



Dead Man's Chest

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Prologue

This was not how the day was supposed to turn out, thought Eddie, as he chewed his fingernails and watched the paramedics at work.

It was supposed to have been an easy day. Take the van out to Woodlands; see the old guy they gave a quote to last week; load up some crates of books and take them to Oppenheim's down by the university.

Eddie had just been bending to close the last crate when Mr Dixon had come back into the room with his cheque. See? He was even a good payer! Plus, the guy dressed like he was out of some British show on PBS where they all wore yellow vests, and flowers in their lapels. Mr Dixon had a carnation today. But Eddie had thought he looked different from last week. Not as cheerful; his face looked drawn and pale, and he was breathing funny, in little gasps.

He'd still been fiddling with that little wooden box, though. He'd been doing that last week, too. Sort of twiddling it between his hands, all the time they were there. He'd stopped doing that for a moment and handed the cheque over to Eddie.

"There you are, Edward. Hope that's all in order. Thank you for being so prompt."

Eddie had peered at the cheque, trying to decipher the flowery script to make sure they didn't have a dud. As he did so, it was like Mr Dixon had lost control of the little box, because all of a sudden it bounced onto the table at the edge of Eddie's vision, and then into the still-open crate.

"Mr Dixon," he'd said, pointing, "you've dropped your..."

And then he had looked up to see Dixon, with ashen face and blue lips, sinking to his knees, clutching his chest. Forty minutes later, he was still staring at the old guy on the floor. The paramedics' equipment was all around, but their work was over.

"Sorry, guys," said one. "He's gone. Massive heart attack, I would say. He didn't have a chance."

"It's okay," said Eddie, still feeling vaguely upset by it all. "We weren't related." Paulie, always the more go-getting out of the two of them, elbowed him in the ribs.

"You need us anymore?" Paulie asked the paramedics.

"Nope. You've given us your details. We'll do the formalities with the cops and get him into General shortly."

Paulie briskly flipped the lid of the final crate which was lying near the body, picked it up and shoved it at Eddie, pushing him towards the door.

"Paulie!" protested his brother, "Don't we oughta stay?"

"No, we don't," muttered Paulie, hustling Eddie towards the van. "We get this load dropped off, and then we get straight to the bank to cash that cheque. And we don't tell Oppenheim nuthin', either. Otherwise this job is going down the toilet!"

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Part 1

Jim Ellison had thought he'd known Cascade until he'd been dragged on a Sandburg-style book-hunt. Specifically, a book-hunt around the university quarter and the network of small streets between the main campus and the research buildings, which wasn't an area he'd had much cause to explore in the past. But an enthusiastic bookworm like Blair Sandburg of course knew all the small second-hand bookstores that were squirrelled away there, and the man was nothing if not keen to share his discoveries.

It was his own fault, Jim concluded wearily, as Blair all but dragged him by the hand into the fourth establishment that afternoon. He'd confessed to being at a loose end. After all, there was only so much cleaning of the Loft even *he* could find to do, all their errands were up to date and, for once, the Major Crime department was experiencing something of a slump in business. For all Simon Banks' dread warning that it was *'the calm before the storm, you mark my words, Jim!'*, having a moment or two where they weren't being rushed off their feet

was something to savour. In lieu of a trip out of town, an easy Friday afternoon helping Blair with the kind of retail therapy he liked the best (after Blum's deli and that Asian supermarket on Third) was a pleasant jaunt; a light interval before getting some take-out and enjoying the Clint Eastwood season on Channel 9.

Anyway, that's what he'd thought. Three hours earlier.

The thing was (as he had to admit he had already known, so there was no point in grouching) once Blair got wound up in the wares on offer, it was very hard to tear him away. Initially, Jim had found the process quite entertaining, and he'd contentedly thumbed through ancient sports annuals and last-century fishing monographs while he waited for his friend. But that was before he realised how much of a route march Sandburg intended to drag him on.

Blair was pretty disciplined about it; Jim had to give him that. He pored over everything with an intensity that left him fairly unresponsive to Jim's attempts to hurry things along, and all afternoon had stuck rigorously to his budget, which was in fact pretty meagre. But, as his partner had explained, one had to make regular visits to the bookstores in the area. They were always taking in new deliveries of books of varying ages and conditions – in many cases because the most recent owners had passed away and their executors were taking the easy option and just selling the deceased's library on to the bookstore owner.

"They're ragbags, Jim," Blair had explained, his eyes shining. "Usually ninety-nine per cent is crap. But now and again, you find a jewel amongst them!" And Jim had found himself smiling involuntarily at his friend's obvious enthusiasm.

"Like a dusty old copy of Burton on Sentinels?" he teased.

"Yeah! Exactly! Maybe better than that, even – a publication from a century or more ago that's never been noted in the official records. Just think, a new source of information, just waiting there to be discovered!"

