PROLOGUE



The Clan moved through the undergrowth in a silent wave, tuned so finely to each other's movements that communication was barely necessary. They were clearly human but glided as effortlessly as a pack of hunting dogs, with a gait that was neither tiptoeing nor running. Not a single crunch of dry leaves or crackle of broken twigs marked the passing of their bare feet. Every minute or so, one of them would stop and cock his head, listening intently to the tales told by an alarm-calling bird, or to mark the prevailing direction of the meagre wind. They inhaled shallow breaths through their noses, drawing in scents and odours. The sense of smell is one that most humans have simply forgotten to tune, but remains plenty potent enough to track by when it's trained. Each clan member was a boy in his early teens, hair closely cropped, torso sinuous like bunched coils of hemp rope, eyes alert. They took on a loose arrowhead

formation. At their apex was a boy of commanding presence, his broad shoulders moving fluidly over his narrow waist, his eyes icy blue like a young wolf pup. He stopped with an abruptness that instantly brought his companions up short, then dropped to his knees to probe the leaf litter. The Clan crowded around him, their movements excited and agitated. The boy called Wolf brushed the leaves aside and revealed a large blocky twist of black dung, as sticky and pungent as newly slicked tar. Tiger scat, and it was fresh! The Clan practically yipped and yelped, pleading to be unleashed. Wolf nodded. They splintered, and leapt forward at a sprint.

The one known as Saker ran with an easy loping stride. It was all he could do to stop from yelling with excitement as he chased the invisible story left by the mighty predator. Saker's long bow was strapped tightly to his shoulders, but still bounced awkwardly with his biggest leaps, threatening to catch on low branches as he passed. Instead of stopping and stooping below such obstacles, he'd barely break stride, but drop to the ground and bound effortlessly like a macaque dashing between trees. He stopped dead. Ahead in a thicket something was out of place. Light pierced through the trees creating slats of orange and white brightness and black shadow . . . in such coloured light, the striped cat was almost invisible. Almost. Its amber eyes gave it away, staring intently at Saker, watching his every move. Gently, fluidly, trying not to breathe, Saker took the bow from his back. It was an ash longbow, much like

medieval marksmen once used, but it was certainly not a primitive tool. Saker knew it could take down a deer at fifty paces, and the tiger was much closer. He notched an arrow into the string and drew the fletches back, the bowstring grazing his cheek. As he pointed the arrowhead at his mark, the tiger hissed with fury, flattened its ears against its head and sprang. The undergrowth yielded a massive form, one which moved with explosive and irresistible power, mouth open, vast canine teeth yellow against the dark of its gullet. Saker didn't flinch. He unleashed the arrow, and the tiger fell. Heart thumping, Saker released his pent up breath, levelled his bow with a new arrow already held in trembling fingers, and moved forward cautiously. There is nothing more dangerous than a wounded and cornered predator. He soon saw that there was no danger. The tiger lay on its side, breathing with shallow fast breaths. The arrow shaft protruded from its chest, and with every heave of its breast, a glug of blood flooded from the entry wound. Its eyes weren't shut yet, but soon would be. Saker crept closer, drawing his knife to finish the majestic beast off. It needed to be clinical so the coat wouldn't be damaged. As he knelt, he inhaled the musky pungent smell of big beast, and the tiger looked up at him with golden eyes. It almost seemed to be pleading, imploring. Saker lifted his knife, then stiffened. There was something else in the bushes. Creeping over the tigress, he moved the brush aside. Before him were two small, mewing cubs, their eyes barely open, shrinking into the cover and

trying to make themselves invisible. It was as if he had been punched in the chest. Something was very, very wrong with this. Saker shook his head. They were another prize, part of the contract. He had done well.

But no . . . clouds were clearing in his brain . . . how could this be right? The animal before him was one of the brethren, a near-sacred beast. He looked down at her heaving flanks. The arrow wound was fatal, but it would not be swift. The thought of her suffering was overwhelming. Gritting his teeth, he gripped the handle of his blade and lifted it high.



