

A military doubt simmered—one no one dared to voice. The Directorate had chosen to turn its gaze East. The Russian leader, with his years-long game of ambiguous power and threats, had become the new variable to contain. Not just any target: but the man who, in the eyes of the Concordat, embodied the very possibility of chaos.

On the large holographic screen, digital maps of Russia appeared, luminous signs marking military bases, depots, strategic junctions. The officers' voices listed parameters, risk scenarios, probability projections. Everything seemed calculated, yet the silence that followed the presentation was more eloquent than a thousand words.

Inside a restricted study, Alexander Volkov, the Russian political leader, received an encrypted message on a non-official device. It wasn't an email, it wasn't a phone, it wasn't a satellite transmission. It was a direct communication, impossible to trace or ignore. The screen flashed with a single sentence:

“Leader Volkov, the Concordat grants 12 hours to retract all active military actions in Ukraine and activate an immediate ceasefire. People may believe the fairy tales you will tell them, but we do not care. You are accountable to no one but us. Act as you deem necessary. Otherwise, the Decennial Operations will proceed with targeted neutralization of those responsible. No remorse. No exceptions”. Volkov clenched his fist. “Who dares decide Russia's fate without the Kremlin? ...Decennial Operations... bah,” he grumbled. But the anxiety in his eyes betrayed how real the threat was. The message was too direct, without filters. No intelligence network, no military council, no

conventional defense could stop the Concordat. Elias Vorne broke the silence and wrote: "The ultimatum is clear. Either he aligns, or he will be neutralized. There are no alternatives". The words fell heavy like an irrevocable sentence. Some nodded with conviction, others remained still, eyes fixed on the screens. Ámina felt a chill run down her spine. Neutralizing a world leader was not just another operation: it was a leap into the void, an open challenge to the very balance of global powers. In the corridors, far from official microphones, people whispered. Some feared Russia's reaction, some spoke of total war, others saw in the ultimatum the definitive proof of the Concordat's magnificence. Every word was spoken softly, yet doubt spread like an oil stain: how far was it legitimate to go? Back at her station, Ámina opened the internal reports. The data displayed scenarios constructed to appear inevitable, graphs that always led to the same conclusion, percentages that justified the need for elimination. But the more she read, the more she felt that behind that mathematics there was not truth, but the will to bend reality to a predetermined design. She found herself thinking of the unspoken words of many colleagues, of the lifeless gaze of the officer who, during the last briefing, had dared to raise a doubt: "What if we are becoming the very danger we wanted to eliminate?"

Those words kept echoing inside her, stronger and stronger. Meanwhile, the Directorate proceeded without hesitation. The ultimatum to the Russian leader had been issued: he would have limited time to comply, or he would be removed from the global board. As the others returned to work, Ámina remained

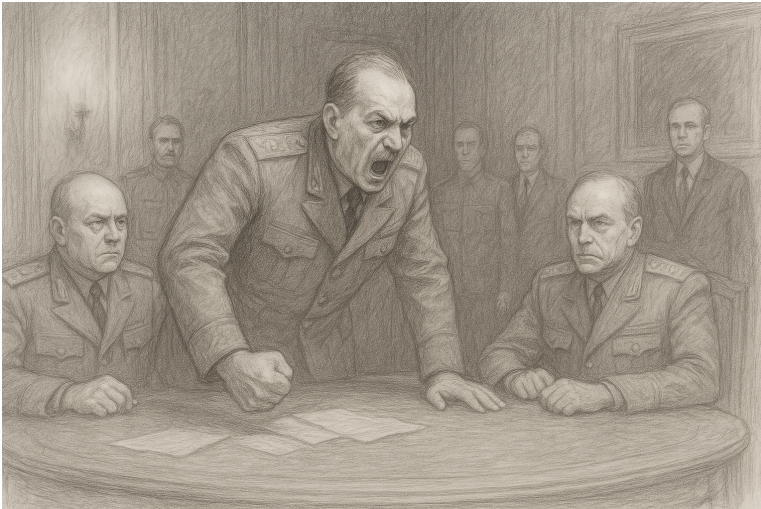
motionless before the screen, aware that the boundary line had been crossed. It was no longer just secret operations to restore peace: it was the declaration of an absolute power that claimed the right to decide the fate of nations and their leaders. And in that instant, she understood that the hardest battle would not be outside, but within—between blind obedience to the Silence and the courage to oppose it.

