Prologue: The Impossible Defendant

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he International Criminal Court in The Hague had been designed as a monument to transparency. Light entered without resistance, untroubled by the partitioned glass that made the whole structure a vast, rectilinear aquarium for the world's worst secrets. On mornings such as this, the March sun was surgical: white, pitiless, and diffuse, revealing dust motes above marble thresholds, the undulating film of every fingerprint left on a doorknob, and—though less obviously—the jagged border where moral certainty yielded to procedural ambiguity.

Catherine Morrison's heels clicked against the tessellated floor with a rhythm that was both precise and punitive. The sound echoed up the walls and disappeared somewhere in the impossible height of the atrium. She was acutely aware of her own reflection in the glass balustrade: the uncompromising line of her jaw, the red hair tied in a vertical vector of efficiency, and the charcoal suit tailored so aggressively it compelled posture. She wore the uniform of her profession like chainmail, but the effect was tempered by the working-class constraint of her body—a straight back, shoulders drawn in tight, as if making herself less of a target. On this day, her movements were even more deliberate, as if she anticipated that the invisible weight slung across her scapulae might, at any moment, slip loose and break her.

The courtrooms were nested deep in the building, protected by concentric layers of security and silence. Before passing through the last checkpoint, she paused to reassemble herself: she straightened her lapel, centered her ID badge, thumbed the frayed edges of the manila folder. The folder contained the day's scripts—opening arguments, cross-examinations, the anticipated choreography of objections and rejoinders. But its contents had taken on a kind of negative mass, as if the more she prepared, the less she understood what, exactly, she was preparing for.

The guard at the threshold gave her the briefest of nods and let her pass without the indignity of a second frisk. She entered the chamber, and the temperature fell. It was a cold designed to keep everyone alert, or perhaps to slow the bacterial spread of doubt. The walls were travertine: a mineral pale, shot through with veins of fossilized algae. Even the wood—oak, bleached and matte—had been selected for its aversion to warmth.

The defense team had arrived first, as always. They occupied the three allotted seats like chess pieces in the early endgame: motionless, but radiating potential moves. The defendant himself was present, though, until one forced the eye to settle, it was easier to pretend otherwise. He sat exactly as one would expect: relaxed but imperious, hands folded on the desk, the world's most ordinary face elevated to the status of an icon by the sheer force of television. Slobodan Miloševi■—or, more precisely, the entity known to the world as Miloševi■—wore a navy suit and a tie of such an unremarkable hue it seemed calculated to escape the lens. The only color in him was the thin band of blue at the edge of his sclera, visible for just a moment when he closed his eyes.

She arranged her papers at the prosecution table with surgical precision. Each item had its place and purpose: the annotated dossier, the slim notepad, the water glass rotated just so. A manila envelope she did not open, for it contained the photographs, and the photographs had a power that was not always to her advantage. Her knuckles whitened on the folder as she waited for the official opening.

Time in this room obeyed a different law. The overhead lights rendered everyone equally pallid, flattening expressions and reducing human skin to a series of spectral values. The translators' booths hovered above, a glass menagerie of language. Through the double-glazed windows, one could see the interpreters lip-synching into their microphones: a ghost chorus perpetually on mute.

The judges entered without ceremony. The presiding judge, an Englishwoman with hair the color of old parchment, was flanked by her German and Beninese colleagues. They did not speak as they took their seats, but their presence was a statement: the law was present, embodied, and ready to be invoked. The bailiff announced the start, and Catherine rose with the others, the choreography of respect performed down to the millimeter.

It was then, as she faced the tribunal and opened her mouth to speak, that she felt the first constriction in her throat—a subtle, premonitory tightening, as if her own body were warning her of an atmospheric change for which no meteorologist could account. The words she had rehearsed came, but with a friction that was entirely new. She was not nervous. Nervousness had long since been cauterized out of her. This was something different: the sensation of standing at the lip of a drop-off and realizing, for the first time, that gravity could be outwitted by geometry.

She addressed the judges by their titles, her voice pitched to fill the room but not echo, and began: “Honorable members of the Court, the matter before us today is not only one of fact but of identity.” It sounded like a declaration, but to her own ears, it was already a question.

She caught the defendant’s eye for a fraction of a second. The gaze she received in return was vacant, yet impossibly intent, as if it were not a person but a lens: transparent, precise, and designed to transmit nothing but pure image.

