

Prologue

Bogdan grabbed his Kalashnikov assault rifle, shot the monitor to shit. He couldn't watch. The police were bulldozing his fortress. All the time and money he'd put into Šilerova Street and they were fucking destroying it.

Ten years hard work, building his citadel. Until The Clan was ready to take over the city. Other guys had died trying. Bogdan had survived. The Clan wouldn't be broken.

The walls and ceilings started to shake.

They had to make a move or they'd end up in a tomb of Zemun stone.

Bogdan nodded at Slaven. They didn't have The Legend with them. But The Gypsy and The Machine would make a stand.

The two men from Zemun took the stairs, opened the secret hatch, went up to ground level.

Bulldozers were pushing in the front walls.

Stone and mortar was falling.

Dust filling the fortress.

The Gypsy aimed his Kalashnikov at the bulldozer's driver, started firing.

The Machine cradled his AK47, rattled off shots as police officers entered the building.

Viktor heard the gunfire, saw two officers fall. He ducked behind a bulldozer, which had stopped moving. The driver shot dead.

Jovanović joined Viktor, crouched beside his partner, said:

'How many of them are there?'

'I think it's just the two of them.'

'Yea, but The Machine's like ten men.'

'He's just got a big gun.'

‘You ever actually killed anyone?’

‘No, but I’m not sure we’re going to be making arrests.’

The two police inspectors had made their first arrest together ten years ago. There had been hundreds of murders since then. Criminal kingpins like The Gypsy had never been arrested. The Clan had a stranglehold on Belgrade. Viktor had waited long enough. He nodded at Jovanović, said:

‘Cover me.’

Viktor didn’t give his partner a choice, ran crouched into the building while shots rang out.

Part 1

White City

December 1993

Vuk handed a wad of notes to the attendant, watched as they guy funnelled petrol from a canister into the SUV.

Attendant was the wrong word because the petrol pumps weren't in use, it was just an out of work mechanic on the corner of Cara Dušana who had hoarded away a few cans of petrol in his garage. Vuk's SUV had been stolen to order before the war. It was time for an upgrade, but at least Vuk had a ride.

Battered old Yugos were parked up over the kerb all the way down the long, tram-lined street. Out of date buses were stationary, abandoned as the city ran out of petrol.

Belgrade was almost at a standstill.

Covered in a layer of snow.

White City.

Vuk lifted the collar of his military winter coat. He could feel the *košava*, Belgrade's infamous wind blowing cold through the streets. He'd survived worse winters, but the wind was a bone-chiller. A drink of *rakija* would do the job.

Goran crossed over the street from the kiosk on the other side. Vuk's right hand-man looked disgusted as he held up a packet of Drina, said:

'This is all they've got. No Marlboro, no Davidoff. Only this shit.'

'At least you'll die smoking like a patriot.'

Goran lit up, said:

'Fuck the West.'

'Did you call Marko and Dušan?'

'Yea, they'll meet us there.'

A commotion behind the two men made them turn to look.

A crowd had gathered outside a bakery, people scuffling to get to the front. An old woman swathed in black cried out:

‘First I lose my son, now there’s no bread!’

Vuk walked over to the crowd, made his way through to the bakery. People started to complain, saw who it was and went quiet. The baker was guarding a tray of bread. Vuk gestured for the baker to give him a loaf, said:

‘Come on, give me one.’

The baker handed over a loaf and Vuk slapped several notes on the tray. The crowd parted and Vuk gave the bread to the old woman. She grabbed his arm in thanks, said:

‘You’re a saint.’

‘Not yet.’

Vuk understood the impact of sanctions on petrol and cigarettes because they were imported. But if there wasn’t even enough flour to make bread, how were people supposed to eat? Vuk walked back to Goran, said:

‘Let’s get a drink.’

The two men got in the SUV and Vuk drove out of Stari Grad, past the old stone walls pockmarked with bullet holes from World War Two. Bloody Germans had never been back since then.

They cruised over the Sava, Kalemegdan looming over the river intersection. The fortress had been a battleground in wars against the Turks and the Germans. Whatever the world threw at Belgrade, the city would remain strong.

Vuk turned right off the bridge, drove alongside the Danube. Heading into New Belgrade, they passed Hotel Jugoslavia, a monument to a country that was in danger of no longer existing. Vuk didn’t want to look to the past, so he pulled in at Hotel Intercontinental. It was a wide-ranging empire he was going to create.