The operatives in the room drew their weapons, their faces hardening. The air in the room changed again, the electronic hum now overlaid with the metallic click of safeties being switched off.

Elena stepped closer to Tito. "Is this what you wanted? A war in the streets?"

Tito turned to her, his expression unreadable. "I

wanted the truth to be heard. The streets decide what happens next."

On the screen, Markovi was being d by his own security. He was shouting, fighting, but he was a dead man walking. The narrative had shifted. The puppet had become the puppet.

Tito stood up. He walked to the map, his fingers tracing the route the black sedans were taking. He saw the geometry of the trap, the angles of approach.

"They are coming for the ghost," he said. "But they will find only the machine."

He looked at Elena. "Stay close to Jelena. Keep the feed active. I need to see what they do when they realize we are not running."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I am going to the gate," Tito said. "A Marshal does not hide in the bunker while his soldiers fight."

"You're a liability," she said, her voice sharp. "If

you are captured or killed, this all ends."

"If I hide," Tito replied, his voice dropping to a low, gravelly register, "then I am already dead."

He walked toward the door, his coat swirling around him. The room watched him go, a collective breath held in the silence. The ghost was walking into the light, and the city of Belgrade, shrouded in fog and fear, was about to see him clearly for the first time. The symphony was reaching its crescendo. The drums were beating. The strings were screaming. And the Marshal was stepping onto the stage.

CHAPTER 10: THE IRON GATE

The air in the sublevel corridor was cold, smelling of damp concrete and ozone. Tito's footsteps echoed with a heavy, deliberate cadence, a metronome counting down to a collision he had already calculated. The walls of the Institute were thick, reinforced with steel plates scavenged from decommissioned Yugoslav-era bunkers, but the tension vibrating through the floorboards suggested the fragility of their defenses. It was a skeleton of the old world holding up the new.

Vukovi was waiting at the junction,
fanned

out behind him. They were young, mostly—faces hardened by the economic collapse of the last decade, eyes reflecting the harsh LED strips overhead. They wore mismatched tactical gear, a patchwork of private security surplus and black-market NATO castoffs. They looked at Tito with a mixture of reverence and raw terror.

"Perimeter cameras are jammed," Vukobranovic's voice low. "The sedans stopped two hundred meters out. They cut their engines. They're on foot."

"Number?" Tito asked, adjusting the collar of his coat. He wore no armor, only the heavy wool of a winter uniform that hadn't been seen on the streets of Belgrade in thirty years.

"Six hostiles. Heavily armed. Suppressed rifles, night-vision. They move like professionals. Not police. Not army." Vukobranovic hesitated.

"Or a private contractor with Russian backing," Tito

said. "It doesn't matter. The methodology is the same. Precision. Intimidation. Deniability."

He looked at the young operatives. They were clutching their weapons, knuckles white. They were fighting for a ghost, for a memory of a country that had died before they were born. They didn't understand the geopolitical currents swirling around them; they only knew hunger and humiliation.

"Listen to me," Tito said, his voice cutting through the hum of the ventilation. "You are not fighting for me. You are fighting for the right to determine your own destiny. Those men outside? They represent the new colonialism. They do not want a partner; they want a puppet. Just as the West wants a puppet in Zagreb and Ljubljana. Just as the old empires always wanted."

Elena appeared in the corridor behind them, breathless. "Jelena has regained partial visual. Thermal imaging shows they are flanking the west wall.

The blind spot."

"They know the layout," Vuković growled. "They have a leak."

"Or they have good intelligence," Tito corrected.

"Assume the worst. Plan for the inevitable." He turned to Elena. "Stay here. Monitor the comms. If we fall, you trigger the data purge. The world must know what Marković was planning. They know the extent of the rot."

"And you?" Elena asked, her eyes searching his.

"What happens if you fall? A bullet in the dark? The Marshal returned only to be erased?"

Tito paused. He looked at his hands—scarred, veined, the hands of a man who had spent decades smoking cigarettes and signing orders. For a moment, the weight of the years he hadn't lived pressed down on him. The 1990s. The void. The screams he hadn't heard.

"If I fall," he said softly, "then the Marshal was

just a myth. And we are all just ghosts."

He moved toward the heavy steel door that led to the loading bay. Vukovi signaled his team into formation, a ragged phalanx of resistance.

The loading bay was a cavernous space, once used for storing bales of cotton, now filled with crates of servers and ammunition. The massive rolling door was shut, but the metal was thin. Outside, the fog had thickened, wrapping the old textile mill in a suffocating embrace. The city lights of Belgrade were distant, blurred by the mist—faint stars in a polluted sky.

Tito walked to the side access door, a small personnel exit reinforced with a crossbar. He placed his hand on the cold steel.

"Open it," he commanded.

Vukovi hesitated. "Marshal, it's better to choke point inside."

"I will not cower behind a door while they stalk the

perimeter," Tito said. He looked at Vu
hardening. "Open it."

Vukovi nodded to a technician. With a
hiss, the locks disengaged. The door swung inward,
letting in a rush of cold, damp air that smelled of
diesel and wet asphalt.

Tito stepped out into the loading dock. The fog
swirled around his boots. The silence of the
industrial zone was absolute, broken only by the
distant, mournful horn of a freight train on the
Danube.

He stood there, a silhouette against the dim light
spilling from the bay. He was a target, a beacon in
the gloom.

From the shadows of the adjacent warehouse, figures
emerged. They moved with fluid silence, weapons
raised. Six of them, as Vukovi had said.
black tactical gear, faces obscured by balaclavas and

respirators. They didn't speak. They simply moved, encircling the dock.

Tito did not reach for a weapon. He stood with his hands at his sides, his chin raised. He looked not at the guns, but at the lead operative. He looked for the eyes behind the lens of the night-vision goggles.

"Who sends you?" Tito asked. His voice was not loud, but it carried in the stillness, amplified by the acoustics of the concrete walls.

The lead operative paused. He was ten meters away. The red dot of a laser sight danced across Tito's chest, then settled over his heart.

"Put your hands behind your head," the operative said. The voice was distorted by the respirator, but the accent was thick—a Balkan accent, hardened by years of mercenary work. A local boy, bought by foreign rubles.

"You are a Serbian soldier," Tito said, ignoring the command. "Or you were. Now you are a hired thug for

the Russians. Do you know what they call men like you? Poslanici. Envoys. But you are not envoys of peace. You are envoys of the grave."

"Shut up," the operative snapped. He stepped closer.

"Get on the ground. Now."

Behind Tito, the shadows of the loading bay shifted.

Vukovi and his team emerged, weapon lining the edge of the dock. The standoff became a chessboard of intersecting laser sights.

"This ends one of two ways," Tito said, his voice remaining calm, almost conversational. "You shoot me, and you become the man who killed a symbol. You will be hunted. Not just by us, but by the history books. Or, you lower your weapon, and you walk away. You tell your employer that the Marshal is not a ghost to be exorcised. He is a fact to be dealt with."

