

Early April 1999
A few miles outside of Vizic, Serbia

Marko Resja peeked cautiously over the top of the jagged stone wall, and scanned the lodge's distant front porch with powerful binoculars. Through the driving downpour, he counted four men, which was a good thing. With the entire external security team in one place, he should have no trouble approaching unseen.

He lowered himself to the spongy, pine needle covered ground, and leaned back against a sharp granite chunk that formed part of the estate's perimeter wall. Created by haphazardly dumping large uneven rocks around the lodge on all sides, the utilitarian border marked the divide between hastily cleared land and the impenetrable Fruska Gora National Forest.

Marko had arrived at the stone wall one hour earlier, hampered by the same relentless rainfall that had kept NATO aircraft at bay for more than a week. Concealed in the dense pine foliage behind the jagged barrier, he could hear the distant roar of high altitude jets through the relentless storm. He guessed the NATO pilots were testing Belgrade's air defense network from a safe distance, impatient for the weather to clear over the northern Balkan Peninsula.

Marko stared out into the wavering pine forest before turning his attention back to the lodge. The two-story, modern stone and beam structure looked sturdy enough to withstand an artillery attack. A similarly constructed, one-story garage stood between Marko and the house, partially obscuring his view of the main structure.

Srecko Hadzic, ruthless leader of the paramilitary Serbian Panther crime syndicate, had built the lodge for the sole purpose of hiding his brother, Pavle, from prying eyes. Rumors of NATO commando teams operating within Serbian borders had taken root among upper level leadership, raising paranoia to nearly impossible levels, and Srecko feared Pavle's capture more than his own. Unfortunately for Srecko, the Vizic compound was one of the worst kept secrets in Belgrade.

He took one more peek over the top of the wall, just to make sure all four men were still on the porch. He spotted the bright orange glow of cigarettes through the impenetrable rain squalls. Marko didn't expect any of them to emerge from their cozy shelter, but he had to keep in mind that these men were all current or former Serbian Special Operations types, and despite the overindulgences often associated with paramilitary security details, all of these men had been hand-picked for their competence. Three more had accompanied Radovan Grahovac, Srecko's Chief-of-Security, into the lodge to meet with Pavle.

They had all arrived dressed in civilian clothes, which suggested that the crew might head north for a night of prostitutes and drinking along the banks of the Danube River in Novi Sad. But despite their casual dress, each man carried a compact assault rifle, and a pistol. Under normal circumstances, this was not a crew he would cross. Today, Marko would make a notable exception.

Satisfied that all four men are still in the same place, Marko picked up a long, thick black nylon duffel bag and ran to a position along the wall that was completely obscured from the porch by the garage. He knew from two previous reconnaissance trips, that Radovan didn't stay more than ten minutes, which meant he was already running out of time.

From his new spot, he glanced over the wall, and saw one of two dark blue Range Rovers that had arrived at Pavle's hideaway a few minutes ago, depositing Radovan and his heavily armed security detail. The other Range Rover was parked a few meters behind the first, hidden from Marko's view by garage.

He kneeled low and wrestled a Serbian-made light machine gun out of the soaked nylon bag, extending the weapon's foldable shoulder stock. He placed the weapon against the wall and reached back into the bag for one of two detachable ammunition drums. He swiftly attached one of the seventy-five round drums to the weapon and placed the second in a hip satchel.

Beyond the high capacity ammunition drums, he had four, standard thirty round magazines velcroed into quick-access pouches on his combat vest, nestled among with four stun grenades. He screwed a large silencer to the machine gun's barrel, and chambered a round with the weapon's charging lever. The final item he took from the bag was a gray, aluminum ice climbing axe, which he attached low on the side of his vest. He was ready.

He gripped the sturdy assault weapon with his left hand, and hopped over the rock wall, using his right hand for leverage. After splashing down in ankle high mud, he slugged through the torrential rain to reach the left back corner of the garage. From that spot, he'd be able to see the four men leave the porch, which was critical to his plan.