Jim couldn't begrudge him the excitement. At least, he couldn't at two-thirty. By five-fifteen, things were different. By then, there was a small carrier bag holding a number of obscure academic texts, and he could see Blair mentally totting-up his remaining dollars and cents as they turned another corner and reached 'Oppenheim's Emporium'. Jim had been about to express the hope that they'd already seen enough dusty stacks for the afternoon – this was Store Number Four, after all - when Blair's shining eyes cut him short.

"We gotta go in here, Jim! I've saved the best till last. Mr Oppenheim always has the good stuff. You just have to really look for it!"

And so Jim had sighed, and allowed himself to be led through the narrow doorway into the dim interior. It being near the end of the trading day, they were the only customers in the store. The elderly Mr Oppenheim gave Blair a kind smile.

"Ah, Blair, my boy! Good to see you! It's been a while."

Blair shook the old man's hand with clear affection.

"I'm dividing my time now, Mr Oppenheim. I work a lot at the Police Department, doing some research. This is my partner at the PD, Detective Ellison."

Jim shook hands in turn and, with a resigned sigh, settled into a rickety armchair and watched Blair immerse himself in the piles of books that currently surrounded Mr Oppenheim's desk.

"I've just had a delivery," Mr Oppenheim explained to Jim, gesturing ruefully at the amassed paper. "A very acquisitive gentleman from out Woodlands way. He's a dealer in antiques - furniture, I believe, and very highly regarded - but I had no idea he's such a collector of books from the last century. Some even earlier! He wanted to clear out part of his large library so he's sold these to me as a job lot. I'm sure there will be some treasures amongst them, but I've had no time to sift them out so far."

"Treasures?" queried Jim, by way of small-talk. He had liked the old man immediately, and could see why Blair was drawn to his store.

"Oh, you know, first editions, obscure and ancient texts... I'm sure Blair has told you of the sheer excitement of finding something rare."

"He certainly has," replied Jim ruefully. "At great length." Mr Oppenheim chuckled, but Blair remained oblivious to the barb. He was already deep in the first pile, and suddenly straightened up with a whoop.

"Wow! A Kingsley-Grange! First edition!" He gave it a reverent look and put it to one side.

"Isn't that a treasure, then, Sandburg?" asked Jim, hopefully. Blair gave him a distracted smile.

"Well, of course. But I've got one already, albeit second edition. You know, there are so many weird things here. It's amazing! European titles, stuff in Spanish that will be from South and Central America, I think. Really old bindings... I can even see some hand-written manuscripts at the bottom of that pile over there."

"Why don't you dig into that, then," suggested Mr Oppenheim. "It may be more fun. I think this lot here are mainly standard teaching texts from the 1890s."

And so it was that Blair got immersed for the next half-hour, occasionally coming up for air to exclaim things like "Jim, will you just look at this!" or "Jim, the Anthro department would just love this one" until even Mr Oppenheim was looking at his watch.

"Blair, it's six pm...." he began. Blair straightened up.

"Oh yeah, Mr Oppenheim, I guess you want to get home." *He's not the only one*, thought Jim, but Blair was still talking. "We could call back tomorrow, maybe, and help you more with the cataloguing?"

Jim sat bolt upright.

"Now, just a minute, Sandburg..." he hissed. But Mr Oppenheim was shaking his head.

"You are very kind, boys, but I am out of town tomorrow and for the rest of the weekend. My great-nephew's christening over in Wenatchee. But next week..."

"I'll call in on Tuesday," said Blair, shooting Jim an amused glance. "I expect Jim will be tied up in PD stuff."

"Yeah, I certainly expect to be," agreed Jim, with alacrity.

"In the meantime," continued Blair, "I'd really like to buy this one. If I can afford it, that is."

He held up a weighty, leather-bound volume, large-scale and clearly very old, with its cover heavily tooled in a geometric pattern. The yellowing pages within were held together with a metal clasp.

"What is it, Chief?" asked Jim, hauling himself out of the chair. "It looks like something out of Edgar Allen Poe."

"Ah," exclaimed Mr Oppenheim, "I noticed that earlier. I thought you might well be interested in it!"

"It's an author I've never heard of," replied Blair in a wondering tone. "Someone called Matthias Laurenson. *'Native Peoples and Savage Tribes of the Great American Forest.'* Basically covering what's now Guyana and Suriname, from the maps inside. But look how old it is! Early part of the 19th century, very early – 1807. I didn't know anyone had written this kind of study then."

"I should be delighted to sell it to you, Blair. I believe it could have some considerable value, given the age and the charming illustrations. For you, shall we say a hundred and fifty dollars?"

Jim saw Blair's face fall.

"Yeah, of course something like this is going to be valuable," sighed Blair. "I mean, I guess a hundred and fifty is pretty much on the low side, Mr Oppenheim." Jim could see that he meant it. He recalled some of the titles they'd pored over during that afternoon; a book like this could command well into the hundreds of dollars, so Mr Oppenheim was trying to do Blair a favour. But Jim also knew that the price was far too high for Blair's self-imposed budget. He sighed.

