

From *Black Flagged: Beginnings*

The next book in the *Black Flagged* series

Foothills of Divjaka, Republic of Kosovo
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Marko Resja stood a few meters away from the raised dirt road, swatting flies away from his grimy, sweat covered face. August drew stifling heat and oppressive humidity to the Balkan Peninsula, which couldn't have been timed worse for the Yugoslav offensive. The heat seemed to incite the flies, which needed little encouragement in these hills. He wondered if these insects could sense their role in the impending tragedy. It would certainly explain their increased activity.

He raised his twenty-year-old M-76 sniper rifle, and stared through the scope, scanning the road as far as was practical. He was assigned to watch the most likely western approach for Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) vehicles, and shared the duty with another relatively new member of Hadzic's Panthers. Satisfied that nothing threatened to approach from the outskirts of Divjaka, he lowered the rifle and shrugged at his partner, who spoke into a cheap plastic handheld radio.

Sava looked back at him and rolled his eyes, alternately wiping his forehead and slapping flies away from his ears. His dark green camouflage uniform looked filthy, crusted with light brown mud up to his thighs, and large sweat stains formed odd circular shapes under his armpits and across his chest. The only thing clean about Sava was his assault rifle, which was slung over his left shoulder, freeing him to perform the occasional radio check-in and chain smoke cigarettes. Sava's face disappeared in a cloud of tobacco smoke, and reappeared sporting a grin. His teeth stood out through the thin layer of unevenly applied green and black camouflage.

The camouflage greasepaint had nearly worn away over the past three days, as their unit moved through the hills, mopping up "suspected" bands of KLA resistance. Apparently, "suspected" had always been a loose term among the Panthers, but since yesterday's gruesome discovery in Klecka, the designation was now applied to any of the ethnic Albanian Kosovars found in the hills.

Regular Yugoslavian security forces captured the KLA stronghold in Klecka, and were led to a crematorium by a young man who claimed to have been forced to participate in atrocities against kidnapped Serbians. Evidence of scorched human remains was found in a makeshift crematorium, and several trenches filled with badly decomposing bodies were uncovered in a nearby orchard. Word of the discovery spread like wildfire through Serbian units in the foothills, and Marko's platoon was roused from a deep sleep at three in the morning to prepare for an urgent operation.

Several armored vehicles arrived in the camp shortly thereafter, and provided transportation to the outskirts of the Divjaka, where a mortar team set up in a clearing to the west. Half of the thirty-man platoon drove to the eastern road on the other side of the village, along with a few of the M-80 armored personnel carriers. The entire platoon's focus was a cluster of homes and structures in northern Divjaka, isolated from the main

town, and accessible by two roads, which were now blocked by a heavily armed Serbian paramilitary force.

They loitered in the western tree line until a crimson sun started to creep over the eastern hills of the tight valley, and fingers of deep orange light caught the tops of the trees around them. He could only imagine the terror spreading through the homes in front of them, as residents helplessly listened to the distant rumble of idling engines beyond their sight, and waited.

The mortar tubes announced the break of dawn across the valley, firing a volley of 82mm high explosive shells at the closest grouping of structures visible along the road. The shells sailed in a high arc, and took an eternity to find earth again. When gravity returned them, the ground behind one of the houses erupted skyward in a light brown cloud, followed by another geyser of dirt from the road. The sharp crunch of the impacts washed through the men, giving rise to a few cheers. Marko felt relieved that the rounds had missed the homes.

The mortar attack lasted five minutes, as the mortar crew haphazardly sent several more salvos into the village, adjusting their aim to "walk" the shells through the entire length of the community. Luckily for the inhabitants, the mortar team never focused on the buildings. Only once did they see a shell make a direct hit, as large wooden chunks of a red roof flew skyward, joining the dust cloud. This led to a chorus of cheers from the men around him, which he pretended to eagerly join. He felt relieved that the mortar attack had done so little damage, but his solace would be short lived.

Without ceremony, the mortar teams disassembled their equipment and loaded it into the troop compartment of one of the M-80's. The entire detachment of regular army vehicles sped away, leaving his squad with their own odd assortment of AUZ jeeps. The ride over had been a "treat" for the Panthers, who would be left behind at Divjaka to do the day's dirty work, and had distracted most of them from the fact that they weren't in the company of regular Yugoslav infantry. Marko noted this as soon as the army convoy arrived at their encampment, and dreaded their destination. He knew this would be a difficult day. He truly had no idea how bad it would get, or how important the day would turn out to be for him.