Marko arrived at the corner, careful not to expose himself. He checked all of his gear one more time. He wished he could check the computer and satellite phone in his waterproof backpack, but dismissed the idea as last minute paranoia. He knew the electronics rig worked, and would give him a secure satellite connection for both the satellite phone and his computer. He assembled and tested it nearly a dozen times within the last twenty-four hours. He might not even need it, but he wasn't about to take any chances, and neither was The General.

The rain intensified for a minute, as sheets of water pummeled the side of the garage. Despite having been exposed to the frigid early spring rain for nearly two hours, Marko wasn't cold. Under his paramilitary camouflage outfit, he wore a waterproof, insulated one-piece jumpsuit. Certainly not standard issue for elite Serbian commandos, or even the most pampered members of Srecko Hadzic's paramilitary forces. Nothing in Marko's equipment load-out was standard Serbian issue.

He peeked around the corner of the garage and saw one of the men hastily throw a lit cigarette out into the front yard. Another man talked excitedly into a small handheld radio and rapidly nodded his head. Showtime.

Marko released the weapon's safety, and pulled a rain soaked black ski mask down over his head. He peered cautiously around the corner, and watched the men scramble off the porch. When the men vanished from his sight, he moved rapidly down the unobserved side of the garage, where he reached the front corner and risked another peak. Everything looked just like he had predicted. The lead SUV was already loaded with Radovan and the three men who accompanied him inside the lodge. The four commandos from the porch jogged toward the rear SUV.

He'd witnessed the same scene several dozen times before. Radovan always insisted that the team assigned to the rear vehicle wait for all of the members of the lead car to get situated. At first Marko thought this might be for security reasons, but he learned firsthand that this was simply another one of Radovan's psychotic quirks. He also

knew that all four members of the rear security team, anxious to get out of the rain, would be so preoccupied watching the lead SUV that he could engage them completely undetected.

Marko pushed these thoughts aside, and instantly engaged a near trance-like mindset. He stepped out into the open and lowered his body into a tensed semi-crouch, as he aimed at the last man in the group. Through the Aimpoint site, he placed the red dot on the man's upper back, just below the nape of his neck, and squeezed the trigger for a controlled burst. The weapon kicked considerably, but he kept it under control, and repeated the process for the remaining three guards. He sprinted for the back of the empty SUV, and reached it before the last guard hit the ground. None of them had a chance to react. If anything, a few of them might have felt a warm, chunky spray. Less than five seconds had elapsed.

A quick glance back confirmed that all four members of Radovan's rear security team were dead, and Marko moved forward along the right side of the rear SUV, focused on Radovan's vehicle.

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The rain hammered the truck's thick metal roof, while Radovan sat impatiently in the front passenger seat of his Range Rover. He hated these trips, and absolutely despised handing their hard earned cash over to Srecko's "gang-banger worshipping" brother, Pavle. Radovan was a committed ultra-nationalist, and had no tolerance for the newly arrived American "gangsta" music that had penetrated the Belgrade club scene. When Radovan hit the town, which he frequently did, Belgrade went hip-hop free. Nobody risked incurring the security chief's wrath.

"Why the fuck are we not out of here already?" he yelled at the rain blurred windshield.

Directly behind him, one of the commandos shifted uncomfortably. *Here we go again.* He turned his head back over his right shoulder, equally annoyed with his infantile boss, and the idiots in the other Range Rover. Through the wide back window on the Range Rover's gate, he saw a figure sliding down the right side of the rear SUV, but never formed much more of an impression about the situation. Several steel jacketed bullets ripped through his skull, and the cabin of the SUV erupted in chaos.

Radovan was immediately hit by two of the bullets that passed unhindered through the commando's throat. One struck him in the upper left shoulder, where it stayed, and the other ricocheted off the metal head rest post, and grazed the right side of his neck. The windshield in front of Radovan crumbled from the second bullet, and he instinctively grabbed for the short barreled assault rifle that rested between his right leg and the door. Before his hand completed the twelve inch journey, the front passenger door erupted in a fusillade of torn plastic, metal fragments, and safety glass.