"Let me loan you the balance, Chief." Blair looked up, surprised and a little embarrassed, but pleasure won out.

"Jim, thank you! That would be wonderful! If you're sure, I mean..." Jim gave him a wry look and turned to Mr Oppenheim.

"If you can take a credit card, sir? I don't have that amount of cash on me, right now."

Mr Oppenheim was speedy in his production of an antiquated card-swipe machine.

"Certainly, Detective! All forms of payment are welcome here, I can assure you!" And, as Jim completed the formalities, Mr Oppenheim turned back to Blair with a small box in his hand.

"And here is something to thank you for your help today and, of course, your custom over many years, Blair."

Blair put down his book and took the box with unfeigned interest. Jim peered over his friend's shoulder to see. The box was about three inches square; there was no sign of a lock or a lid. All the sides were covered with an intricate pattern of marquetry in different coloured woods.

"It's beautiful, Mr Oppenheim," breathed Blair. "I would guess it's Indonesian, but I've no idea of its age. A puzzle-box?"

"I believe so," answered the old man, as Jim took it himself and turned it over in his hands. "I've not tried to open it; indeed I wouldn't know where to start. But it might give you some entertainment. It arrived with this latest delivery of books, just lying at the top of one of the crates. An oversight, I assume, but a job lot is a job lot, and I am a bookseller, not a dealer in curios, so...."

"Thank you, sir," said Jim. "This may even be complicated enough to keep Sandburg quiet for days."

They left Mr Oppenheim in his store, where he said he wanted to do an hour or so of accounts and paperwork before he left for the weekend. Blair repeated his promise to be back on the coming Tuesday, and then hurried after Jim, who was striding ahead back to the truck, tossing the little box to and fro in his hands as he walked.

"Careful with that, man! You could drop it!"

Jim turned his head to give a look of disdain, and tossed the box back to Blair, who caught it with a fumble, and put it in his carrier bag.

"Thanks again for the loan, Jim."

"Just add it to your ever-expanding tab, Chief," returned Jim, who had already decided privately on the book being part of Blair's next Christmas present. "You can buy dinner tonight. And as it's *'Hang 'Em High'* at seven-thirty, I think Mexican take-out is in order, don't you?"

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Part 2

Pablo's delivered just as the movie was starting, and Blair was distracted enough from his purchases for a while by the various goodies on offer, and the opening scenes of the movie. But once the food was finished and there were only moody landscape shots and brutal killings as entertainment, he got fidgety and retreated to the table again, where he laid out his

purchases. Jim could see him leafing through the big leather-bound book, and thought Blair's private expressions of wonder and fascination, as he carefully turned the rather brittle pages, were a pretty fair return for a few hours of tedium on Jim's part during the afternoon.

Not long after, Jim found his attention was far more on the table than it was on the movie – which was not, he was forced to admit, living up to his memories of seeing it years before. Now, he found it reminded him depressingly of a few of the nastier cases he'd come across in the PD. He zapped the TV with the remote, and got up to sit with Blair at the table. His friend gave him a broad smile.

"This book is amazing, Jim! What a find! Just look at these illustrations!" He turned the open book round so that Jim could get a better look. The colours seemed to have barely faded over time, and Jim gazed in genuine wonder at vibrant depictions of the local population, the various tribes clearly differentiated by their dress and ornamentation.

"This guy, Laurensen; he was there with the British in the 1790s, and into the 1800s," continued Blair. "A civil servant, he says, but boy, was he a real anthropologist! His study is meticulous – very detailed - and it looks like he did the paintings himself, so they should be pretty accurate. So far, I can work out descriptions of at least the Machushi and Patamona groups, and the Arawak, too, from what I know of the customs today. You know, this book is a real treasure-trove of data about these earlier people."

He pushed it over to Jim, who turned a few more pages, entranced by the illustrations, but also very aware that Blair was watching over him like a proud professor supervising his favourite student. Jim raised an eyebrow.

"Any Sentinels so far, Chief?" He meant it as a good-natured barb, but Blair's face clouded immediately, and Jim felt guilty all of a sudden.

"Ah, no. Not so far, I admit. But there's almost three hundred pages of text here! I've only skimmed it so far."

"Not everyone may have been as observant as Burton," replied Jim, feeling obliged to lift Blair's spirits. "And if there's anything here, I'm sure you'll find it."

Blair had picked up the puzzle-box again, and was absently playing with it, twisting the sections this way and that, though without any clear strategy. His eyes looked troubled.

"Yeah, I know. It's just that it would be great to find some more studies that corroborate Burton, and to have first-hand accounts that Sentinels existed within other cultures as well. Especially from that era, and those early explorers – the first people to have met these remote communities."

"Never say never, Chief," said Jim firmly, smoothing the pages down gently as he read. "You know, I'd like to read it myself; see if there's anything that might parallel Chopec customs." *And just to enjoy the process*, he thought to himself. It was rare that he touched paper as old

as this, and it was interesting to feel the texture, to guess at its constituent elements – here he would guess fabric. And then of course there was the workmanship in the leather cover.