The operative laughed, a harsh, grating sound. "You are a relic. A statue in a park that nobody visits.

The world has moved on."

"Has it?" Tito asked. "Look around you. Look at this city. Look at this country. You think the Russians care about Serbian pride? They care about the lithium in the ground. They care about the pipeline routes. They care about a buffer zone against the EU. You are not a soldier. You are a speed bump on a trade route."

The operative's finger tightened on the trigger. The tension was a physical thing, a weight pressing down on the air.

Inside the loading bay, Jelena's voice crackled over the internal comms, audible only to Tito's earpiece. "Marshal. I've hacked their comms loop. They are receiving orders. A sniper has you sighted from the roof of the opposite building. He is waiting for the signal."

Tito didn't flinch. He kept his eyes locked on the lead operative. He knew the game. The man in front of

him was a distraction. The real threat was the invisible finger on the trigger across the street.

"Tell your sniper," Tito said, his voice dropping to a whisper that seemed to cut through the fog, "that if he fires, the electromagnetic pulse I have rigged to this facility will wipe every hard drive within a five-hundred-meter radius. All the data on

Markovi . All the evidence of your em involvement. Gone. You will have killed me, but you will have buried your own secrets."

The operative stiffened. The lie was perfect. It was plausible. In a city built on shadows and double-crosses, it was the only currency that held value.

"You are bluffing," the operative said, but the certainty in his voice wavered.

"Am I?" Tito smiled, a thin, cold expression. "I am the man who held Yugoslavia together with nothing but

will and wire. Do you think I would return to this fractured nightmare without a dead man's switch?" Silence stretched. The fog swirled. The red dot on Tito's chest trembled slightly.

Then, the operative's radio crackled. A voice in Russian, sharp and authoritative. The operative listened, his head tilting slightly. He looked at Tito, a look of grudging respect mixing with hatred.

"Stand down," the operative barked to his team. He lowered his weapon, but the red dot remained fixed on Tito's chest. "This isn't over, Marshal."

"No," Tito agreed. "It is merely the opening movement."

The operatives melted back into the fog as quickly as they had appeared. The silence returned, heavier than before.

Vukovi let out a breath he seemed to be holding for minutes. He stepped up beside Tito. "Did

you actually rig an EMP?"

"No," Tito said, turning back toward the warmth of the loading bay. "But they don't know that. In this city, the truth is less powerful than the fear of it."

He walked back inside, past the young operatives who looked at him now with something akin to awe. Elena rushed to him, her face pale.

"You risked everything," she whispered.

"I bought us time," Tito corrected. He walked to the central console, where the feed of Mark was still looping. The Minister was in cuffs, his face a mask of defeat. "Markovi is fallen. government is in disarray. The Russians are testing our defenses."

He looked at the map on the screen, at the fragmented borders of the old federation. Slovenia. Croatia. Bosnia. Kosovo. North Macedonia. Montenegro. All severed. All leashed to different masters.

"Brotherhood and Unity," Tito murmured. The words

tasted like ash in his mouth. He looked at the faces of his team — Vukovi , Elena , Jelena . strangers to him, yet bound to him by a desperate, dying hope.

"Why do they fear you so much?" Elena asked. "You have no army. No state."

"Because I represent a third path," Tito said, his eyes reflecting the cold blue light of the screens. "And in a world of binary choices—East or West, Empire or Colony—a third path is the most dangerous thing of all."

He sat back down in the wooden chair. The immediate threat had retreated, but the air in the Institute remained charged.

"The Russians will not send amateurs next time," Vukovi warned .

"Let them come," Tito said. He leaned back, closing his eyes for a brief second, listening to the hum of

the machines. It was the only heartbeat the city had left. "We have the narrative now. And a narrative is a fortress harder to breach than any wall."

Outside, the fog swallowed the street, hiding the retreating figures, hiding the sniper scopes glinting in the dark. The Marshal had returned, and the ghosts of the past were beginning to stir in the ruins of the present.

CHAPTER 11: THE WEIGHT OF ASH

The silence in the loading bay was not a reprieve; it was the vacuum left by an explosion. The heavy steel door hissed shut, sealing out the fog and the lingering phantom of the sniper's laser. Yet, the cold seemed to have permeated the concrete, settling into the bones of the Institute's occupants.

Tito stood by the central console, his back to the room. On the screen, the loop of Mar played out—the Minister's face contorted in a silent

scream, the flash of police lights against the grimy Belgrade night. Tito watched it with the detachment of a historian examining a faded photograph.

Vukovi holstered his sidearm, his movements still adrenaline flooding his system. He signaled his team to stand down, but his eyes never left Tito. The fear that had gripped the young operatives earlier had transformed into a brittle kind of reverence. They had witnessed a man stand down six armed hostiles with nothing but words and a calculated lie.

"That was a high-stakes gamble, Marsh," said, his voice rough. He walked over to a crate of ammunition, using it as a seat, his posture slumping. "If they had called the bluff..."

"They didn't," Tito said, turning around. His face was pale, the lines around his eyes deepened by the harsh lighting. "And they won't, not until they can verify the existence of an EMP. That buys us hours, perhaps a

day. Use it."

Elena stepped forward, clutching a tablet to her chest like a shield. Her breathing was still uneven. "You told them we had a dead man's switch. You told them the data would be destroyed. But Jelena is still purging the secondary servers. If they had attacked, we would have lost everything."

"A predator hesitates when it smells a trap," Tito replied. He moved away from the screen, pacing the perimeter of the loading bay. His boots crunched on loose grit and stray shell casings from previous, forgotten skirmishes. "The Russians are not looking for a fight to the death. They are looking for a clean extraction. They want Markovi's data. My bluff forced them to prioritize the asset over the target."

He stopped and looked at Elena. "You are thinking like a technician. You must learn to think like a strategist. The truth is irrelevant in the heat of the

moment. Only the perception of truth matters."

Elena's jaw tightened. She respected him, that much was clear, but the fear he instilled in her was palpable. "And if they return with an EMP detector? Or if they simply decide to storm the building and take their chances?"

"Then we die," Tito said simply. "But we will not die cowering in the dark."

Jelena's voice cut through the tension from the comms station in the corner. "Marshal. I've isolated the frequency they used. It's encrypted, but the signature is Russian military-grade. A private firm, 'Varyag Security,' out of St. Petersburg. They're contractors."

"Contractors," Vuković spat. "Mercenaries." "More than that," Tito corrected. He walked over to the map of the Balkans projected on the far wall. The borders were stark, drawn in aggressive reds and

blues. "They are the surgical tools of the new empire. They do what the state cannot. They clean up messes."

He traced a line with his finger from Moscow, down through the Black Sea, and into the heart of Serbia.