The case would be long. It would require the reconstruction of a decade of history, the parsing of witness testimonies, the dissection of medical and photographic evidence, the invocation of philosophical debates that had once been the exclusive province of men in robes and candlelit libraries. But at this moment, all that lay ahead of Catherine Morrison was a single, suffocating fact: she had entered a chamber built for the manufacture of truth, and already, she could not distinguish the real from the replica.

She turned the page, her hand steady despite the tremor now migrating up her trachea. The next lines awaited her, but for the first time in her career, she did not know whose voice she would hear when she spoke them aloud.

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The processional of witnesses began with a civil servant, a man whose posture betrayed more years in government than his face could suggest. He had survived the siege of Sarajevo in a cement basement, ingesting the daily broadcasts of his tormentor on a battery-powered set that flickered even as the shells fell. He swore that the defendant was Miloševi■, “the only face I saw more than my own father’s.”

When asked to describe the man—his presence, his peculiarities—the witness recited a litany of features. The hair, already thinning, combed left; the jowls pale but resistant to gravity; the left hand’s tendency to toy with the cufflink during moments of stress. Each detail sounded indisputable, and each had appeared in at least a dozen international wire photos that Catherine had personally entered into evidence.

She pressed him: “You saw him once, in person, at the cordon for the Dayton summit?”

The witness nodded, then hesitated, eyes darting to the defendant, who regarded him with the indifference of a bus driver confronted by a passenger’s existential crisis.

“And how close were you?”

“Twenty meters, perhaps less.”

“Would you say the man you saw at Dayton is identical to the man before us today?”

His answer arrived too soon, too fluid: “Yes, precisely. That is the same man.”

Catherine thanked him and sat, but a residue clung to her palate. She leaned into the microphone. “No further questions, Your Honors.”

The next witness was a woman whose accent flagged her as Croatian, but her manner had been smoothed by years in Toronto. She had managed an aid organization, tracking Miloševi■’s televised addresses for code words that meant the difference between convoy or massacre. She was forensic in her recollections: the tone of voice, the syntactic preferences, the practiced curve of his smile. “He never smiled with his eyes,” she said, a detail so personal it might have been true of every politician on earth.

Under cross-examination, Catherine asked, “When you see the defendant now, here, in this light, what strikes you as most similar to the man you remember?”

The witness cocked her head, studied the glass wall that separated her from the accused, and said: “He is perfect, except—except he looks less hungry.”

Less hungry. Catherine circled the phrase in her notes. “Can you elaborate?”

“There is no… ambition in him. He is calm. The real one was never calm.”

“Could you be mistaken, then? Is it possible the defendant is not—”

The witness shook her head so forcefully the earpiece of the translation kit snapped free. “No, it is him. There can only be one.”

Catherine let her eyes rest on the defendant, who absorbed the testimony without a flicker. He looked from the witness to the three-judge panel, as if waiting to be summoned to the next room for his appointment.

As the day wore on, the parade of witnesses began to blur. A pattern asserted itself. They would approach the stand, testify with confidence, and when pressed for particulars, would repeat details available in any public record. None could distinguish the man in the dock from the man in the archive. Their certainty only increased as Catherine’s skepticism grew. When she returned to the prosecution table between witnesses, she found herself massaging her larynx, as if her body had learned to anticipate the growing obstruction in her voice.

The final witness before lunch was a linguist from Amsterdam, brought in by the defense. He had analyzed hundreds of hours of Miloševi■’s speech and was prepared to testify that the defendant’s idiolect was “indistinguishable” from the original, down to the sub-phonemic quirks. “It is as though he has lived inside the other’s mouth for decades,” the linguist said.

Catherine stood for the cross. “Professor, are you aware of the concept of cryptomnesia?”

The linguist smiled politely. “The phenomenon where one believes a memory is original, when in fact it is borrowed. Yes.”

“So, it is possible for a man to internalize another’s speech so perfectly that he cannot distinguish his own words from the other’s?”

“In theory, yes. But what we see here is beyond mimicry. It is, shall we say, a kind of possession.”

Catherine nodded, as if this were the answer she’d expected. “Thank you, Professor.”

Throughout the testimony, the defendant performed the rituals of a man on trial. He conferred with his counsel in whispers, sipped water at the expected intervals, occasionally jotted notes on a legal pad. Catherine, from her vantage, observed that the handwriting—blocky, sloped right, the R's distinctive for their prongs—matched samples she'd studied in the casefile. It was a minor detail, but it gnawed at her.