Now that was something else. That it was top-quality hide was apparent to his heightened sense of touch, even after almost two centuries. He turned to the endpapers and looked at the binding, noting where a craftsman had cut and stitched. Oh, and had made a mistake, or there had been damage, because there was re-stitching down one side, and in nothing like the original workmanship. Blair sensed his interest.

"Whatcha got, Jim?"

"Look at this." Jim turned the book around again. "See where that's been opened and then sewn up again? Not very well, either. And in fact...."

Blair's eyes widened as Jim ran his hands over the back cover of the book.

"There's a thicker part here. Not much, but it's not the same size as the book, and there's no corresponding bump on the outer cover. It feels like something's been inserted behind the leather."

"Hidden?" asked Blair, slightly breathless.

"Maybe. Wanna take a look?"

Blair leapt up to scabble in a kitchen drawer and handed Jim one of the slim, sharp knives they used for fish-filleting. Then he hung over Jim's shoulder as Jim began to carefully unpick the rough secondary stitching.

"Do you think it's been done recently?" asked Blair. Jim shook his head, still concentrating on the stitches.

"Not from the feel of the thread," he replied. "I wouldn't have said there was a lot of difference between this bit and the rest of the book. But it's clearly been done by another hand."

The last fragment of the stitches came free. Jim used the tip of the blade to prise the board and leather apart, and peered in to the opening he had made.

"Well?" said Blair impatiently. Jim could sense him practically vibrating with curiosity.

Jim put down the knife and tipped the book upside down. Something the size of an old-style legal document, folded in thirds, slipped out. Blair reached out for it.

"It's parchment!" he exclaimed, as he opened it up carefully. The document unfolded surprisingly easily, still retaining a good deal of its natural suppleness. "And in pretty good shape. Wrapped up in the book, it's been preserved from light and air. Look, Jim! The writing is..."

They both froze for a moment as the impact of what they saw before them sank in. Drawn on the parchment in blue, red and green inks, and perhaps paint as well, was a rough shape. It was dotted with little scribbles that obviously denoted trees, mountains, rivers and stretches of open water. A tiny ship, in full sail, hovered at the mouth of the largest of those rivers, and there was a broad red line, starting at what was presumably a landing place, which ran haphazardly through the little triangular mountains on each side until it reached the largest of them all.

Written above that peak, which had been rendered white on the parchment by use of paint, now flaking, ran a flowery script: *'La Gran Montana del Carmelo'*. A red circle had been drawn on the east side of the white mountain and next to that more words, though these were written in finer script, and were harder to read.

Blair pulled a table light closer to help them see, but Jim was way ahead of him, of course. He started reading aloud:

"I, Fabian McKee, Famed Irishman and Finest Privateer of this Wide World, have discovered the Greatest Treasure known to Mankind. And as my Discovery is sought out by diverse Naughty Menne and Scoundrels, I have hid it within the Secret Cave on the Slopes of La Gran Montana, or Koma Kulshan, as the people there call it. Should the Good Lorde call me to Judgment before I travel there again, I call upon Worthy and Brave Menne to retrieve My Treasure and put it to the Good Use of all Mankind. To the Glory of Godde, this 25th Day of Aprille, Seventeen Hundred and Ninety-Seven."

Jim looked up and caught Blair's excited gaze. Then they both broke into huge grins; for a moment, each of them was seven years-old again, playing at pirates alone in his bedroom.

"A treasure map, Jim! An honest-to-God treasure map! Can you believe it?"

Jim was chuckling.

"Certainly looks like it!"

"Oh, my God," continued Blair, still lost in rapture. "We gotta go find this, Jim! Except..." - his face clouded - "...where the hell do we look on La Gran Montana? I mean, where the hell *is* that mountain, anyway?"

"Well, for a start," said Jim, pointing at some additional script further down the parchment, which appeared to be a list of numbers, "this looks like he's worked out the latitude and longitude. It should be easy to find, always supposing he had a reliable chronometer with him. And as he was such a great privateer, I guess he would have had a good clock."

Blair was still poring over the map.

"Koma Kulshan, Koma Kulshan..." he repeated, then jumped up and raced to his room, returning moments later with a battered tome.

" 'A History of the Peoples of the North West', " he said, pointing at the title on the cover as he sat down again. "*Koma Kulshan* - that name is familiar." Blair leafed through the pages, and Jim, craning to see, suddenly reached out to point at one of the maps.

"Look! The Strait of Juan de Fuca and the forests leading up to Mount Baker! That's what McKee's map is! See how the outline corresponds?"

"Wow, Jim! And now I remember why that name rang such a bell with me." He looked up with a rueful smile. "Would you believe that the *Koma* part of the name in the Lummi language means '*White Sentinel*'? Seriously. I'm not making this up. I remember noting this when I was looking for ... ah... Sentinels appearing in other cultures."