Nenad Sojic, the platoon's de facto leader, spoke to his radio operator, a lean, darker-skinned Serb, named Goran, and waved the squad over. Through the radio handset, Goran relayed Sojic's orders to the men positioned on the eastern approach to the village, and took a deep drag on his cigarette. Without ceremony, Sojic told them that they would search house to house for KLA insurgents and weapons caches. Once a house was searched, the inhabitants would be sent to a centralized location for further questioning. Even the most naive members of the platoon knew what that meant.

They walked through the dew covered fields down the road toward the simple concrete houses. Cool mountain valley air penetrated their thin uniforms, and most of the men still wore the black wool watch caps they had donned while shivering in the middle of the night. The caps would be ditched by mid-morning, as temperatures reached unbearable highs. The jeeps roared to life behind them, and soon met up with the soldier on foot.

When they reached the first set of homes, Marko and Sava were detached to serve as pickets at the western edge of the village. They were tasked to observe the same road the armored personnel carriers used to hastily separate themselves from Marko's

paramilitary comrades, and report any incoming vehicles. They both quickly turned their attention to the road, as doors were forced open and the screaming started. He concentrated on the empty road, as the rest of the squad and the vehicles moved down the road, pushing hesitant villagers ahead of them. Neither of them wanted to look back and acknowledge what was happening.

Marko's thoughts shifted back into the present, as he tracked a crow flying through the air from the west. The large black bird landed on a crude wooden fence several yards back from the road, joining the several dozen already quietly arrayed along the fence. More crows were perched hidden among the nearby trees. They weren't intimidated by the soldiers' presence in Divjaka. They had as much right to be here as the flies, and they were here for same reason.

"They know something we don't," remarked Sava, dragging on his cigarette.

The man had smoked non-stop since they left a Belgrade primary school soccer field three days ago, and he suspected that the young northern Serb must be close to exhausting his supply of cigarettes. All of them must be running low. Marko carried a pack of cheap Serbian smokes to fit in, but he generally never indulged, unless offered. He had always despised the habit, but his trainers at The Ranch had made it clear that he would smoke. Everyone smoked in Serbia, at least casually. He'd grown accustomed to the taste, and no longer minded the acrid smell of tobacco smoke in cramped spaces. Still, the habit did nothing for him, except help him blend into his environment.

Sava grinned nervously, and Marko wondered what he was thinking. He didn't look, or sound too eager to head deeper into the village. He was young, and didn't have the same brutal edge that was common among Hadzic's veteran Panthers. This thought brought another concern back into focus. His platoon was comprised of too many newbies, several of which had been swapped into the platoon just after last night's dinner. He was new to the Panther organization, and had only been deployed to the field, in a large scale operation, twice before, but this structure stuck him as odd.

Hadzic's field units typically overflowed with hardened paramilitary veterans of the Bosnia conflict, or former Yugoslav military. The process for integration of new recruits was brutal, and discouraged most naive youth. Still, they had no shortage of volunteers, and in times of war, the training camps swelled with eager recruits, pushed through to augment roles left behind by combat hungry veterans. This platoon brimmed with newbies, and that concerned him, though he had no idea why.

His concentration was shattered by the sudden crack of automatic weapons fire, as hundreds of crows scattered, briefly drowning out the sound of the guns. Like the crows, Sava reacted instinctively, and threw himself onto the ground next to the slightly raised dirt road. He flinched, but stood impassively in the middle of the road, as the volume of gunfire diminished, finally ending with an occasional crackle. He hadn't felt or heard the familiar snap or hiss of bullets passing near him, so he kept his composure. He knew exactly what had happened, and turned his head lazily towards the center of the village. Occasional, single pistol shots started to fill the air, and Sava rose to his feet to rejoin him on the road.

He wore an expression that betrayed his true feelings, and Marko knew that the young Serb felt the same way that he did about the situation. They were both equally relieved to have been assigned to a deserted stretch of road, even if three hundred meters of separation didn't provide them with any absolution for their presence in the valley.

Sava's radio crackled, and they're respite from the madness was over. They had been recalled to the village center.

He slicked his thick, matted brown hair back with his left hand, and wiped the sweat onto his camouflage pants. Sava looked terrified for the first time since they had piled into green, tarp covered trucks in Belgrade. He patted the kid on the back, and nodded.

"Let's get going."

The two of them started to jog down the road, careful not to twist an ankle in the shallow crater created by one of the mortar impacts. He spotted several AUZ jeeps in a clearing to the north of the village. All of the doors in the village had been left open, which gave the village a frightening aura. Almost like it had been abandoned. The first thing he heard was the crying, and it nearly stopped him in his tracks. He searched for the source, and saw a group of women and children huddled under a tree, guarded by a soldier. As the scene started to unfold in front of him, he sensed that Sava had stopped altogether.

"Keep moving, or you'll end up in one of those trenches," said Marko, wondering if that was where they might end up anyway.