When the court recessed for lunch, she remained seated, staring at the empty witness box. The glass between defendant and witness seemed to pulse, as if the air on either side obeyed incompatible laws. She wondered if anyone in the room could actually see the accused, or if they saw only a series of screens, each more convincing than the last.

She paged through her notes. Every answer she'd received today was, in principle, correct. Every answer was also, at the same time, circular: the witnesses recognized the accused because they recognized the accused. Their certainty was self-sustaining, hermetic.

Her own questions were growing longer, more convoluted, as if length alone could force the truth out of hiding. She caught herself beginning a question with, "Given the paradoxical nature of memory and the inherent limitations of empirical observation—" and recoiled from the sound of her own voice. It was not the voice she'd practiced; it was the voice of someone trying to write her way out of a trap.

The judges returned at precisely 1:30, their faces composed but weary. The remainder of the day passed in procedural rhythm, each witness sanded smoother by the attrition of legal process. By dusk, the only thing that remained vivid in Catherine's mind was the defendant's gaze: unwavering, pale blue, and utterly still.

The session adjourned. Catherine gathered her documents with the precision of someone performing an autopsy on her own belief system. As she exited into the chill corridor, she glanced back one last time at the defendant, whose eyes met hers in a moment of shared, unacknowledged recognition.

If identity could be conjured by repetition and consensus, then maybe the law itself was complicit in the illusion. She did not know what that meant, but she knew it would haunt every minute of the trial to come.

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The court reconvened the following morning to the odor of disinfectant and the click of latex gloves. The witness stand was prepped for a succession of pathologists, forensic anatomists, and medical illustrators, each summoned to render the defendant’s body as data.

Catherine’s own hands—usually the most reliable instruments in her arsenal—quivered as she arranged the evidence on the overhead projector. She pressed her left palm flat against the wood to steady it, then called the first expert, a Dutch surgeon whose skin bore the translucent pallor of a man who spent his life indoors. He testified in low, syllabic English, accentuations falling like scalpels:

“The incisions are located at the postauricular crease, running in the natural fold behind the ear. They were performed using a microtome, under magnification. The hairline, likewise, exhibits a subcutaneous suture pattern, consistent with the repair of a lifted scalp flap. Beneath the mandible, the entry points for the endoscopic instruments are nearly undetectable. Whoever did this work had an unparalleled command of tissue handling.”

He used the laser pointer to highlight the subtle irregularities in the courtroom’s projected images. Catherine watched the blue dot circle a single raised line on the defendant’s neck, a cicatrix so faint it could have been a birthmark. She waited for the judges to signal their understanding before proceeding.

“Would it have been possible,” she asked, “to replicate these procedures without leaving evidence?”

The surgeon shook his head, lips compressed. “Even the best must leave a trace. Skin remembers everything.”

Next came the radiologist, a woman whose hair was shaved almost to the scalp, her eyes sharp behind polycarbonate lenses. She presented side-by-side cranial X-rays: one archival, labeled ‘S. Miloševi■, 1991,’ the other ‘D, 2002.’ To the untrained eye, they were as alike as two consecutive frames of film. Only the caption distinguished

them.

“Note the congruence of maxillofacial architecture,” the radiologist said. “Every curve and inflection is within margin of error.”

“But?” Catherine prompted.

The radiologist magnified a region just beneath the zygomatic arch. “Here we see micro-abrasion consistent with surgical ablation of bone. It’s subtle, but it’s there. The replica is so precise, it appears the surgeon not only copied the structure but actively corrected it to match the reference.”

Catherine repeated the phrase silently: “corrected to match the reference.”

The last expert was a cardiac pathologist. He entered in a haze of cough lozenges and wore a tie spattered with faded stains. His task was to present the results of the defendant’s cardiovascular workup.

He cleared his throat and read from a prepared statement. “The subject exhibits moderate aortic valve regurgitation, mild concentric hypertrophy of the left ventricle, and a cholesterol profile consistent with prolonged stress and a Central European diet. These pathologies are, in all respects, identical to those found in the decedent.”

The presiding judge raised her hand, palm out, a gesture Catherine had come to associate with disbelief. “Are you suggesting the accused shares not only the physical characteristics but also the medical history of Mr. Miloševi■?”