"Hmmm," grunted Jim, determined to be unimpressed. "And so what does the '*Kulshan*' bit mean?"

"Ah..." - Blair consulted the book again - "*crater*. Because it's one of the North-west volcanoes."

"Great place to hide your treasure," grumbled Jim. He picked up the map again, peering closely at the material and rubbing his thumb along the surface.

"Do you think it's a hoax?" asked Blair, a sudden note of worry in his voice. Jim shook his head.

"If it is, it's a very old one. I would put money on this parchment, and the ink and paint used, being at least as old as the book it was in."

"So it's worth going to have a look? It is, isn't it? C'mon, Jim!"

Jim sighed.

"Have you *seen* the forecast for this weekend, Sandburg?"

"Oh, come on! A little rain? This *is* the North-west, after all."

Jim managed to maintain his customary scowl for a few moments more, then broke out into a wide grin.

"Okay, okay. What the hell. I'll just drop by the PD tomorrow first thing, to check with Simon. We could be on the road by mid-morning."

"Great! And while you do that, I'm gonna call into Rainier to see what's in the records about Fabian McKee, and if Professor Eustice is around I'll see if she recognises where this little box may have come from." Blair picked up the puzzle-box again and ran his fingers over the patterned wood. "After that, it's only about three hours to Mount Baker, so..."

He stopped in mid-sentence as Jim held his hand up for silence.

What? mouthed Blair. Jim jerked his head towards the door.

"Corridor," he said quietly. He got up and moved silently to the door to look through the spyhole. Then he wrenched the door open.

A man with Oriental features stood outside, an expression of shocked surprise on his face.

"I never knocked!" he said with a fluster. Then, collecting himself, he put a foot over the threshold.

"You ordered take-out, right? I got take-out from Wu's."

Jim shouldered him roughly back into the corridor, taking a quick look left to right as he did so. Blair, seeing trouble, got up from the table and grabbed Jim's gun from the kitchen drawer. Jim was staring the man down.

"No, we've not ordered from Wu's. You've got the wrong address, pal."

"You ordered from Wu's!" insisted the man, thrusting a crumpled brown-paper bag towards Jim, whilst craning his neck to see into the Loft. Jim's frown got deeper, and he pushed the man back again with the flat of his hand.

"I'm telling you we didn't. And I don't recall seeing you at Johnny's place. I think you'd better check your order again. *After* you leave this building. And believe me, I'm a cop, and I will *know* if you don't do what I say and leave right now, okay?"

The man nodded and slunk away down the corridor. Jim listened for a moment or two, then locked the door again and made for the window. Blair joined him and they watched the man leave 852 and cross the square, getting into a dark sedan on the other side of the street.

"Wu's, my ass," said Jim. "When did Johnny Wu start sending his take-out around by Chrysler? In teams of four?"

"Plus, added Blair, "Johnny only employs members of his family. Now, I know that family's pretty extended. But Jim, that guy was *Japanese*... What's going on?"

Jim turned around with smile.

"Beats me, but I don't intend to go rushing after them. The licence plate was obscured, so no way of checking their ID. Whoever they are, they can make the next move. Now, in the meantime..." – he clapped his hands together – "let's break out the camping gear!"

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The old man lay motionless on the floor, amid tumbled books and broken glass. A sluggish trail of blood led from his scalp to the dusty carpet. His spectacles, ripped from his face, lay smashed in front of his outstretched hands.

One of the three other men in the room opened the bookstore door and an elegant woman, dressed in black but with extravagant red lipstick, stepped fastidiously inside and gave the ruin of the store a look of disdain.

"They never learn," she said, shaking her head.

"I would guess they were here not more than thirty minutes ago," said the man. "As to whom, I would say the Russians, or Luca Grillo's outfit. Our Japanese friends would have left far less destruction."

"Indeed." The woman pursed her lips. "And from the mess, I do not think they were successful. What we seek has already gone, and this afternoon. The delivery from the house arrived at noon."

"Madam Hao," said another of the men, with a deferential inclination of his head. "We have heard word on the street that another party is now in the race. A break-away faction from the disgraced '*Sunrise Patriots*'."

Madam Hao made a *moue* of disgust. "Zealots like that are always such amateurs. That will further complicate matters." She flicked her hand towards the ravaged desk in the middle of the room.

"Check the records for purchases today. If there is a lead, we will observe and assess. Meanwhile, continue the watch on our competitors."

The men bowed their heads briefly and she swept out of the doorway.

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Part 3

"You want to do what? This weekend? Have you *seen* the forecast?"

Despite the man's height and his considerable breadth, it was almost impossible to see Simon Banks behind the teetering piles of paper and files that crowded his desk. As Jim tried gamely to hide his amusement, Joel Taggart entered the room backwards, bearing another twenty or thirty files.

"Where d'you want these, Simon?"

An arm shot out from behind the piles on the desk.

