

# 1

Deep in the Scottish Borders, Lox Lennox stood frozen in the darkness of the conservation site, one eye on the man at his feet, the other focused to infinity as he concentrated on his immediate surroundings.

*Don't ask questions, Malkin had said, just get him off my land.*

Ears and nostrils twitching like finely-tuned gauges, Lox registered the sounds and smells around him, filed them away. The smell of the Tweed and its decaying summer carcass, rank with silt and weed, down beyond the palisade of silver birch. A melange of scents borne on the warm night breeze. Herbacious borders, manure from the stables, fresh creosote from the fishing howff down by the river.

*Blood.*

Five minutes stretched to ten. Still Lox remained motionless, a shadow amongst shadows, primary senses on red alert. Merging with his environment the way he'd been trained, recalling his instructor's maxim that to move is to die.

Snapshot:

Oman '73. High on the *jebel massif* above Mirbat, the adoo guerrillas on the move three days before the attack, Lennox and a host of scorpions

hunkered in his makeshift trench watching the guerrillas file silently along the track against a moonless black sky. So close he could smell the garlic on their breath, almost reach out and touch their dusty boots. Lox lying there for almost an hour before it was safe to move, having to prise his teeth from the stock of his Armalite after cramp set in.

A lifetime ago.

After twenty minutes with no extraneous sound disturbing the night, Lox gave it the green light. He knelt and once again examined the intruder in the light of his torch.

Euan Ker was still bleeding, though not so heavily, from the wound in his head. Breathing steady, if a little stilted. Soon he would be coming round. Lox shook his head and sighed. The laird of Craikmuir breaking into the Institute in the middle of the night like a common criminal... What was the world coming to?

*Don't ask questions, just get him off my land.*

Lox rubbed the scar at his temple. The bullet contracting as it cooled, firing sparks behind his eyes. It had been one of those days. Out on the river, noon till dusk, hunting Fin with shotgun and stun-grenades, the sun blazing down, not even a glimpse of the finless freak to make it all worthwhile. And now it looked like an even longer night ahead, cleaning up Malkin's personal debris field.

There had to be more to life than this.

He hefted the unconscious laird over his shoulder and continued down to the river.

## 2

Sunday afternoon and Duncan Ker stood at the observation window in the consultant's office, looking in on the CRU and all the blinking lights on the sophisticated machinery there. Patients in only three of the five beds, Euan closest to the window—his brother, yes, but not the brother he knew. A shrunken replica, lifeless but for the loveless labour of the slave machines. Their grandfather Ranal parked bedside, one bony claw clutching Euan's wrist as the other manouevered the wheel of his chair. He looked up and caught Duncan watching. Duncan turned away.

"Let's put it another way," he said, tired of the doctor's prevarication. "What are his chances?"

"Chances?" Dr Joel E Warner came away from the window overlooking slick hospital grounds and the misted flanks of the Eildons now barely discernible through the torrential rain. "Apart from maintaining your brother's general status, direct treatment of anoxic coma is limited. Only when he becomes medically stable can we start thinking about his chances and capacity to recover."

"Tell me something positive," Duncan said.

Warner melted into the swivel chair behind his desk, leant back and sighed. Fatigue circled his eyes like savages on horseback, his diction bowed beneath words he could barely lift above the monotone. He said, "The fact that your brother does not seem to have suffered a prolonged submersion, nor delayed resuscitation, and the fact that we detected

minor electrical activity of his heart when he was admitted, all could be interpreted as positive. However we don't know how long he spent in his condition before help arrived."

"You mean he'll be a vegetable if he ever comes out of the coma?"

"The term Persistent Vegetative State was coined to describe a patient's condition in which vegetative or anatomic functions such as breathing and digestion could persist indefinitely in the absence of awareness. Unfortunately 'vegetative' has been misconstrued to mean 'vegetable', and 'persistent' to mean hopeless and untreatable. Neither of which apply to your brother."

"So he's not brain dead?"

"Consider brain death as the irreversible cessation of all brain activity. Euan's EEG scan this morning showed cortical activity, prognostically a positive sign that we can progress with his recovery therapy."

"But he'll never be the man he was?"

A moment's silence stretched so thin that Duncan could hear the rain rattle through thirsty summer leaves on bushes outside the window.

"Unfortunately brain tissue cells are the most susceptible to hypoxia, and in Euan's case, I would expect some major neurological impairment."

"Such as?"

"Short-term memory loss. Difficulty finding words. Disturbed vision. Incoordination. Spasticity. Abnormal movements. Partial or total paralysis. Impairment of executive functions such as reasoning and judgement, impulsivity, the ability to initiate and persevere."

Perseverance, Duncan thought, turning again to the observation window. It was a quality Ranal once told him he possessed in abundance. "Duncan," he'd said, trying to talk him out of joining the Marines, "you're the stubbornest wee bastard I've ever known."

In the CRU only the hands of the clock, it seemed, had moved. He could've been looking at a photograph of all the family he had left. A wheelchair-bound octogenarian with Alzheimers and a comatose brother he didn't dare imagine how he could ever live without.

"Tell me, Doctor," he said without turning from the window, "is there anything you could say I could possibly misconstrue as good news?"