"Markovi was their man in the government, the conduit for the lithium trade, the bypass around the EU sanctions. By arresting him, we didn't just embarrass the Serbian government; we severed a vein in the Russian supply chain."

"And now they are bleeding," Vuković stood up.

"And they will be furious," Tito agreed. He turned to the team. They were exhausted, running on fumes and fear. "We need to move the primary server stack to the sub-basement. The loading bay is compromised. They know we are here. They know our strength."

"Moving the servers now is risky," Jelena warned.

"The fiber optics run through the west corridor. It's

exposed."

"Then we protect the corridor," Tito said. He looked at Vukovi. "I need a perimeter sweep on every entry point. If they return, they won't come through the front door. They will come through the walls."

Vukovi nodded, barking orders to his operatives snapped into action, their movements fueled by the authority Tito projected. They were no longer just guarding a building; they were defending a cause.

As the team dispersed, Elena lingered. She watched Tito as he examined the tactical map, his brow furrowed in concentration. The weight of the command sat heavy on his shoulders, but he wore it with an eerie familiarity.

"Marshal," she said softly. "You spoke of the 1990s earlier. The void. Do you remember anything? Anything at all?"

Tito's hand hovered over the border of Bosnia and

Herzegovina. A dark, jagged line that cut through the center of the old federation.

"I remember the silence," he said. "I went to sleep in a country that was whole. I woke up in a graveyard. Every time I look at these maps, I see the ghosts of the borders that were drawn in blood while I was... absent."

He looked at her, his eyes dark. "I have read the reports. I have seen the footage. Srebrenica. Vukovar. The shelling of Sarajevo. I understand the facts. But I do not understand the why. How did 'Brotherhood and Unity' become a punchline? How did neighbors become executioners?"

Elena looked away, her gaze falling to the floor.

"My father was in Sarajevo during the siege," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "He died waiting for a convoy that never came. He believed in the old country. He believed in you."

Tito stiffened. "I failed him."

"No," Elena said, looking back at him. "You weren't

there. That's the tragedy. You were the one person who might have stopped it."

"Or I might have died with them," Tito mused. He looked at his hands again. "Perhaps this is my penance. To return to a broken home and try to glue the shards back together."

He shook his head, dismissing the sentimentality.

"But sentiment is a luxury we cannot afford. The Russians are testing us, but they are not the only ones watching."

He gestured to the map. "Look at this. Slovenia and Croatia are in the EU and NATO, looking west, turning their backs on the east. North Macedonia and Montenegro are NATO members—fortresses of the alliance. Bosnia is a powder keg, begging for entry, while Kosovo begs for recognition. And Serbia? Serbia is leashed to the Kremlin, a reluctant dog on a short chain."

"It's a mess," Elena admitted. "It's impossible."

"It is fragmented," Tito corrected. "And fragmentation

is weakness. The old empires knew this. The new ones know it too. They feed on the division. They offer safety in exchange for sovereignty."

He turned to her, his voice dropping to that low, gravelly register that seemed to vibrate in the air.

"We are not fighting for the past, Elena. We are fighting for a third path. A way out of the cage, whether it is made of iron or gold."

"Brotherhood and Unity," she whispered, testing the words. "People spit on that phrase now. They associate it with the crimes of the past, with the suppression of identity."

"Because they have forgotten what it meant," Tito said fiercely. "It was not about erasing the Serbian, the Croat, the Slovene. It was about building a table where all could sit as equals. A table that was overturned by the greed of a few and the indifference of many."

He moved back to the console and switched off the loop

of Markovi's arrest. The screen went reflecting their tired faces.

"Vukovi," Tito called out.

The head of security jogged back over, adjusting his vest. "Marshal?"

"Get me a secure line to the underground presses. I want a manifesto drafted. Not for the world, but for the people of this city. I want them to know that the silence is over. I want them to know that there is an alternative to being a vassal state to the East or a second-class province of the West."

Vukovi looked skeptical. "A manifesto? They'll call it propaganda."

"Let them," Tito said. "But they will read it. And they will remember."

As Vukovi moved to carry out the order, the light in the loading bay flickered. A low hum vibrated through the floor—a generator kicking in as the city's grid

failed again.

The darkness outside the loading bay seemed to press in closer. The fog was no longer just weather; it was a shroud, hiding the movements of the hunters in the night.

Tito stood in the semi-darkness, the blue glow of the monitors illuminating the side of his face. He looked older than he had an hour ago. The confrontation at the gate had taken a toll, not on his body, but on his spirit. He had stared into the barrel of the new world, and he had seen the same cold ambition that had destroyed the old one.

"Marshal," Jelena called out from her station. Her voice was sharp, urgent.

Tito turned. "What is it?"

"I'm picking up a new signal," she said, her fingers flying across the keyboard. "It's not the mercenaries. It's... diplomatic encryption. High-level."

"Who is it?" Tito asked, stepping toward her.

"It's coming from the Russian Embassy," Jelena said,

her eyes widening. "They're requesting a channel. They want to talk."

Tito stopped. A slow, cold smile touched his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"They hesitated," he said. "Now they want to negotiate."

He looked at Elena, then at Vuković. They gathered around him, the weight of the moment settling on them.

"Put them through," Tito commanded. "Let's see what the new empire has to say to the ghost of the old one."

The hum of the server room filled the silence as the connection was established. The battle had moved from the physical to the digital, from the loading bay to the invisible wires of the global web. And in the heart of the ruined textile mill, the Marshal prepared to wage war with words, knowing that every syllable he spoke was a step closer to either salvation or total

annihilation.

CHAPTER 12: THE ECHO CHAMBER

The connection established not with a chime, but with a hiss of static—a sound like sand blowing over dry concrete. It filled the loading bay, a white noise that seemed to strip the warmth from the room. The team gathered around Jelena’s workstation, their breath fogging in the sudden chill of the sub-level air.

On the monitor, a waveform pulsed rhythmically, a digital heartbeat. Jelena adjusted her headphones, her

fingers dancing over the encryption keys. "They've bypassed the usual diplomatic protocols," she murmured, her voice tight. "They're using a direct line, military-grade scrambling. It's them."

"Put it on the main speakers," Tito commanded. He stood center-frame, his hands clasped behind his back, a statue of composure in the center of the storm. "I want everyone to hear. We have no secrets from each other now."

Vukovi shifted his weight, his hand resting on his sidearm. The tension in his shoulders hadn't eased since the retreat of the Varyag contractors. If anything, it had coiled tighter. "They're shifting tactics too fast," he muttered. "This isn't standard procedure. This is panic."

"Or calculation," Tito countered softly. "The direct approach implies confidence. Or desperation. We shall soon find out which."

Elena stood to Tito's left, clutching her tablet. She

looked from the screen to Tito's profile, searching for a crack in his armor. She found none, only the deep-set weariness of a man who had been dead for forty years and had returned to a world that made his life's work a mockery. "What if it's a trap?" she asked. "A delay tactic while they reposition?"