"Window. Then we'd better start on this first lot. Come get some Java." He stood up and twisted back to pour himself some coffee from the machine. "I won't offer you any, Jim" he said pointedly, "because you're off camping. Did you hear that, Joel? Jim and Sandburg are off camping."

Joel straightened up from placing the files on the floor.

"This weekend?" he asked, a note of *you-must-be-kidding* in his voice. "Have you *seen* the forecast?" Jim sighed.

"What's a little rain? Anyway, Sandburg's found an old treasure map and he wants to follow it. Amazingly, we've nothing pressing here, Captain, and a backlog of leave to take. So, some free days are in order?"

"Go! Go! See if I care!" Simon waved his arm at the door.

"Treasure map?" echoed Joel.

"Yeah, well, it may not be kosher, but it didn't come out of a fortune cookie, either. He found it in a book he bought yesterday." *A book I bought*, Jim mentally added, with an inward smile.

"Damn, that sounds like fun!" exclaimed Joel, with a bleak look at his superior.

"Look," snapped Simon, "can I help it that the Commissioner asked the two of us personally to go through the archives for this centenary commemorative book he wants? I'm only grateful that we've got enough quiet time to do it now. Plus, I'm saving you from camping with these bozos at Mount Baker this weekend. Because no one in their right minds would go to the National Forest this weekend, on account of the *forecast*...."

Jim waved his hand airily, and grinned.

"It's the North-west. Of course it'll rain. See you Monday. I'll save you both a doubloon."

A file hit the door just after he closed it behind him.

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There was a fine drizzle in the air as Blair crossed the square in front of Hargrove Hall and made his way towards the parking lot. He gave the sky a dark look, but the weather couldn't really affect his buoyant mood. His quick researches that morning about Fabian McKee had been pretty fruitful, although Professor Eustice hadn't been in – not surprising, really, as it was a Saturday.

He was still carrying the wooden box in his hand, and wondered idly whether Jim could *sense* his way through the puzzle mechanism – they'd paid it little attention the previous evening, as Laurenson's book had kept them fully engrossed. He grinned; he'd challenge Jim to open it that night at the campsite. Given Jim's competitive nature, it would provide good camouflage for a senses test, he thought with satisfaction.

Reaching the car, he thrust the little box into his backpack before delving for his keys in his jeans pocket. He was wrestling with the Volvo's door when he realised he was being addressed.

Blair glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes widened as he saw the beauty standing demurely a few yards away, smartly dressed in a neat business suit and carrying a tiny handbag. She was stunningly lovely in a classic Oriental way, the dark of her hair offset by

her bright red lipstick, but with something about her that hinted that she had European ancestry, as well.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," the woman repeated in her sweet voice, "and I can see you have your arms full, but could you direct me to the Literature Faculty?"

Blair gave up on the door and swung his backpack onto his left shoulder, turning to her with a broad smile.

"Hi, yes, of course I can! It's in that building over there, the one with the green copper decoration on the roof." He pointed. "Do you see it?"

The woman stepped a little closer to him as she inclined her head in the direction of the faculty building. Blair noticed her heels – at least three-inch stilettos. *It's not as if she needs them*, he thought ruefully. *She'd still be taller than me if she took them off.*

"Oh, thank you!" She smiled at him winningly, which prompted Blair to amp up his own winning smile. "I am so sorry, I got very confused with the map. It's my first day, you see."

"You're working here?" asked Blair, moving a little closer himself.

"I am here for a year of post-graduate work. I am studying American literature. My name is Eleanor Hao. You are a professor?"

"Oh man, hardly! Grad student, too! Anthropology. Blair Sandburg." Blair offered his hand and the pretty lady took it in a delicate clasp, then stumbled as her ankle twisted on its tall stiletto. Off-balance, she reached forward and grabbed Blair's jacket, catching hold of the strap of his backpack and half-pulling the bag from his shoulder in her attempt to regain her footing. Blair, for his part, attempted to support her without the risk of putting his hand in an inopportune place - quite difficult in the circumstances.

After a few seconds of mutually-supportive swaying, she was back on an even keel again, and she hastily drew away from Blair with a bashful giggle.

"So sorry to have been such a clumsy person. Perhaps I can buy you a coffee to make up for it."

"Well, yeah, but I'm buying the coffee..." began Blair, then started thinking with his brain again. "Except I've got to go right now. I'm off on a trip with my room-mate, going camping, in the National Forest up at Mount Baker. It's kind of an exciting trip, sort of a treasure hunt... But maybe next week...?"

"I'll look forward to it," she smiled, then turned and walked off, suddenly very confident in her stilettos.

"I'll phone you at the Faculty," called Blair, and she waved. Blair continued to watch her until she rounded the next corner, then he grinned to himself.

Oh, yes, he thought, as he threw the backpack into the Volvo and jumped into the driver's seat. Next week could be very nice indeed!