The pathologist shuffled his notes. “It is, of course, possible for unrelated individuals to develop similar cardiac profiles under similar conditions. But when paired with the other evidence, the probability decreases exponentially. Either this is the same man, or the greatest feat of physiological simulation in medical history.”

The judges conferred in murmurs, their expressions inching from skepticism to unease. Catherine moved to dismiss the witness, but her hand trembled so violently she nearly dropped the next exhibit. She pretended to smooth a wrinkle in her skirt, but the tremor did not abate.

She glanced at the defendant. He showed no reaction. His face was the perfect mask of self-possession, slackened only by the minor tic of his right index finger drumming the table at precisely two-second intervals. Catherine had reviewed the video evidence: Miloševi■ had always done this, as if keeping time for an invisible metronome.

She looked closer and saw that, despite the gravity of the proceedings, the man was bored. Bored, or perhaps anticipating a punchline that everyone else in the room had missed.

The rest of the presentation was a procession of high-resolution images, tissue slides, and data overlays. Each new layer of evidence, meant to cement the accused's identity, instead built toward a crescendo of doubt. The perfection of the match was itself the anomaly.

By midday, Catherine could feel her own skepticism metastasizing. She heard herself asking questions in the tone of a defense attorney. "Isn't it possible—" "Couldn't the record be in error—" "Have you considered—" The witnesses, for all their scientific rigor, offered only more confirmation: yes, yes, yes, it is the same man, the same man, the same man.

As the session closed, Catherine gathered her exhibits, fingers uncooperative, and caught the defendant watching her. For a moment she thought she saw the ghost of a smile—just a ripple in the muscles beneath his jaw. She felt, with sudden certainty, that he knew something she did not.

She closed her folder, shut her eyes, and tried to conjure a universe where evidence meant what it used to.

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Dr. Yun's arrival in the witness box was so unobtrusive that, for a moment, Catherine thought the court had malfunctioned and produced an automaton. He was not tall, but his presence was total; his hair, silver and surgically parted, seemed both archaic and futuristic. He wore a suit of such severe minimalism it could have been painted on.

Around his neck hung surgical loops, the lenses resting against his sternum like an unblinking third eye.

Catherine observed that, unlike previous experts, Dr. Yun refused the carafe of water offered to him. He folded his hands precisely atop each other, as if prepping for a procedure, and did not look at the defendant or the judges. His gaze was fixed on an invisible object just above and to the left of the prosecution table, as if rehearsing an operation on an absent patient.

She began with the standard: “State your name and qualifications for the record.”

He complied, voice modulated to a frequency just above whisper. “Yun. Medical doctor, triple-board-certified. Forty-three years in reconstructive and identity surgery.”

Catherine paused. “Identity surgery?”

Yun blinked. “A specialty subfield. My practice is almost entirely referral-based. My patients are typically state actors or individuals requiring extreme intervention to safeguard their personhood.”

“Safeguard, or erase?”

He allowed himself a single, shallow nod. “The distinction is often semantic.”

The judges looked at one another. Catherine continued, “You have reviewed the medical documentation and postmortem records of Slobodan Miloševi■?”

“I have reviewed the files provided,” he confirmed, “as well as source data requested through intergovernmental channels.”

“Do you find any discrepancies between the physical characteristics of the decedent and the defendant?”

A faint tic flickered at the corner of Yun’s left eye. “From a macroscopic perspective, no. At the microscopic level, there are subtle deviations consistent with extensive tissue remodeling and post-traumatic healing.”

“Can you be more specific?”

Dr. Yun leaned forward, the surgical loops catching the overhead light and refracting it into blue prisms across the desk. “The subject displays evidence of serial craniofacial grafts, including but not limited to subdermal endoprostheses and custom-fit osseointegrated scaffolds. The skin envelope has been expanded and re-draped; neural inputs to mimic facial affect have been carefully mapped and replicated. The subject’s voice box has undergone glottal manipulation to reproduce the original’s formant structure. There are indications of advanced neural adaptation—most likely the result of immersive behavioral conditioning.”

Catherine let this settle. She glanced at the defendant, who had not moved. “You’re telling us that the accused has been engineered, down to the finest detail, to become Miloševi■?”

Yun turned his gaze to her for the first time. His eyes were not cold; they were, if anything, painfully compassionate. “The subject is not a copy. The subject is a vessel. The will, and the flesh, have been made to converge.”