His hand never touched the rifle. He felt incredible surges of pain at multiple points throughout his body, but remained conscious for a few seconds, vaguely aware that a figure moved across the front of the SUV, firing continuously into the vehicle. His head was violently snapped backward and to the left, leaving him with a view of a shattered body in the seat behind the driver. He tried to call out to the man, but couldn't form the words. He watched as a dark red stain splattered the bodyguard's window, and a

red mist aerosolized the rear cargo compartment. This was the last thing Radovan would ever see.

Against all odds, the driver, Jorji, survived the seemingly endless hail of bullets. He was hit several times, but knew that he was not critically wounded. When the first bullets passed through the car, Jorji twisted his body to the right, and pressed down on the center console, trying to present the lowest possible target to his attackers. This was not the first time he had been attacked in a vehicle, and his previous experience kept him alive a little longer than the rest of the Range Rover's occupants.

Several bullets pierced the back of his seat, and tore into the top left side of his body, causing mostly superficial damage, but shredding muscle and tendon from his left hip all the way up to his shoulder. The extensive muscle damage along his entire left side kept him locked in place over the center console, with his face nearly buried in Radovan's lap. No matter how hard he tried, he could not sit up, which was another reason that he was still alive.

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Marko dropped to the soaked gravel near the front left tire of the Range Rover and rolled over onto his left side, which gave him easy access to the hip satchel containing the second ammunition drum. The gun's barrel sizzled as the rain struck the dangerously overheated metal. A hundred thoughts and stimuli flashed through his brain, which were immediately prioritized and processed for Marko's use. Marko's trance reduced useless distractions like emotion, hesitation or fear, and enhanced his focus on the highly specialized skills required to survive.

"Reload weapon" is at the very top of the list. His weapon wasn't empty, but he knew that seventy five rounds didn't last very long at the rate he had fired. In the flash of a synapse, "driver still alive" is also broadcasted, and Marko's eyes narrow. He had fired long bursts into each passenger as he moved counter-clock wise around the SUV. After targeting the rear right guard and Radovan, Marko fired a lengthy burst at the driver through the rear right door window. He knew the bullets had passed through the seat and connected with the driver, but the man's demise was not conclusive, and he knew it.

He detached the drum magazine, and threw it out of the way. The second drum was out of the satchel and attached to the light machine gun in a blur of hands. Marko popped up from the ground into a low crouch, keeping well below the window, and fired a sustained burst through the center of the front passenger door.

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The silence felt like an eternity to Jorji, but he knew his lifespan was now measured in seconds, unless he could take the offensive. Jorji lifted his head up far enough out of Radovan's blood soaked lap to catch sight of the assault rifle jammed against the door by Radovan's right leg. Jorji knew this was his only hope. His only weapon, a small semi-automatic pistol, was jammed under his right armpit in a concealed holster, and he couldn't lift his body to free it. Not that it would have matter if he could. Jorji was left handed, and a bullet had passed right through the back of his left elbow, rendering his left arm useless. He strained to slide his right arm free, and his hand

managed to reach the rifle just as several bullets punctured the driver door, and put an end to any hope that he might survive.

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Marko raised his body enough to see into the Range Rover, and kept the gun aimed forward. He saw the driver leaned over Radovan's lap, but couldn't be sure the man was dead. Through his weapon's sight, he centered the red dot on the back of the man's skull. One quick trigger pull put an end to Radovan's security team.

He pulled back up against the house and absorbed the entire scene. The whole scene resembled a well-executed ambush, and there was little chance that anyone would suspect the attack was perpetrated by one person. The vehicle was shredded on all sides by bullets, and most of the safety glass lay shattered on the packed gravel. He fired from nearly every angle around the car, leaving shell casings scattered everywhere.

He saw that two of the guards behind the rear SUV fell on top of each other, and immediately decided that he'll stuff one of them into the trunk of the luxury Mercedes in the garage. He'd dump the car into one of the lakes near Belgrade. The absence of a junior member of Radovan's inner sanctum will lead Srecko Hadzic to suspect that this was an inside job, and if anyone took a close look at ground around the bodies, they would only find the washed out evidence of three deaths.

