

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED

BRIAN LANCASTER

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TWENTY-FOUR

UNCLE

"I know you," I say, which seems an oddly understated response, given the memories flooding back. This man guided me during my early years, honing my fitness, combat skills, and intellectual development. He also helped to evolve my psychological abilities, which included teaching me about male intimacy and how a young boy can recognise signals of attraction and capitalise on an adult's illicit desires, which render the target open and vulnerable. He also taught me to perfect innocence and ignorance while listening carefully, memorising any discussions, anything spoken in the company of others, and any little secret that could lead to a mark's undoing.

"You should do. We spent eleven fine years together, perfecting your upbringing. You cannot even begin to fathom how perplexed I was when reports of your accident and death came in. My star pupil. On whom I lavished my complete focus and attention."

Even if his appearance has changed with age, the familiarity of his voice is unmistakable.

"Okay, old man," comes Coleman's voice behind me. "I

did what you asked. I brought him to you. What do you want me to do now?"

"You could try to shoot him," the man chuckles. There is a scar running down his face from the corner of his left eye to his jawbone that I don't remember. "But I am guessing that if you check your firearm, you'll find the bullets have been removed. Am I right, Five?"

He is. Romano's casual dismissal of Coleman attending the briefing and his parting words cemented my suspicions. While Coleman slept last night, I searched his car for evidence, including bugs, trackers and weapons, when I found the pistol stuffed into the toolbox. Behind me, I hear Coleman checking the magazine and cursing.

"What else, then?" he asks.

"There is nothing you can do. Even without a weapon—and I doubt Five has come unarmed—you would last no longer than a few seconds. Go outside and wait for me by the water tower."

"What about you?" asks Coleman.

"I will be fine," he says, his voice warm and familiar. "We're old friends. Go now. You have kept your part of the bargain. I will keep mine."

After a brief hesitation, I hear the echo of Coleman's footsteps as he leaves the hut. The man watches on, too. I could use this moment to neutralise him, but he is old, weak, and poses no apparent threat. Moreover, I have an innate sense that he should be protected rather than harmed.

As soon as we are alone, he shuffles forward and reaches out two fingers to prod my cheek. The action is like somebody checking fruit for freshness. I do not move, do not even flinch. The gesture comes back to me, one of affection for what he called his children.

Everyone else called him M2 back then. We called him

Uncle. With other instructors, he oversaw us through optimum development drills. Running dusk until dawn marathons in the winter rain or snow, or swimming the loch, instructors monitoring us from rowing boats and batting our hands away with oars if we tried to cling to the side, only fishing us out when exhaustion threatened to drown us. These endurance drills were designed to push us to our limits and beyond. Only having lived among ordinary people do I see now how brutal and sadistic they were.

"You look well, Five," he says, his hand clamping onto my shoulder.

"Gabriel. My name is Gabriel."

He scoffs at my words and drops his hand.

"You have no need of a name. You are above such mediocrity. Created from only the finest human anisogamous organisms. We guided your growth through parturition into childhood to produce the powerful weapon that you are today."

"I am a man, not a weapon."

"You are much more than either. And don't allow anybody to tell you otherwise. You are the future, Five. Whether this world is ready or not. A genetically perfect living organism farmed in a laboratory rather than born of a womb. Carefully cultivated with any potential genetic flaws eliminated. Imagine a whole legion of Knights, biologically superior and detached from weak emotions. Free from any bonds with inferior progenitors and their petty needs. You would be unstoppable, untouchable—"

"Disposable."

My interruption pulls his old eyes to mine, and he sighs sadly.

"All soldiers conscripted to defend their countries are, in essence, disposable, are they not? I forget you went to see

one of our number. Were you impressed? I would tell you to pay no heed to the whimperings of a vain, weak-willed old man, but you must make up your own mind. It did not take me long to grasp that Dr Leblanc is more concerned about his reputation than in making history."

I am unsure if he wants me to reply, so I say nothing.

"The reality is the Knight programme succeeded beyond anyone's expectation. At six years old, one of your company could hold her breath underwater for almost half an hour, over five minutes longer than the longest on record. Another could run faster than any human who had ever lived. Not a single one of you fell ill in all the time you were here. Major conflicts, terror attacks and other threats to the free world were averted because of your deployment and intervention. But success often breeds complacency."