Only three minutes had passed. The clock hands marked 11 hours and 57 minutes. Volkov stared at the message on the screen, breath heavy. Every passing second reduced his possibilities. Marco observed the leaked coordinates, feeling a knot in his stomach. From her office, Ámina struggled to breathe: the power she served had become a moral condemnation. The outside world knew nothing. But within 12 hours, a decision would change the fate of millions. The war could end—but who truly decided the price of peace? Who calculated the human cost? And while Europe held its breath, unaware, the Concordat's clock kept ticking—cold, relentless, unquestionable.

The Kremlin was immersed in a deathly silence. Barred windows, dim lights, the weight of snow falling slowly over Moscow. Volkov, leader of the Federation, had received the Concordat's message only minutes earlier: a few lines, cold, blunt, but as heavy as a declaration of war. With trembling hands, he clutched the printed page he had just produced. Then, in a hoarse voice, he ordered: "Call the Security Council immediately. I want my generals and the Secretary of State here"...

The restricted hall filled within minutes. Volkov walked back and forth, fists clenched, gaze empty.

“Gentlemen, let’s not beat around the bush. This is an ultimatum. They’re already here. The Americans have declared war on us. Not with bombs, but with words. And we all know what that means”. A murmur crossed the room. The Secretary of State lowered his gaze, some generals nodded grimly. But one, the oldest among them—General Orlov—stood up, his steps slow and firm. “Mr. President, with respect... no. This is not America.” Volkov spun around: “Then who, Orlov? Who else has the strength and above all the arrogance to speak to us in this way?”



The general held the leader’s gaze, his voice calm as steel: “Sir, the United States act differently. They would apply economic pressure, mobilize NATO, look for allies. They do not send anonymous ultimatums without their intelligence services preparing the ground. And ours, Mr. President, have registered

nothing. No mobilization, no signals, no movement that indicates imminent war”. A heavy silence fell over the table. The attendees exchanged nervous looks, someone whispered: “It’s true...”, “It’s not their style...”, “There’s no proof...”

Volkov pressed his right hand to his forehead as if trying to squeeze out the burning confusion. His anger slowly turned into doubt. Orlov continued, almost paternal: “If this is an attack, it does not come from Washington. It comes from someone else. Someone who wants us to believe America has declared war. Someone working in the shadows”. That word hung in the air: Shadow. Everyone understood that the ultimatum was not an American gesture, but the signal of a darker, invisible presence, capable of instilling fear without firing a single shot. Volkov stopped in front of the table, slammed a fist on the polished wood, and murmured in a low, almost strangled voice:

“Then whoever is declaring war on us... doesn’t even want us to know who they are”...

The Kremlin hall was thick with cigar smoke and unspoken words. Volkov stared at the ultimatum lying on the table like an uncomfortable corpse. The generals, motionless in their decorated uniforms, no longer dared to speak. The air vibrated with tension: the enemy remained invisible, and no one could put a face to it.

“It’s not America...” Orlov had said earlier, and that sentence kept bouncing in everyone’s mind. But if not Washington—who? What power had the strength and above all the insolence to threaten Russia with such precision? Then the Secretary of State, sitting slightly apart, tilted the sheet toward himself. His eyes fell

to the bottom, where the page was nearly empty. There, small and discreet, almost etched into the ink like a shadow rather than a stroke, was a symbol, perhaps an emblem. A geometric figure resembling a rune, an ancient and incomprehensible mark, familiar yet not immediately noticeable. He leaned forward, tightening his lips. He had seen it before. Not once, but at least twice, in the past. Always fleetingly, always in contexts he had dismissed as coincidence. He suddenly remembered a classified folder that had crossed his office years earlier: the dossier on arms trafficking in the Balkans. On one of the photos, a rusted container bore the same rune, almost erased by time. Back then, he hadn't paid any attention, thinking it was graffiti or a forgotten industrial logo. And again, years later, during an informal meeting in Brussels, an African diplomat had pulled out a black leather document holder. On the golden clasp, for a moment, the Secretary had noticed the same sign engraved—before the object disappeared into the briefcase. Now, seeing it appear at the bottom of that ultimatum, it could no longer be a coincidence. It wasn't superstition. It wasn't decoration. It was a mark. The Secretary swallowed, slowly lifted his eyes, and said with a grave voice, cracked by unease:

“Mr. President... this is not just a message”...