Marko decided to skip any further house surveillance, and moved toward the door. He had done a mixed job of keeping the noise level down, and didn't want to waste any time if Pavel's bodyguards had been alerted.

The silencer had worked perfectly, and ensured that the automatic weapon would not draw anyone's attention. Marko could barely hear the gun's internal mechanisms over the rain storm. The Range Rover was a different story, and he was not at all satisfied with the noise created by the bullets that impacted with the SUV's heavy steel frame. To Marko, it had sounded like multiple, low speed fender benders, and it nearly jarred him out of his operational mindset. He had backed up against the house more out of fear than a rational tactical decision. It was the right decision, but this was not how he had been trained to operate.

Marko reached his right hand over to the door knob, and tried to twist it. It didn't move. Wasting no time, he reached into his hip satchel and removed an object that resembled a small plastic explosive charge. He tightly jammed it between the door knob and door trim. He pulled a small plastic device out of a pouch on his vest, and slid it upward along the door from the first small charge. The device's LED turned green about two feet above the door knob. *Dead bolt.* He placed a second charge against the trim, right where the LED flashed green. He quickly pulled a small cotter pin on each of the homemade devices, and pressed himself flush against the paved stone wall of the lodge.

In rapid succession, each device ignited, and burned intensely for five seconds. The thermite packages created very little noise, but generated an incredible amount of smoke, usually on both sides of the door. Marko pushed firmly on the heavy oak door, which gave way now that the locks had been melted. He held his breath and stepped into the house. The caustic smoke obscured his vision and burned his eyes momentarily, but he immediately recognized that he was on a small landing. Several stairs lead up into the

house through an enclosed stairwell that separated the landing from the main house, and kept him out of sight.

His ears picked up a familiar sound, which relieved Marko of any fears that his attack had been compromised. A hard core rap song from Dr. Dre's Chronic album vibrated throughout the lodge. His mouth formed a thin grin as a Serbian accented "Yeah motherfucka" echoed alongside Snoop Dog's lyrics.

Marko eased up the stairs, and peeked around the corner. The lodge's ground floor was an open concept space, which gave him a clear view straight through the kitchen to the great room. He didn't see any smoke detectors in the kitchen, which allowed him to relax the pace slightly.

The ceiling opened up just past the eat-in kitchen area to form a two story great room, with floor to ceiling windows on the far wall facing Marko. A dark gray slate fireplace and chimney split the middle of this wall, and disappeared into the timber framed ceiling. The men were stationed around a rustic, dark wooden coffee table, which was centered on the fireplace, and littered with a pile of mixed currency. A dimly lit chandelier hung low over the coffee table, attached to the ceiling by a thick, black chain.

Marko spotted Pavel immediately, which was not a difficult task. Pavel was paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair, which faced the fireplace. Both of Pavel's outstretched arms embraced the deep hip hop beat with a slow, synchronized wave. Each hand held a thick stack of American bills.

Marko assessed the bodyguards. A large, stocky man in a black turtleneck sweater and brown jacket stood in front of Pavel, and bounced up and down completely out of rhythm. The third bodyguard sat on a dark, rich leather couch to the left of the table. He nodded his head to the steady rhythm and rolled what Marko assumed to be a marijuana joint. He didn't see any obvious weapons. Marko chuckled at the pathetic crew in front of him.

Ready to make his move, Marko took the time to feel the razor sharp edges on both the front and back of the climbing axe. The axe would provoke the final outrage. The inevitable civil war between two of Slobodan Milosevic's largest paramilitary groups would tear Belgrade apart from within, and give Marko the cover he needed to tie up a few more loose ends before vanishing. For the first time in several years, he felt hopeful.

His time in this shithole of a region was rapidly coming to an end, and he intended to walk away with a little more than just the satisfaction of a job well done. Pavel held the key to his brother's vast criminal fortune, which would soon belong to the United States' government - Minus a small finder's fee. He caressed the axe's blade once more, before he lowered his body to a full crouch and slipped into the kitchen. He still had a long day ahead of him.