"Then we treat it as a negotiation," Tito said. "And we negotiate with the same ruthlessness they would apply to us."

The static cleared abruptly, replaced by a voice that was smooth, cultured, and utterly devoid of warmth. It was a voice accustomed to being obeyed, filtered through a high-quality microphone that picked up the faintest inflection.

"This is Attaché Dimitri Volkov of the Russian Federation Embassy. I am attempting to reach the authority in charge of the facility formerly known as the Tekstilna Industrija. Please acknowledge."

The silence stretched for a beat. Tito stepped

forward, leaning toward the microphone Jelena had positioned on the desk.

"This is Josip Broz," Tito said. His voice was low, gravelly, carrying the weight of history. "You are speaking to the authority in charge."

There was a pause on the other end. The silence was heavy, filled with the unspoken shock of the man on the line. Volkov had likely expected a terrified technician, or perhaps a rogue military officer. He had not expected the ghost.

"Marshal," Volkov recovered, the smoothness returning to his voice, though a fraction tighter. "An unexpected pleasure. I must admit, the reports of your... revival... seemed fantastical. Yet, here we are."

"Here we are," Tito agreed. "You have five minutes, Attaché. The fog is lifting, and I have work to do."

"Direct. As the historical records suggest," Volkov

said. A faint clinking sound came through the line—the ice in a glass. "Let us dispense with the theatrics, Marshal. We are aware of Minister Markovi's location. We know he is in custody."

"You know he is a prisoner of the Institute," Tito corrected. "A guest, if he cooperates. A traitor to his people if he does not."

"He is a diplomat," Volkov countered, a hint of steel entering his tone. "His arrest was illegitimate. The Serbian government is in a state of flux. We request the immediate release of the Minister and the handover of the data drives he secured. In exchange, we offer a guarantee of safe passage for your team."

"Safe passage to where?" Tito asked, his eyes scanning the faces of his team. Elena looked hopeful; Vukovi looked ready to shoot. "To a cell in Lefortovo? Or a shallow grave in the Ural Mountains?"

"To a neutral zone," Volkov said smoothly. "We are not

barbarians, Marshal. We understand the... unique circumstances of your existence. We are willing to facilitate a relocation. You have proven yourself a formidable variable, but one that disrupts the regional stability we have worked hard to establish." Tito let out a dry, humorless chuckle. "Stability. You call this stability? A country leashed to the East, its economy hollowed out, its youth fleeing to the West? You call the partition of the Balkans into spheres of influence 'stability'?"

"I call it the reality of the twenty-first century," Volkov replied. "The old ideologies are dead, Marshal. They died with the wall, and they died with your federation. There are only two engines left in this world: the bear and the eagle. You are currently standing in the bear's den."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then the den becomes a trap," Volkov said. The velvet

glove came off. "We have Varyag contractors on standby. We have assets within the city infrastructure. We can cut your power, your water, your internet. We can turn the city against you. The Serbian people are hungry, Marshal. They are desperate. We can paint you as the instigator of their suffering. We can make you the villain in the narrative you seek to control."

Tito looked at Jelena. She was already typing, her face illuminated by the screen. She shook her head slightly. They were bluffing about the city infrastructure—they didn't have that level of control yet—but the contractors were a real threat.

"You speak of narratives," Tito said, his voice dropping an octave, becoming intimate, almost conspiratorial. "Let me tell you a story, Attaché Volkov. A story of a man who wakes up in a world he does not recognize. He sees borders drawn by foreign

powers, economies dictated by distant banks, and governments that answer to flags not their own. He sees a people divided, not by their own will, but by the machinations of empires."

Tito leaned closer to the microphone. "You offer me a choice between two cages. One made of iron, one made of gold. I am here to tell you that I am not interested in cages."

"You are a relic," Volkov spat, the diplomacy fraying. "You are a dinosaur trying to roar at a meteor."

"And you are a clerk," Tito shot back. "A functionary in a machine that will eventually grind you into dust along with the rest of us."

The line crackled. "We are sending a delegation," Volkov said, the words clipped. "One hour. To the courtyard of the Institute. We will discuss the terms of your surrender."

"There will be no surrender," Tito said. "But you may

come. I have a manifesto to draft, and I would like an audience."

"You are making a mistake, Broz."

"It is the only thing I have left to make," Tito said.

"The line is now closed."

He nodded to Jelena. She severed the connection. The hiss of static returned for a second before the speakers fell silent. The hum of the generator filled the void.

Vukovi exhaled a long, shaky breath. Marshal. You just invited the wolves to the front door."

"I invited them into a conversation," Tito corrected.

"And I will control the room."

"You can't trust them," Elena said, her voice trembling. "Volkov is a snake. He's KGB, or FSB, or whatever they call it now. He'll come with a briefcase in one hand and a detonator in the other."

"Probably," Tito said. He turned away from the console

and began to unbutton his coat. The adrenaline was fading, leaving him feeling hollow, brittle. "Which is why we will not meet them in the courtyard. We will meet them in the sub-basement."

"The server room?" Vukovi asked, coming forward.
"That's our last redoubt. If they breach that—"

"They won't breach it," Tito said. He looked at the map of the facility displayed on a secondary screen. The sub-basement was a labyrinth of cooling ducts and server racks. "The sub-basement is an echo chamber. The acoustics are dead. The air is cold. It is a place of facts and data, not emotions and posturing. It will unnerve them."

He looked at Elena. "You wanted to move the servers. Do it now. Take the primary stack down to the sub-basement. Secure the redundancy drives."

"And the manifesto?" she asked.

"That comes second," Tito said. "First, we secure the

heart. Then, we feed the mind."

As Elena moved to organize the server transfer, Tito walked to the heavy steel door that led to the corridor. He placed a hand on the cold metal, feeling the vibration of the building's machinery.

"You told them about the third path, coming to stand beside him. "About the cages."

"I did," Tito said.

"Does it exist?" Vukovi asked, his voice low. "Is it just another bluff?"

Tito looked out through the reinforced glass viewport. The fog was thinner now, revealing the skeletal outlines of the industrial ruins across the street. Somewhere out there, in the grey gloom, Volkov's delegation was maneuvering.

"It was a bluff when I first spoke it," Tito admitted, his voice barely a whisper. "But the more I say it, the more I believe it. And if I believe it enough,

Vukovi, it becomes real. That is how start. Not with guns, but with an idea that refuses to die."

He turned back to the room, watching his team move with grim purpose. They were moving the servers now, the heavy racks sliding onto dollies, the cables coiling like snakes.

"Jelena," Tito called out. "Monitor the frequency. I want to know if Volkov is lying about the delegation size. If I see more than three vehicles, we seal the blast doors."

"And if they attack?" Jelena asked.

"Then we give them the silence they fear," Tito said. He picked up a tablet from the console, opening a blank document. The cursor blinked, waiting.