*

Part 4

The fact that it was raining hard, "High Society" was the afternoon film on Channel 9, and most of Jim's neighbours on that floor were over the age of eighty and hard of hearing, meant that nobody paid a great deal of attention to the three heavily-built men who had slipped into the building via the storage area. Frank and Bing were belting out: *"Have you heard? It's in the stars..."* from behind numerous closed doors as the trio approached the Loft, armed with a crowbar to gain entry.

Except they found the door already jemmied, and ajar. Sounds of activity came from inside. One of the heavy men put a finger to his lips to warn his colleagues, and they all drew their guns.

"*Yakuza!*" he whispered. At his signal, one of his colleagues kicked the door wide open, and they barrelled through to find four masked men rifling through piles of books and papers that were scattered across the floor of the living area.

The three men from the hallway levelled their guns, but found themselves that instant looking down the barrels of four revolvers held by the men in the room. For long, tense moments they all hung there, teetering on the balls of their feet, arms straining, each waiting for the order, and for someone else to give it.

A musical voice drifted in from the hallway.

"Please put your guns down, gentlemen. We have business to discuss."

No one moved a muscle. A tall, elegant Eurasian woman slipped into the room. She was silhouetted by the light from the hallway, but everyone in the room could see she had no gun, though the three men behind her were armed to the teeth.

"Very well, if you must persist with this silly behaviour..." She sighed, her annoyance clear.

"I have no desire to turn this into a blood-bath. I merely wish you to relay a message to your employers. The thing you seek – that which we all seek - is already gone from this apartment. We know where it is heading. We propose a joint operation to reclaim what belongs to all of us. Tell your superiors to meet with us at the old boat yard on North Bay dock in one hour."

With that, the woman turned her back on the many guns in the room, and calmly walked out of the apartment; her team withdrew, walking backwards, their guns still trained. In a few moments, the situation was back to the same seven guys with guns, staring at each other.

"Leave the room now," said one of the masked men, in a pronounced oriental accent, "and we'll do the same after you have gone. We need to pass this information on."

The first heavy-set man flicked his eyes to his colleagues, who all gave brief nods.

"This time only, *chuvák*," he replied, with a significant look at the other speaker. "Next time, you don't get away so easy."

Silently, the group nearest the door withdrew, and soon after the Loft was completely empty, with the door left slightly ajar and the breeze from the hallway riffling through the scattered papers on the floor.

*

"Taggart? That really you, at work on a Saturday?"

Joel looked up from the papers strewn across his desk.

"Man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, Detective Greenbaum," replied Joel, with a grin. He dusted off his palms and the two men exchanged a warm handshake.

"It's good to see you get out of the depths of Robbery for some fresh air, Dave. What brings you to the lofty heights of Major Crime? You need something?"

"Kind of. We got a case this afternoon. Nasty break-in and attack at one of those little antiquarian bookstores out by the University. Place bust up and the owner - elderly guy, too - smacked around and left with a head injury. Currently he's at General, still unconscious. Looks like it happened last night. One of the other bookstore owners saw him about 7pm, through the window as they waved goodnight, and all seemed okay just then. But our victim was meant to go to some family event this morning, and when he never showed, his relations started making calls."

"Nasty," frowned Joel, shaking his head. "Poor old guy. Is there some Major Crime angle, d'you think?"

"My boys did a quick look through the cash tin, ledger - you know, the usual drill," replied Greenbaum. "Guy had a scheduled delivery around about lunchtime - a load of books he'd bought. We've already checked with the guys who brought the crates. Two kids with a van. They seemed a bit jumpy, so we've cautioned them to be on the safe side, and I've got someone out checking with the guy the crates came from. Out in Woodlands, but he's not answering his phone right now. And there was only one transaction in the afternoon, which is why I'm here. There was no credit card slip, but the ledger says it was a card transaction, and the buyer's name was a James J. Ellison."

"Jim?"

"Well, I thought," continued Greenbaum, "that as Jim has got his ridealong, that university guy Sandburg, maybe they'd been out to buy books in that area. I wondered if he was on duty this afternoon. I can't get hold of him on his home number. It sounds like it's been disconnected."

Joel shook his head.

"Jim and Blair have gone hiking this weekend. They left this morning. But, you know, I reckon that would be our Jim who bought the book. He told Simon and me earlier a crazy story about how he and Sandburg had found an old map in a book Sandburg had just bought, and they were going to check it out. I guess Jim must have paid for the book. Blair's never got enough cash on him."

"They're back on Monday?" asked Greenbaum, scribbling down what Joel had said in his notebook. Joel nodded. "Okay, can you ask them to get in touch when they get back? I'd just like their take on what was going on in the store when they were there, if they saw anyone else around. And if they noticed there was anything special in the store. The place has really been done over. Whoever it was, they were looking for something specific."

*

"Can you beat it, Chief?" raged Jim for the umpteenth time as they roared up I-5. "Not one, but two assholes almost run me over in the street, within a half-hour! One practically outside the PD and then across from Eight Fifty-Two. And that one even mounted the sidewalk!"