They were blocked by a group of Panthers and told to leave their weapons stacked against one of the vehicles. He saw several assault rifles leaned against a mud covered chassis, and walked over to the jeep, scanning the area. He could see the pit over the hood of the jeep, just beyond a dozen or so Panthers who were staring down into it. A few of them shook their heads, while others spit at the earth. As he placed his sniper rifle against the jeep's rear tire, Sava joined him.

"Fucking burial duty. Wonderful," said Sava.

"It's typical for new guys," lied Marko.

He hadn't seen shovels among the men standing in front of the long pit. His stomach tensed, and he fought to remain calm. This would probably be his defining "critical point," as the Black Flag psychologists termed it. They had prepared him for these moments, characterizing the different types and their significance. This one looked like a "terminal critical point." He would either survive, and emerge as a trusted member of the Panthers, or he would die in the pit along with the rest of the villagers. No aspect of General Sanderson's training program could truly prepare him for what would transpire in the next few moments, and he had to make a choice.

If he lined up with the rest of the men, he would have to take his chances with a gamble he had taken a few weeks ago. A little insurance policy that might save his life. His other option was to put his training to work, and fight his way out of here. He might even be able to kill all of them. Half of the group was unarmed, standing like sheep in front of their own grave, all of their weapons stacked at his feet. Twelve remaining men? He had several loaded assault rifles sitting right in front of him. He could sling two of them over his shoulder, and start cutting down the armed Panthers with a third. The odds were in his favor, given his capabilities. It might even be blamed on KLA guerillas.

He glanced up at one of the men that had ordered him put his weapon against the jeep. The man's greasepaint camouflage had been recently reapplied, neutralizing his expression, but his eyes gave Marko pause. They were cold and alert. He would have to make his decision within the next fraction of a second. Taking his hand off the sniper rifle, he decided to gamble with his life. The payoff would secure his status among the

Panthers, which was the ultimate purpose of his training as a Black Flag operative. He swallowed shallowly, and followed Sava around the jeep, never taking his eyes off the hardened soldier escorting them.

As he approached the rest of the men, a buzzing sound hit his ears, causing him to stop.

"Get with the rest of them," someone barked from behind, and he continued forward.

A few of the dirty soldiers ahead of him laughed and pointed down into the pit, which demonstrated exactly how clueless some of the new recruits were, when confronted with the obvious. He saw the guards from the eastern side of town walk around the pit to join them. They had the same look on their faces as Sava when they glanced downward.

Marko caught his first look into the shallow trench, and fought the urge to gag. He betrayed no emotion as the full scope of the atrocity appeared before him. He no longer wondered about the buzzing sound. Thousands of flies swarmed over the freshly slaughtered corpses; fighting to land in bright red pools of blood, drawn to the stench of involuntarily voided bowels. The smell started to overwhelm him, and he decided to stop and turn around.

He faced members of the same firing squad that had put all of the village's men into a hastily dug mass grave. The rest of the shooters mingled with him, some complaining about being put on burial duty, others bragging about the accurate shots they had fired into the "terrorists." One of the loudest newbies called out to the platoon commander, who was talking into a radio headset.

"Hey, Nenad! How about the guys with the easy jobs on the road bury this garbage?" he said, pointing toward Marko and Sava.

"How about you shut the fuck up!" said a stocky Serb crouched near one of the jeeps.

The man's bravado disappeared, and he started to melt back into the dozen or so men standing around in front of the trench. Marko took in the scene. Nobody was pointing weapons in their direction, but he could see the looks passing surreptitiously back and forth. He located some shovels nearby, which were caked with dirt, and had probably been recently used by the slaughtered Kosovars to dig their own grave. Nobody else glanced at the shovels. This was not a work detail. This was either some kind of sick initiation that might involve the surviving women and children, or something entirely different. Either way, he wondered if he had made a mistake. His eyes found the nearest M-90 assault rifle, and he did the calculations, casually looking around. He could put a knife through the owner's throat and get the rifle, but his chances beyond that were now non-existent.

The sound of vehicles broke his concentration, and everyone's heads turned to see two black Range Rovers speed down the road from the east, kicking up a storm of dust behind them. He saw the armed Panthers straighten themselves up, and some of them even attempted to brush off some of the dirt and mud in a futile effort. Nenad Sojic and his radio operator jogged to the road to meet the occupants. He recognized the SUVs, and suddenly it all made sense. He might survive the day, but only if Radovan Grahovac, Hadzic's security chief, decided to indulge in his patented sadism for a few minutes,

before putting them all into the ditch. He was optimistic. Radovan didn't like to stray too far from Belgrade without the promise of some entertainment.