"Marshal," Vukovi said, stopping him could type. "You asked about the 1990s. You asked why it happened."

Tito paused, his finger hovering over the screen.

"I was there," Vukovi continued, his c

haunted. "I was a boy. I watched my neighbors burn houses. I watched the maps change on the news every night. It happened because the silence you left behind was too loud. People needed to fill it with noise. With shouting. With guns."

Tito looked at the young man, seeing the trauma etched into his face—the same trauma he had seen in Elena, in Jelena, in the faces of the operatives. They were the children of the silence. They were the generation he had failed to protect.

"Then let us make a different kind of noise," Tito said. He began to type.

The title appeared on the screen in stark, white letters against the dark background:

TO THE PEOPLE OF BELGRADE: A PATH FORWARD.

Outside, the sound of engines rumbled in the distance, heavy and menacing. The delegation was coming. But inside the Institute, the Marshal was writing the

first sentence of a new history, and the ghosts of the past were finally finding their voice.

CHAPTER 13: THE WEIGHT OF GHOSTS

The servers were moving. It was a slow, laborious migration, a procession of blinking lights and heavy steel. The loading bay, once the frantic heart of their defense, was being hollowed out, its energy shifted downward into the claustrophobic dark of the sub-basement. The air here tasted of ozone and stale concrete, a scent that clung to the back of the throat. Elena guided the first rack into the elevator cage,

her hands steady despite the tremor in her knees. She looked at the blinking array of drives—the repository of everything they had gathered, every encrypted file, every surveillance log. It felt less like data and more like a congregation of souls.

"Careful," she murmured to the operative pushing the dolly. "If we scratch the chassis, we lose the redundancy."

Vukovi stood by the elevator shaft, his hands scanning the monitor feeds of the perimeter. The fog was burning off under a weak, winter sun, revealing the scarred concrete of the courtyard. "They're ten minutes out," he said, his voice flat. "Two black sedans. No visible heavy weapons. But that means nothing."

"It means they want to talk," Tito said. He was standing by the door of the sub-basement, watching the elevator descend with the first load of hardware. He

looked gaunt in the harsh fluorescent light, the lines of his face carved deep. The sleep he had stolen earlier was a distant memory, replaced by a hyper-alert clarity that bordered on hallucination.

"It means they want to dominate," Volkov corrected. He turned to face the Marshal. "You're walking into a psychological trap, sir. Volkov is a diplomat, but he's a product of the SVR. He doesn't negotiate; he dismantles."

"Then let him try to dismantle me," Tito said. He touched the rough wool of his greatcoat, a habit he had developed when confronting uncertainty. "I am already a ghost, Vukovi. What can a ghost?"

"Erase your history," Vukovi said softly. "You. That's what they do. They take the past and twist it until it serves the present."

Tito's eyes narrowed. He saw the fear, but beneath it, there was something else—a desperate need

for the man standing before him to be the legend he was supposed to be. It was a crushing weight.

"Come," Tito said. "Help me prepare the room."

They descended the stairs to the sub-basement. The space was a concrete box, twenty meters square, lined with server racks that hummed with the collective heartbeat of the Institute. The cooling ducts overhead hissed, circulating air that was frigid and dry. It was an acoustic dead zone; sound didn't echo here, it was absorbed, swallowed by the machinery.

Elena was already there, overseeing the final placement of the central console. She had set up a single metal table in the center of the room, two chairs on either side. There was no other furniture. No windows. Only the blinking LEDs and the low drone of the fans.

"It's ready," she said, her voice echoing slightly despite the soundproofing. She looked at Tito, her

expression a mixture of awe and terror. "It feels... like a tomb."

"It is," Tito said. He walked to the table and ran his hand over the cold metal surface. "It is the tomb of the old world. And tonight, we bury it."

He sat down, opening the tablet where he had begun his manifesto. The screen cast a pale blue light on his face.

To the people of Belgrade, he had written. You have been told that history is a straight line. That you must choose between the bear and the eagle. I tell you that history is a circle, and we are standing at the point where it closes.

"What are you writing?" Elena asked, moving closer.

"A promise," Tito said. "And a warning."

"About the 1990s?" she pressed. She had been watching him since the call ended, sensing a shift in his demeanor. He was no longer just the Marshal; he was a

man haunted by a specific, personal grief," Tito said you asked him about the war."

Tito stopped typing. The hum of the servers seemed to grow louder, filling the silence.

"I remember the Federation," Tito said, his voice low. "I remember the factories in Slovenia, the vineyards in Croatia, the mines in Bosnia. I remember the handshake that sealed the union. It was a handshake of iron." He looked at his own hands, scarred and trembling slightly. "When I woke up, I looked at a map, and I saw that the iron had rusted. But I didn't know how. I didn't know the violence of the rust."

He looked up at Elena, his eyes glistening. "I told me that the silence I left behind was too loud. He is right. I built a dam to hold back the flood of nationalism, and when I died, the dam broke. The water washed everything away. And I wasn't there to drown with them."

Elena sat in the chair opposite him. She didn't touch

him, but her presence was a grounding force. "I was in Sarajevo," she said quietly. "In '92. I was a student. I remember the silence before the shelling started. It wasn't peaceful. It was heavy. Like the air before a storm."

Tito looked at her, truly seeing her for the first time not as an aide, but as a survivor of the history he had failed to prevent.

"Did you hate me?" he asked. The question was raw, stripped of the Marshal's authority.

Elena hesitated. "I hated the idea of you," she admitted. "The myth. The giant statues. The rigid control. But later... later, when the shelling stopped and the politicians started stealing what was left, I missed the silence you provided. I missed the safety of the cage, as you called it."

"Because the alternative was chaos," Tito finished.

"Because the alternative was death," she corrected.

The heavy steel door at the top of the stairs groaned

open. Vukovi's voice drifted down, ti
professional. "Marshal. They're here. Two cars, four
men. Volkov is in the lead."

Tito closed the tablet. He stood up, his spine
straightening, the fatigue vanishing behind a mask of
iron composure. The man who had spoken of regret
vanished; the Marshal took his place.

"Send them down," Tito said. "One by one. Disarm
them at the threshold."

"Sir," Vukovi acknowledged.

Tito turned to Elena. "Stay behind the console.
Monitor the feeds. If I give you the signal—the word
'Sarajevo'—you lock this door and you do not open
it until the silence is absolute."

Elena nodded, her throat tight. "What is the signal
for success?"

Tito looked at the empty chair across from him.

"There isn't one."

He turned back to the table as the first footsteps

echoed on the metal stairs. They were heavy, measured steps. The sound of expensive leather on iron.

Dimitri Volkov descended into the sub-basement like a prince entering a dungeon. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, wearing a tailored overcoat that seemed out of place against the industrial grime. His face was sharp, aristocratic, with eyes that missed nothing. He carried a slim leather briefcase. Behind him came two aides, both young, both wearing the tell-tale earpieces of security detail, and a woman in a severe suit holding a recording device.