She tried to reset the parameters. “Could this have been accomplished without the subject’s consent?”

Yun shrugged, a gesture so minuscule it was measured in degrees, not centimeters. “Consent is a legal question, not a biological one. I can say only that the procedures required would have necessitated prolonged sedation, analgesia, and full compliance for rehabilitation. Whether that constitutes consent, I leave to the philosophers.”

The Beninese judge cleared his throat, asked, “In your professional opinion, is the man before us the original, or a duplicate?”

Yun considered this, then spoke in the manner of one dictating a surgical note. “If identity is continuous with memory, then the subject’s neural engrams have likely been re-written to match those of the prototype. If, however, identity is defined by DNA, then the subject is a divergent entity. The distinction, at this level of convergence, is without consequence.”

Catherine felt her own body responding: pulse up, throat closing. Her hands began to sweat inside the gloves she’d donned as a psychological barrier. She pressed on, “So you are saying that identity can be manufactured? That a person can be created to

be—”

She searched for the word, and it did not come. Yun filled the gap: “Indistinguishable, yes. There is a threshold beyond which the body and the will become inseparable. This is, perhaps, the first documented crossing of that threshold.”

The German judge, who until now had been silent, leaned forward. “Doctor, do you believe this practice is ethical?”

Yun smiled—a gesture so fleeting it could have been a muscle spasm. “Ethics is the name for what we do before the first incision. Afterward, it’s all triage.”

Catherine tried a new tack. “You refer to the accused only as ‘the subject.’ Why?”

He blinked, eyes steady on hers. “Names are mutable. Structure is persistent. My purpose here is to speak of the structure, not the myth.”

The courtroom was still. Even the defendant seemed to be waiting for something—a tell, a glitch, a misstep. Catherine realized, with a kind of detached horror, that every word from Yun had been scrubbed of metaphor. He was, for all his poetic turns of phrase, the most literal man she had ever met.

She tried a final time. “In your judgment, does the law have the capacity to assign guilt or innocence to someone whose very identity has been engineered?”

Yun looked at her, the surgical loops swinging gently, and said, “The subject is both the vessel of his will and its own victim. The question is not whether he is guilty, but whether the law can acknowledge his existence.”

Catherine sat back, unable to find a follow-up. The room seemed to shrink around her, the walls compressing until the only thing left was the strange, surgical certainty of Dr. Yun, and the man in the dock who was, or was not, Miloševi■.

She realized then that the law was not built for such cases. It was a relic of a world where the body was the last guarantee. In the new world, even that had been made provisional.

The presiding judge thanked Dr. Yun and dismissed him. He left the stand as silently as he’d arrived, his hands clasped behind his back, the surgical loops swinging like

the pendulum of a clock that would never run down.

Catherine sat, arms limp, and wondered if she had just witnessed the autopsy of truth itself.

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The defense had called no witnesses. They hadn’t needed to; the accused himself had become the only exhibit that mattered. On the morning of the fifth day, the courtroom was swollen with a low-pressure front of anticipation. The defendant sat at his place, hands folded, eyes fixed on the placid glass wall of the translators’ gallery.

Catherine had prepared for a final procedural skirmish, a coda of motions and rejoinders that would postpone the moment of judgment. Instead, the presiding judge invited the defendant to address the tribunal, if he so desired.

He stood, smooth and fluid, as if the interval between sitting and standing was a solved equation. He began, in English, to recount the “fabrications of the Western media,” the “unrelenting bias of the prosecutors,” and the “suffering of the Serbian people at the hands of the globalist order.” It was a liturgy anyone could have anticipated. Every word and phrase corresponded, with eerie precision, to earlier addresses given by the original Miloševi■. There was no rhetorical innovation, no break in pattern. If anything, the performance was more exact than any prior instance.

Halfway through his statement, the defendant’s hand shot to his chest. He grimaced, then tried to resume his speech, but the next word caught in his throat and shattered. He steadied himself on the table, jaw clenched, and exhaled a sound like a malfunctioning servo. For the first time in the trial, his composure fractured.

Catherine saw it before anyone else: the splay of the fingers over the heart, the microsecond pallor, the beads of sweat that erupted, instantly, along the brow. She recognized it from the autopsy photos, from the medical records, from the footage of the real Miloševi■ in his last months at The Hague: an infarction in progress, so precisely mirrored that it seemed less like a tragedy than a ritual reenactment.