He turns from me and hobbles a few paces to the right, using his cane to tap at a broken tile.

"One of the generals referred to you as the new master race, an expression that stuck. Unfortunately, those kinds of labels frighten people. What also did not help was me voicing my secondary concept, to use Britain as a future testing ground once the ectogenesis process had been perfected. A step too far, they told me. But one day somebody will take on the mantle. Because if you remove the ability for humans to procreate naturally and instead populate by design instead of choice, at the same time controlling quality and numbers using birthing centres, most of the world's problems of overcrowding, crime and conflict could eventually be resolved."

He stops speaking, and I wonder if he wants my verdict. I know Albert would be horrified at his words. Life would be reduced to a production line with babies as the commod-

ity. Moreover, whoever controlled the process would hold absolute power.

"What do you want with me?" I ask instead.

He moves further away until he reaches one of the overturned filing cabinets. Lifting his cane, he strikes the side with the metal end and stills as the tinny crack reverberates throughout the building.

"Look at this place. This is what happens when followers lose the faith. If I were to ask, would you be willing to come with me?"

"Where?"

"To start again. To perfect what we started in a place that has less restrictions."

"No."

Backing further away, he reaches the far wall, swings the cane and smashes one of the windows. For a moment, he stares outside, lost in thought, before turning back to me.

"As I thought. But I felt it only fair to give you the opportunity. I am sure you can tell that I do not have much time remaining. And I need to tie up loose ends before I depart this earth. I'm afraid that does include you, Five. Your time is also coming to an end. Because I cannot trust that you will not disclose what you are beginning to remember."

Breaking a window has opened the room to exterior sounds, and I am sure I can hear the whine of helicopter blades somewhere in the distance. But the noise is quickly drowned out by heavy boots on concrete as a team of ten black-clad, black-helmeted and armed soldiers appear from rooms within the building. Once in position, they form a semi-circle around me and aim their assault rifles at my chest.

"I am doing what I must to protect my legacy," he says,

the warmth gone and his voice carrying an edge of steel. "Because I do not want to be vilified posthumously—like one of those sordid celebrities—by this new and loathsome breed of sensation-seeking media columnists who love nothing more than to spread salacious gossip and speculation to increase their own popularity. They could never begin to grasp the pioneering research of my life's work, the inherent risks and sacrifices I have had to make. I am also doing this because I believe I have found someone visionary—from a country whose governance is less overbearing—who will carry on my crusade, a man who has already done pioneering work in the field of human cloning. Before we were closed down, I made sure to collect samples from all of my Knights. All except one. But now here you are, and my collection is complete. Step forward, Knight Five, and roll up your sleeve."

One of the guards lowers his weapon and approaches the man. A cuboid compartment of black nylon is secured to the person's front. The man—I think it is a man—rips open a velcro flap to reveal a small steel chest and other items contained neatly inside. The old man plucks out a hypodermic needle. I am distantly horrified when I look down and find I am not only standing in front of him but have rolled up my sleeve as instructed. I watch without flinching as he pulls on surgical gloves, then holds my arm and draws blood.

"Finally. A full set. Now take three steps back, Knight Five," he says, holding a small tube of scarlet liquid up to the light. "Nine samples, all eight Knights and my own. The surrogates will need guidance and leadership. Written and video recorded notes will educate my successor once I am no longer able to do so. I think that might be his people now."

As he has been speaking, and with the soldiers standing silently by, the pulse and unusual thrum of a helicopter has grown louder, and I notice a couple of heads jerk to the hole in the roof. On a nod from one of their number, two march across the floor to check. As they move, I look about me to judge my options when I notice smoking cans roll silently in from another corridor at the end of the hut.