Volkov paused at the bottom of the stairs, his eyes sweeping the room. He took in the server racks, the cold air, the solitary table. His gaze lingered on Tito.

"An impressive setup," Volkov said, his English flawless, carrying a Moscow accent that clipped the ends of his words. "Cold. Efficient. Very...

militaristic."

"Please," Tito said, gesturing to the chair. "Sit."

Volkov placed his briefcase on the table but did not sit immediately. He looked at the empty chair, then at Tito. "You requested an audience, Marshal. I have granted it. But let us be clear. This is not a negotiation between equals. This is a discussion on the terms of your cessation of hostilities."

"The only hostilities," Tito said, remaining standing, "are those waged against the sovereignty of this region. By you. By the West. By the collaborators in the government."

Volkov smiled, a thin, cold expression. He finally sat, crossing his legs. "Sovereignty is a luxury of the powerful. The weak survive by attaching themselves to stronger limbs. Serbia has chosen its limb. The Russian Federation."

"And what a limb it is," Tito said. "A limb that rots

from the inside out. I have seen the economic reports, Attaché. I have seen the inflation. The debt. You offer protection in exchange for their resources, their youth, their future. You are not a protector; you are a parasite."

Volkov's smile didn't falter, but his eyes hardened.

"Colorful rhetoric. But rhetoric does not stop a tank.

We are here for Minister Markovi and his drives. That is the only item on the agenda."

Tito sat down slowly. The metal chair creaked.

"Minister Markovi is a traitor to his country. He is selling the water rights to a foreign consortium. He is being held accountable."

"He is a pawn," Volkov countered. "A useful one.

Return him, and we discuss a corridor for your escape. Keep him, and we turn off the lights.

Literally."

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "We control the power grid,

Marshal. We control the gas. We can freeze this city into submission. And we will pin it on you. We will tell them that the ghost of the past has come to steal their heat."

Tito looked at the aides standing behind Volkov. They were stiff, professional, but their eyes darted to the humming server racks. They were calculating the threat.

"You think in binaries," Tito said. "On or off. East or West. You lack imagination."

"I lack patience," Volkov corrected.

"Then let me offer you a third option," Tito said. He placed his hands flat on the table. "I release

Markovi . But not to you. I release his people. We hold a tribunal. Public. Broadcast on the frequencies we control."

Volkov laughed, a short, sharp bark. "You are delusional. A tribunal? In this economy? They would

tear him apart for a loaf of bread."

"Perhaps," Tito said. "But it would be their justice. Not yours. Not the EU's. And regarding the data drives..." He paused. "I will not give them to you. But I will give you a single file. A sample."

Volkov stopped laughing. He studied Tito, his mind racing behind those cold eyes. "A sample of what?"

"Proof that the West is negotiating with the same separatists you claim to oppose," Tito lied smoothly. He had no such file, but he saw the flicker of doubt in Volkov's mind. The Russian intelligence apparatus was paranoid by design; the mere suggestion of a hidden player in the game was enough to plant a seed of hesitation.

"You are bluffing," Volkov said, though his voice lacked conviction.

"I am the Marshal," Tito said. "I do not bluff. I strategy."

Volkov stood up abruptly. The atmosphere in the room

shifted, the tension snapping tight. "You are buying time. And you are wasting mine."

"The delegation is waiting outside," Tito said. "Let them wait."

Volkov stared at him. For a moment, the diplomat vanished, and Tito saw the hard edge of the intelligence officer. He saw a man capable of ordering a hit, of dismantling a life with a pen stroke.

"You are a dangerous man, Josip Broz," Volkov said softly. "Because you have nothing to lose. You are already dead."

"Exactly," Tito said. "And the dead have no fear of the dark."

Volkov picked up his briefcase. "We will return in twenty-four hours. With an answer. And with consequences."

He turned and walked toward the stairs, his aides falling in behind him. The woman with the recorder

looked back at Tito, her expression unreadable.

The heavy door slammed shut above them, sealing the sub-basement in silence once more.

Elena exhaled, a long, shuddering breath. She emerged from behind the console, her face pale.

"You taunted him," she whispered. "You practically dared him to attack."

"I provoked him," Tito corrected. "I needed to see how he reacted when his authority was challenged."

"And?"

"He's afraid," Tito said. He stood up, his knees popping. "Not of me. Not of the Institute. He's afraid of the uncertainty I represent. In his world, everything has a price. I told him the price was his control over the narrative. That terrified him."

He walked to the server racks, placing a hand on the warm metal casing. The hum vibrated through his palm.

"We have twenty-four hours," Tito said. "Volkov will

try to cut the power. He will try to jam our signals. He will try to isolate us."

"Can we stop him?" Elena asked.

"We don't stop him," Tito said. He turned back to the tablet on the table. The cursor was blinking, waiting for the next sentence. "We outlast him. We finish the manifesto. We give the people a reason to keep the lights on themselves."

He sat down again, the blue light illuminating the exhaustion etched into his face.

"Get Vukovi," Tito said without looking at him to prepare the perimeter for a siege. Not of bullets. Of silence. And Elena..."

"Yes, Marshal?"

"Find me the names of the families who died in Sarajevo. The ones who have no graves. I want to list them. I want the world to know that I remember."

Elena nodded, tears stinging her eyes. She turned and

hurried up the stairs, leaving Tito alone in the cold, humming dark.

He looked at the screen.

To the people of Belgrade, he typed. I was not there when the darkness fell. But I am here now. And I have brought a match.

Outside, the engines of the Russian delegation faded into the distance, leaving only the sound of the wind whistling through the broken windows of the industrial zone. The trap was set. The hunter and the hunted were now the same.

CHAPTER 14: THE WEIGHT OF ECHOES

The silence that followed Volkov's departure was heavier than the noise of the servers. It pressed against the concrete walls, a physical weight that seemed to increase the density of the air. Tito sat alone in the center of the sub-basement, the blue glow of the tablet reflecting in his unblinking eyes. He was no longer writing a manifesto; he was drafting a battle plan, one where the battlefield was the collective psyche of a nation he no longer recognized.

The hum of the servers was a monotonous drone, a

mechanical heartbeat that lulled the mind into a false sense of security. But Tito knew better. In his experience, silence was never empty; it was merely the pause before the scream.

He heard the soft scuff of boots on the metal stairs. It was Vukovi. The security chief moved heavy, weary gait, his face illuminated by the harsh strip lighting above. He held a tablet of his own, displaying a schematic of the Institute's perimeter.

"The delegation has cleared the outer perimeter,"

Vukovi reported, his voice low. He disappeared into the room, lingering in the doorway as if the sub-basement were a contaminated zone. "They're heading back toward the city center. No signs of mobilization yet. But the traffic patterns are wrong. Too many civilian vehicles parked on the side streets near the power substation."