The judges froze. The defense counsel leapt to his feet, arms extended as if to catch the collapsing edifice of his client's body. Court officers moved in; the glass wall separating the defendant from the rest of the world turned, for an instant, into a confessional.

The defendant slumped forward, fingers clawing at the lapel of his suit. The convulsion was violent, but brief. He gasped, once, and then again, the breaths diminishing in amplitude and frequency. The blood drained from his face, and his right hand, the one with the distinctive metronomic tic, hammered a final, arrhythmic beat on the tabletop before falling still.

A doctor was summoned, but the defendant's body had already retreated behind a curtain of shock. The medical team performed the prescribed sequence—compression, injection, defibrillation—each step more symbolic than effective. Catherine watched, arms crossed, as the tableau played out. She felt nothing. Or rather, she felt everything, but through the insulating barrier of unreality. This was the end she had been expecting; the only possible denouement.

As the chest compressions continued, a sound escaped from the defendant's lips—a phlegmatic, consonant-laden phrase, uttered in perfect Serbian. The interpreter translated, without looking up: "I have always been here." It was, according to the file, the final sentence Miloševi■ had spoken before his first heart attack.

Catherine glanced at Dr. Yun, who had been retained as an observer in the gallery. For the first time, the man's mask slipped. He allowed himself a brief, infinitesimal tilt of the chin, as if this outcome confirmed a private hypothesis. His eyes met Catherine's, and she understood, in a flash of cold lucidity, that the body's failure was not a malfunction but a form of completion. The organism had done what it was designed to do: perform Miloševi■, down to the last, perfect arrhythmia.

The doctor pronounced the time of death. The defense table was cleared, the corpse shrouded, the paperwork initiated. The judges retreated, not even bothering to gavel the session closed.

Catherine remained seated, staring at the vacancy where the defendant had sat moments before. She waited for a surge of relief, of triumph, of vindication. Nothing came.

After the courtroom emptied, she gathered her folder and stood, joints creaking. The glass of the translators' booth, so prominent in her memory, now reflected only her own face, wan and contorted, stretched by the geometry of the room into something unrecognizable.

She walked out, into the corridor, and felt the old doubts solidifying into a new kind of certainty: there had never been a Miloševi■, not really. Only a succession of vessels, each inhabited by a will that refused to die.

Outside, the March light was colder than ever. She blinked against the brightness, unsure if what she saw was the world, or just a series of perfect imitations.

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After the conclusion, the Hague Tribunal emptied itself in less than ten minutes, leaving only the residue of disturbance in the air. The janitorial staff arrived to unbolt the defendant's chair, roll up the unused polygraph cables, and wipe away the residual salts from the table's edge. The process was so practiced, so ordinary, that it felt obscene.

Catherine remained at the prosecution table, her hands rearranging the case files into a geometry of futility. She paged through the exhibits—photographs, pathology reports, timelines—each one now a relic of a trial that had ended not with a verdict but with a deletion. She did not know why she stayed; perhaps it was habit, or the slow uncoupling of herself from the ritual she had believed was truth.

She closed the last folder, ran her thumb along its edge, and glanced at the defense table. The surface was smooth, lacquered, but a faint impression lingered where the defendant's right elbow had rested. She reached out, almost involuntarily, and pressed her fingertips to the spot.

There was no warmth, no psychic residue, nothing to prove that the body had ever been there. It was as if the man, and the trial, and the entire archive of Miloševi■, had been a fever dream summoned for her alone.

She waited for the question to resolve itself, but it refused to arrive. Instead, she felt the slow reversal of the trial's momentum: all the certainty she had marshaled over months of preparation had become negative mass, collapsing into an event horizon where no answer could escape. The law could only measure what was there. It had no language for what was manufactured so perfectly that the real and the replica could never be untangled.

She whispered, for her own benefit: "Where does it end, then?"

The words vibrated against the glass, but the chamber gave her nothing in return.

She gathered her things, switched off the desk lamp, and walked the length of the courtroom, every step less assured than the last. The echo of her heels was all that remained, a signal fading into the null.

Outside, she allowed herself one backward glance. The doors were already closing, the tribunal receding into its own vanishing point.

She left, not knowing whether she was leaving as herself, or merely as the last echo of the case she had failed to solve.