CHAPTER ONE



He came to as if someone had just thrown a bucket of ice water in his face, gasping for breath, shocked into a sudden brilliant consciousness. Nostrils filled with the heavy smell of dead wet leaves, he lifted his head to see dense trees forming a cavern around him. Slightly muffled by the trees and away in the distance was the sound of excited barking dogs, following a scent, drawing closer. His combat trousers and sodden cotton tunic were drenched with sweat, and . . . was that blood? Yes, it was, thick blood almost black around his stomach, but he felt no pain. Perhaps it wasn't his blood? His head hurt though, with a fierce sharp pain that focused his concentration. He looked down and studied his hands. They belonged to a boy in his early teens, with sparse fine black hair on the forearms, and damp earth rammed deep beneath the fingernails. The hands looked strong though, with calloused knuckles and prominent veins, the hallmarks

of hard work. He ran his fingers through his hair, probed the swollen part of his skull, and wincing, looked at his hand again. His palm was red with fresh blood, and this time he was certain it was his own. Instantaneously he found himself relaying a status report. "Impact trauma, I was probably struck with a blunt instrument, there's swelling and a thumb-length open wound, moderate danger of internal bleeding and concussion." Head wounds always bleed profusely he told himself, and in this humid forest he would have to be very careful about infection. The gash would certainly have to be cleaned and stitched.

That could wait, though, while he tried to work out what the hell was going on. He'd been taught that it's quite common to wake up in an unfamiliar place after a deep sleep or perhaps a general anaesthetic and not know where you are for a few seconds. This sensation quickly disappears as the brain catches up, and the recent past comes rushing back. But this wasn't what was happening. And worse, not only did he have no idea where he was, or how he came to be there, he had no clear memories at all. There was just a wispy notion of slats of light playing orange, black and white on the forest floor, and a pungent scent, lingering in his nostrils. What was his name? Not even that sprang to his lips. But then his mind played back a short piece of film, tall boys with cropped hair, stripped to the waist to show their dangerous-looking physiques, faces cruel, lips curled in snarls. "Saker, Saker," they chanted. A sudden recollection. He reached down to his

ankle and pulled up his left trouser leg. There on his calf was a bite mark, no blood but still white, and inflicted by blunt teeth. Below it, above his ankle, was a simple monochrome tattoo, the head of a hook-beaked bird of prey, the huge eye dark and intimidating. A saker falcon. Yes! Saker was his name; that at least made sense. The distant barking of the dogs shook him out of this small triumph. With sudden clarity he knew they were tracking him, and they were getting closer. He listened intently for a few seconds. "Four dogs, two German Shepherds, a Dobermann, and . . . one more, I'm not sure . . ." He guessed from the way the calls penetrated the undergrowth that they were just over a kilometre away. The dogs would be coursing, noses close to the ground to suck on the trail he'd left behind, able to pick up the tiniest of scents with a sense of smell many thousand times more potent than that of a human. Drenched with sweat and blood, he would make ludicrously easy tracking fodder. Quickly calculating how distant the barks seemed, he worked out that they would be here in under six minutes.

Something primal in the back of his brain was telling him to run.

As Saker got to his feet and his perspective changed, he realised that he was not alone. Lying face-down in the leaf litter was a man, big, over six feet tall and built like a nightclub doorman, with no neck to speak of and huge shoulders. He was dressed in black combat fatigues from head to toe, with a bullet-proof vest over the top.

"Private security . . ." Some macho tough nut who did a lot of weights, ate too many burgers and loved looking mean in his uniform. Potentially dangerous, no reason to risk waking him . . . but then curiosity overcame common sense, and Saker grabbed one of the black-clad meaty shoulders, and rolled the figure onto his back. He was unconscious, and the bruising round his throat and his contorted face made it clear that he had been choked. Saker had another flash of memory, and saw the big man staggering around, a berserk figure riding his shoulders, wrists locked around the massive throat, crushing the arteries that feed blood to the brain and cutting off the windpipe at the same time. The frenzied figure was pushing down with his legs onto the big man's shoulders, using his whole body to get extra leverage. Clawing at his throat in desperation as he started to black out, the man sank his teeth into the calf muscle of his tormentor. In Saker's mental flashback, the view flew from the struggling security guard, and zoomed up to his shoulders and in on the face of his assailant. Everything came in to focus. Saker was looking at his own face, twisted with effort and fear. Well, that explained the bite mark on his leg. As the big man dropped, he'd taken Saker with him. Their combined weight had meant that they'd come down like a felled oak tree. The gash in his forehead must have been caused by him clattering into a rock that was sticking up out of the leaves. He was lucky to have got away with just a cut. Looking down at his hands again, Saker's head began to

spin; the security guard's meaty paws were twice the size of his.

"How could I possibly have overpowered this big lump?" He was suddenly frightened, and shivered despite the humidity. What was he doing here all alone, fighting a big man in this foreign forest? He cocked his head to one side, and stood perfectly still. The normal sounds of the forest had silenced, the birds had stopped singing as they sensed the approaching dogs. A few hundred metres off, a short whistle repeated three times; a spotted deer's alarm call. The deer might as well have been shouting, "They're coming for you".

There was no time to search the body for further clues. Saker turned away from the noise of the baying dogs and ran.