"Volkov is making a point," Tito said, not looking up

from his screen. "He's showing me he can reach the arteries of the city without firing a shot."

"He's going to cut us off," Vuković bluffed about the power. If he sabotages the grid, the servers die. The comms die. We become a tomb in the literal sense."

"Then we move the generators to the sub-basement," Tito said. "All of them. We seal the ventilation shafts to the upper floors. We turn this room into a bunker."

"That's a logistical nightmare," Vuković stepping down into the room. The air seemed to chill him; he rubbed his arms through his jacket. "We don't have the fuel reserves to run full power for more than twelve hours. And the heat buildup... we'll suffocate."

"We only need six hours," Tito said. He finally looked up, his eyes locking onto Vuković hours to

finalize the manifesto and to broadcast the first transmission."

Vukovi looked at the tablet in Tito's manifesto. You think words will stop a Russian attaché from pulling the plug? You think a speech will stop the Serbian police from storming this building to retrieve Markovi?"

"Markovi is the key," Tito said. He stood with his joints cracking. "He is the leverage Volkov thinks he holds. But he is also the witness."

Tito walked to the corner of the room where a heavy steel door stood, reinforced with a magnetic lock.

Behind it lay the holding cell where Minister Markovi had been kept in isolation.

"Bring him out," Tito ordered. "Bring him to the table."

Vukovi hesitated. "Sir, he's been... uh... been screaming about the Hague. About his rights."

"He has no rights," Tito said coldly. "He surrendered

them when he signed the water rights over to the Euro-Asian Consortium. But I don't want him for his crimes. I want him for his fear."

Vukovi nodded, though his expression was with anxiety. He keyed the code into the lock. The magnetic bolt slid back with a heavy thud.

A moment later, Minister Markovi walked into the room. He was a mess—his suit rumpled, his face unshaven, his eyes wide and darting. He looked at Tito with a mixture of hatred and terror.

"You," Markovi spat. "You madman."
"Sit," Tito said. He didn't raise his voice. He simply pointed to the chair Volkov had occupied minutes earlier.

Markovi resisted, but Vukovi shoved him into the chair. The Minister slumped forward, breathing heavily.

"What do you want?" Markovi whispered.
"Money?"

Asylum? I have accounts. I can transfer—"

"I don't want your money," Tito interrupted. He sat opposite Markovi, the cold metal table between them. "I want your voice."

Markovi blinked. "My... voice?"

"Volkov was here," Tito said. "He demanded your release. He threatened to cut the power, to freeze the city, to blame it all on the ghost of the past. He views you as a valuable asset."

Tito leaned forward, his presence dominating the small space. "But I know something Volkov doesn't. I know that you are not an asset. You are a liability. You are a man who knows exactly who is pulling the strings, and you are terrified that they will cut you loose to silence you."

Markovi's face crumpled. The bravado was gone, leaving only a shaking, middle-aged bureaucrat who had gambled with the wrong people. "They will kill me," he

whispered. "If I talk, they will kill me."

"They will kill you if you stay silent," Tito countered. "Volkov doesn't need you alive once he has the data drives. You are a loose end. But if you speak... if you tell the people exactly what was promised to the Consortium, and exactly what Russia gets in return... you become a martyr. And martyrs are hard to kill."

"I can't," Markovi sobbed. "I have a
"So did the miners in Bosnia," Tito said, his voice devoid of pity. "So did the farmers in Kosovo. They were all pawns in a game of imperial chess. You chose to be a piece. Now you must choose which side of the board you die on."

The steel door above groaned open again. This time, the footsteps were frantic. Elena descended, her face flushed, clutching a handheld radio.

"Marshal," she said, breathless. "Jelena picked up

something. A high-frequency burst from the Russian Embassy. It's a kill signal."

Tito didn't flinch. "To whom?"

"To the backup generators on the roof," Elena said.

"They're not cutting the grid. They're sending a coded signal to the generator's firmware. It's a logic bomb. It's designed to overload the capacitors and ignite the fuel lines."

Vukovi paled. "That's not a siege. This is an assassination attempt. They're trying to bury us alive."

"The signal," Tito said, his mind racing. "How long until it executes?"

"Jelena is jamming it, but she can't hold them off forever. Maybe twenty minutes," Elena said.

Tito looked at Markovi, then at the taunts of Vukovi. The pieces were slotting together into a defensive strategy, but as an offensive counter-punch.

"We don't have twenty minutes," Tito said. "We have

five."

He turned to Markovi . "You are going to broadcast. Live. To the city. You are going to confess everything. Not just the water rights. You are going to tell them about the Russian demands. You are going to tell them about the 'special status' they promised the separatists in the north. You are going to tell them that Serbia is being sold for parts."

Markovi looked at the radio in Elen at the humming servers. He realized the building was about to become his coffin. Fear of death overrode his fear of treason.

"Okay," Markovi gasped. "Okay. I'll do it."
"Vukovi ," Tito said. "Take Markovi to the control room. Isolate the feed. Use the hardlines, not the wireless. If the roof goes up, the hardlines might survive."

"And you?" Vukovi asked, pulling Markovi away.

feet.

"I stay here," Tito said. "I have to finish the manifesto. If the roof goes, the servers in this room are the only archive left. I need to upload the final draft to the local network before the signal hits."

"Sir, that's suicide," Vukovi protested.

"No," Tito said, turning back to his tablet. "It's leverage. Volkov thinks he can erase me. He thinks he can silence the past. But if I am here when the roof blows, the data survives. The truth survives.

And the narrative shifts from 'terrorist leader killed in accident' to 'Russian aggression destroys historic archive.' I am the martyr, Vukovi. No

Elena stepped forward, her eyes wet. "Marshal..."

"Go," Tito commanded. He didn't look at her. "All of you. Seal the door behind you. Do not open it until the all-clear is given by Jelena."

Vukovi hesitated, then grabbed Marko and shoved

him toward the stairs. Elena lingered for a heartbeat, her hand hovering near Tito's shoulder, but then she turned and followed them up.

The heavy steel door slammed shut. The magnetic lock engaged with a definitive click.

Tito was alone.

The silence returned, but now it was charged with the anticipation of violence. He could hear the faint vibration through the floor—the building's old bones settling, or perhaps the distant thrum of the kill signal hunting the rooftop generators.

He looked at the tablet. The manifesto was open.

To the people of Belgrade, he typed. History is not a circle. It is a spiral. We return to the same points of pain, but with greater velocity. I am writing this to slow the descent.

He paused. The cursor blinked.

The enemy is not the bear or the eagle. The enemy is

the belief that we must belong to either. Brotherhood and Unity was not a cage. It was a shield. And I let it rust.

He heard a distant, muffled thump from above. The roof. The signal had hit.

The lights flickered, then died. The servers whined as the emergency battery backups kicked in, the hum dropping an octave. The room was plunged into a red gloom from the emergency exit signs.