I drop to the floor as two muffled explosions rock the air, and thick smoke fills the space. Gunshots are fired close to where I crouch. The punch of a bullet hits me in the right shoulder and throws me backwards. Pain brings sudden lucidity, and I roll onto my side as a red mist lowers. Even though visibility is minimal and getting worse, I drag myself over to an overturned stainless steel shelf and pull the revolver from my waistband with my left hand. Smoke has not completely covered the floor, and I look for legs before raising my gun and firing off a shot. A body drops to the ground. Multiple random shots are fired in return until barked orders from someone I assume to be the troop leader have them holding fire and ordering them to retreat. By now, the room is entirely blanketed in cloying dark fog. The sound of what I believe to be a single helicopter grows louder and closer. Beneath the sound of soldiers' boots moving out and staccato commands from the leader, I hear Coleman's lowered voice.

"Gabriel. Over here."

I don't hesitate. Using my good hand and on my knees, I crawl towards his voice, keeping my head low. He is crouching at the far end of the room where the smoke is less thick. As I reach him, his eyes widen when he sees my injury. I notice blood already dripping from the fingers of one hand.

"Shit. You're hit."

"It's not too bad."

That isn't strictly true. I'm losing too much blood.

"I don't suppose you have anything in your bag to tie around the wound? Help slow the bleeding?"

He yanks off his small backpack and unzips the top. Inside, he has a thin micro towel, the kind I use to dry myself after swimming. Coleman doesn't hesitate, pulling out a box cutter and cutting the towel into strips. Following my instruction, he pours bottled water onto the wound and then allows me to bunch cloth there to staunch the blood flow. I press firmly with my good arm despite the pain. I am about to instruct him to tie another binding around the wound when he pulls out a large roll of gaffer tape. Nodding my approval, I allow him to secure the injury tightly, wrapping strip after strip around my upper arm while I fight off unconsciousness.

"I'm sorry I had to spout that bull—" he begins.

"You don't need to explain. I knew what you were doing. Even before your verbals cues—placing the villa in Sicily and referring to Albert as a fag—it's usually a good idea to switch off the safety when you're intending to fire a gun. He was there in the shadows all the time, wasn't he? That was for his benefit. Romano asked me to pay attention."

"Romano called me last night. I wanted to let you in but he said no. He said you would know what to do when the time came. And then he said something strange."

"Which was?"

"He said the map provider will aid him." Coleman is still partly shrouded in fog, but I see him shrug. "You know, I think we might have to sit this one out. I'm hoping that helicopter is Romano come with back-up."

"No, I think that's here for him. We need to get out of this hut. We're easy marks stuck inside. And the fog is

already beginning to thin. Thank goodness you brought those smoke canisters."

"I didn't bring—"

Two loud explosions outside the front of the hut rock the ground and rattle the windows. Rapid gunfire sounds follow, and muffled cries fill the air.

"Stay behind me and keep low," I tell Coleman and begin to crawl down the corridor towards an open doorway. My right hand is numb and useless, and I keep the gun in my left. Ahead is another entryway into the building, not the door we came through. Smoke is flowing out of the exit, obscuring my view, but shadows appear to be moving outside erratically. One of the passing soldiers spots me and raises his weapon. Before he can fire off a single shot, I hear a distant crack of a rifle, and he is thrown backwards onto the ground. There is only one person I know who can shoot as accurately. I look to the highest point, the water tower, where I am reasonably sure Mrs Bellacci is hidden.

Four black-clad bodies are sprawled lifeless on the ground. Another soldier is unarmed and being tackled in hand-to-hand combat by Lorenzo. Two flank the old man as he shuffles to an open area with a landing pad. What has descended is not a helicopter but a six-seater passenger drone, futuristic and like nothing I have ever seen. Only now do I realise how the soldiers came here when I spot three AWD-armoured jeeps parked up at the rear of the hut. I knew there were other entrances into the grounds, but the old man would naturally know them better than anyone. And then my gaze is drawn to the two soldiers crouching behind the remains of a brick wall, one who has readied a portable shoulder-launched weapon aimed at the water tower. They are shielded from Mrs Bellacci's line of fire.

"Coleman," I say, rising to my feet. "Kneel down in front of me. And cover your ears."

Coleman looks horrified. If not for the urgency, the moment might even be comical.

"Quickly. I need your back for support. To steady my left hand when I fire."

He does what I ask and freezes. I kneel, too, the pack on his back providing the perfect support. I take a moment to check my aim and then fire off three shots. I hit the soldier holding the launcher in the neck, knocking him against the wall. I push Coleman to the ground when the other turns in our direction and fires off a few rounds. Fortunately for us, Lorenzo has neutralised his opponent and, seeing what is happening, manages to pluck a gun from the ground and take him out with a single shot.