The temperature began to drop immediately. The ventilation had stopped.

Tito didn't move. He kept typing, his fingers flying across the screen, illuminated by the battery-powered glow.

I am not your savior. I am your mirror. And I am here to show you the face you have become.

The concrete above him groaned. Dust sifted down from the ceiling, catching the red light like blood in the

water.

Tito typed the final sentence. He hit Save and Broadcast to Local Network.

The screen turned green. Transmitting...

He leaned back in the metal chair, the cold seeping into his bones. He closed his eyes, listening to the settling dust, waiting for the collapse. He had given them the truth. Now, he would give them the silence.

CHAPTER 15: THE STATIC

The air tasted of ozone and pulverized concrete. The red emergency lights painted the server room in the color of a bleeding heart. The ceiling groaned, a deep, tectonic sound that vibrated through the soles of Tito's boots. The roof had fallen, but the sub-basement held, a concrete coffin suspended in the belly of the dying building.

Tito sat motionless in the chair, his hands resting on the cold metal table. The tablet screen glowed green:

TRANSMISSION COMPLETE.

The hardline connection to the city network had held just long enough.

From the floor above, a new sound reached him—not the roar of fire, but the hiss of pressurized water from the ruptured sprinkler systems. The Institute was drowning.

Tito closed his eyes. He listened to the building die. In the street, the night air was sharp with the smell of burning insulation. The Russian delegation's motorcade had stopped two blocks away, parked in a neat, menacing row under the sickly yellow glow of the streetlights. Dimitri Volkov stood by the open door of his armored sedan, a cigarillo clenched between his teeth, watching the smoke rise from the Institute's roof.

"Signal confirmed," his aide said, holding a tablet.

"The logic bomb executed perfectly. The capacitors

ignited. The roof structure is compromised."

"Is it burning?" Volkov asked, his voice bored.

"Smoldering. The internal suppression systems kicked in. It's mostly structural collapse."

"And the Marshal?"

"Buried. No one exits a collapse like that in ten minutes."

Volkov took a drag of the cigarillo, exhaling a plume of gray smoke. "Good. Begin the cleanup. I want—" He stopped.

A sound rippled through the street, emanating from the car's radio, then from the aide's tablet, then from the mobile phones of the security detail. It was a voice, clear and steady, cutting through the static of the emergency bands.

"To the people of Belgrade. I was not there when the darkness fell..."

Volkov froze. He knew that voice. He had heard it in

the sub-basement, arrogant and unyielding. But this was different. This was amplified. This was everywhere.

"The enemy is not the bear or the eagle. The enemy is the belief that we must belong to either."

Volkov's aide stared at his tablet. "Sir... the manifesto. It's broadcasting. It's on every local frequency. It's bypassing the firewalls."

"How?" Volkov hissed, the cigarillo dropping from his lips.

"The hardlines," the aide whispered. "He used the hardlines. He sacrificed the roof to save the data stream."

Volkov looked at the crumbling building. He realized his mistake too late. He had tried to bury the man, but Tito had used the grave to amplify his voice.

Inside the Institute, the water was rising. It cascaded down the stairwell, black and oily. In the

comms room, Vukovi and Elena huddled at the console, Markovi slumped in a chair, weeping silently. The audio feed was live, Tito's voice echoing through the room.

"He did it," Elena breathed, tears tracking through the grime on her face.

"He's still down there," Vukovi said, voice hollow. The steel door to the sub-basement was buckled, warped by the heat of the explosion above. They couldn't get back in. "He sealed himself in."

"He bought us time," Markovi said, voice trembling but clear. He looked at the microphone that was transmitting his confession alongside Tito's manifesto. "He bought us a future."

"The roof is gone," Vukovi said, looking at the monitor displaying the building's schematics. Red lights flashed over the sub-basement. "The structural integrity is zero. The whole thing is going to slide

into the sinkhole."

"Then we move," Elena said, grabbing arm. "Now."

They fled the comms room, wading through ankle-deep water, heading for the emergency tunnel that led to the storm drains. As they reached the heavy iron hatch at the end of the corridor, the building shuddered violently. The lights died completely, plunging them into darkness.

In the sub-basement, Tito felt the final shift. The floor tilted beneath him. The server racks, anchored to the concrete, began to groan as the supports beneath them buckled.

The red emergency lights flickered and died. Total darkness swallowed the room.

Tito did not move. He sat in the absolute black, the silence heavy and complete. The hum of the servers was gone. The air was thick, stale, and rapidly depleting

of oxygen.

He thought of the faces he had never seen. The miners in Bosnia. The farmers in Kosovo. The families in Sarajevo. He had missed their wars, their suffering, their desperate scramble for survival. He had slept through the destruction of the world he had built.

But he had returned to bear witness. And to judge. The concrete floor cracked. A rush of cold, damp air swept up from below as the foundation gave way. The server racks tipped, crashing into the darkness with a sound like thunder.

Tito did not flinch. He felt the chair slide, then fall. He hit the ground hard, the impact jarring his old bones, but he did not cry out.

He was the Marshal. He was the relic. He was the echo.

Above him, the sky opened up as the building collapsed into the old mining shaft, dragging the Institute down into the earth. But above the earth, the signal

traveled. It bounced off satellites, it ran through fiber-optic cables, it screamed from the speakers of radios in apartments, cafes, and trams across the city.

Volkov stood in the street, helpless, as the voice of the dead man filled the night. He looked at the rubble of the Institute, then at the glowing screens of his own security team. They were no longer watching the collapse. They were watching the news feeds. Protests were already forming near the Parliament. The narrative had shifted.

The Marshal had returned, and he had brought the fire.

EPILOGUE

The sun rose over Belgrade, casting long shadows across the rubble of the industrial zone. The Institute was gone, swallowed by the earth, a tomb for a man who had refused to be a ghost.

In the cafes, the radio played the final recording of

Josip Broz Tito. His voice, calm and analytical, dissected the geopolitical trap Serbia had walked into. He spoke of the water rights, the Consortium, the Russian leash. He spoke of a Brotherhood that had been betrayed not by him, but by those who sold the future for a temporary illusion of security.

The government tried to jam the signal, but it was too late. The data was everywhere, mirrored on servers across the world. The manifesto was no longer a file; it was an idea.

In a safe house in the suburbs, Elena sat by a window, watching the smoke rise from the distant ruins. Vukovi was on the phone, coordinating the underground resistance, his voice low and urgent. Minister Markovi sat in the chair, the power in his hands, his life as a politician over, his life as a target just beginning.

They were alive. They were free. But the cost lay

buried in the dark.

Elena looked at the tablet on the table. The screen was cracked, but the text remained.

I am not your savior. I am your mirror.

She closed her eyes, listening to the distant sounds of the city. It was not the sound of peace. It was the sound of a people waking up, blinking in the harsh light of a truth they had tried to forget.

The Marshal was dead. Long live the Marshal.

THE END