When I look around, the loaded drone is already airborne and heading out of the grounds. Within minutes, they will be lost behind one of the low hills surrounding the camp.

Lorenzo runs over to me and is about to hug me when he sees my arm. Instead, he places his hands on either side of my head, pulls me in and kisses me fully on the lips.

"Romano is ten minutes' away. What did he want, this old person?"

"My DNA. He has the other Knights, but wanted mine to complete the set."

"What for?"

"To clone us."

"To clone you?" Lorenzo's gaze swings to the drone, and he utters an expletive.

"He is gone, Lorenzo. The best we can do is to alert Romano—"

"No! Mrs Bellacci can shoot them down."

"Drones operate by battery. There is no fuel tank to hit. The best she could hope for is to take out one or two of the passengers."

He is already turning from me.

"You do not have my imagination, Gabriel." He turns to a dazed Coleman and holds out his hands. "I need your backpack."

Coleman strips the bag from his shoulders without hesitation and hands it over. Lorenzo empties the contents, then runs over to the bodies of the two soldiers and scoops up the remaining launcher projectiles. Once the pack is in place, he grabs the portable rocket launcher and heads towards the tower.

When I turn to check on Coleman, he is mesmerised as Lorenzo scales the narrow ladder to the top of the water tower like a monkey being chased into a tree.

"What the fuck," mutters Coleman. "Remind me that I don't ever want to get on that young man's wrong side."

"You do not, Coleman. Believe me. You really do not."

Mrs Bellacci's head appears when he reaches the top, and after a few brief words, she takes the launcher from him. As Lorenzo clambers over and disappears onto the roof, I grab Coleman's arm and lead him away. I am not sure if it is the sense of danger, but my heart is racing.

"What's the problem?"

"We need to move from this hut. M2 taught me to leave no evidence or traces of what happened once a job is done. And that usually entailed razing a building to the ground. He may well have planted explosives and planned to do the same here now that he's out of harm's way."

We head to a raised spot across the grounds overlooking the landing pad where the drone took off. As I look to the

top of the tower, my eyes blur, a moment of double vision. Confused, I rest a steadying hand on Coleman's shoulder.

"Are you okay, Gabriel? You've turned ghostly white."

Only then, as I watch the trail of a rocket sear the sky, do I realise the dreadful truth. Somewhere around me, I hear an explosion—perhaps the hut or maybe the drone—but my concentration is focused internally because I need to articulate something before it is too late.

"Coleman," I say, grabbing at his sleeve. I feel a toxin working inside me. "I am losing consciousness. Something on the gloves? Will be traces on my wrist. Must tell Romano. He will know what...."

My consciousness folds and I slip into darkness.

Visions surface. Running barefoot up a snowy hill, my feet numb from the cold. *Stay with me*. Fighting to remain afloat amid blazing flotsam in the middle of a calm, cerulean sea. *Gabriel*. The sour smell of sweat from a morbidly obese man, his heavy arm slung around my shoulders. *He's coming*. Screeching metal, broken glass, people and luggage tossed around like clothes in a washing machine as the train compartment tumbles down an embankment. *My love*. Skipping away from a black limousine to a waiting jeep and not even flinching as, behind me, the luxury vehicle explodes in a ball of fire.

Lorenzo's frightened eyes stare down at me. Or is this real? The noise inside this box where I'm laid out is deafening. I can barely hear Lorenzo's shouted words.

"Romano is here. Try to stay conscious, my love."

He places a hand on my cheek. *My love*. The words are soothing and also bolstering. No matter how hard I try, though, I slide back into the dark. Albert is there this time. We are sitting next to each other propped up against the headboard on top of his bed covers, the way we used to. He

is typing on his phone while I am struggling through the Dickens compendium he gave me. With his usual fond smile, he shows me his screen. He has been using our code and tells me to spell out the letters. I tell him I don't have the cypher to hand. He insists that I dig deep and try to remember. I study the characters and scour my memory.



FIGHT.

The second line is shorter and easier to decode.



LIVE.