"I know, you said," replied Blair diplomatically, putting the puzzle-box down in his lap for a moment. "And you're sure there were no witnesses?"

"Like I said, plenty of witnesses, but these were just beat-up cars with bad drivers. Probably drunk, to boot. I gave what details I could to the Patrol guys and they can keep a look-out, but the licence plates were pretty beat-up, too."

"And you're sure they weren't Japanese?" Blair asked again, thinking back to their mystery caller of the previous evening.

"Quite sure. Oh, forget it, Chief. Tell me again what you found out about Fabian McKee. I've not been concentrating, I admit."

"Well," began Blair, his eyes sparkling, "the Pacific North-West section of the history faculty library was very informative. There *was* such a guy in the closing decades of the 18th century. He plied the waters of the west coast from north to south, picking on whatever cargoes he could find. Sometimes he got treasure from the Spanish colonies, sometimes cargoes of fur in the north. By all accounts he was very successful, and very rich. His men adored him. Then there was a trip they made to somewhere in the south, in what's now Venezuela, which changed everything. Most of his men deserted him afterwards. Rumour had it he'd gone mad. Finally he sailed with a small party to the north again, then disbanded the crew in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and set fire to the ship. After that, nothing for a few years, until he turned up again in the Cascade area in around 1805. There's reports of him haunting the harbour area, drinking and making wild accusations. He was called "Mad McKee" in those days. Then, nothing until his death, recorded in 1810."

"So, sometime between him coming back to Cascade and his death, he acquired a copy of Laurenson's book - or at least someone close to him did - and hid the map," continued Jim, thinking it through.

"There's a good chance it would have been McKee himself, given the subject of the book. He'd clearly travelled a lot in the territory around Venezuela and Guyana."

Jim nodded.

"Yeah, that kind of makes sense. I think the most screwy thing, though, is why he went all those difficult miles inland, and up a mountain, to hide this 'treasure' of his."

"You've forgotten an important fact," replied Blair, with a raised eyebrow. "Everyone said he'd gone crazy."

"Yep, that'd do it."

*

Part 5

The rain had eased slightly by the time Louie brought the limo to a halt on the cracked concrete in front of the storage sheds at the old boatyard. Louie was pleased about that. It meant the boss could get out of the car without the whole umbrella malarky they usually had to do. Mr Grillo hated getting his shoes wet, and when Mr Grillo was annoyed, everyone had a bad day.

Mr Grillo wasn't going to be that happy, anyway, because they were the last there, with four other vehicles already pulled up in a rough, wide circle – looking like a kind of Gunfight at the OK Corral, thought Louie, only with 5-door Chryslers with dark-tinted windows. And Mr Grillo was already in a bad mood, as earlier he'd chewed out two of Louie's pals who'd failed to deal with some guy who was in Mr Grillo's way – and they tried twice, for Pete's sake! Everyone knew you didn't disappoint Mr Grillo.

Anyway, he took a look around and, with his gun at the ready, opened the driver's door and got out. Directly opposite was that *Yakuza* bunch – all sharp suits. They were eyeing up a beefy party who stood round a large black SUV. Louie wouldn't have been surprised if it had carried ground-to-air missiles, because these were the Russians, hated and despised by his own distinguished organisation. But it looked like the Russians were just as pissed at the *Yakuza*, for some reason, and barely gave Mr Grillo a second glance.

Then there were the Chinese with that pretty lady out front next to her boss, who wore his overcoat over his shoulders. Louie shook his head. Didn't he realise people only did that in the movies? And finally there was a utilitarian pick-up, its occupants in matching black leather jackets and combat pants. Louie turned to Mr Grillo, sitting in the rear seat, and rolled his eyes.

"We got them Nazi-wannabe bozos here again, Boss."

Louie opened the rear door, and Luca Grillo got out. He raised his hand in a general gesture of greeting to his opposite numbers. The leader of the Chinese group inclined his head.

"Glad you could join us, Mr Grillo. Now that we are all present, let us begin." He turned to his second-in-command. "Madam Hao?"

The pretty lady stepped forward.

"We all seek the same thing," she said. "All of us will profit from its recovery. But we need to find it soon, and fighting against each other to do so will only hinder us. This has already been proven several times during the last twenty-four hours, in failed attempts to apprehend the people who now have our property.

"We propose a joint operation. Each of our organisations will send a car, to travel with the others, recover our property and eliminate the men who took it. When it is recovered, we shall meet again to divide it into our rightful shares. We hope you will all agree that any divergence from this plan, or attempt by a single organisation to retain all of the property, will be met with significant violence?"

There was a slight pause, then both the Russian *Pakahn* and *Yakuza* boss nodded. Luca Grillo also inclined his head in agreement.

"Good, then we shall proceed immediately," continued Madam Hao. "I have placed a tracker on one of the men we seek. They are currently heading north, and I believe them to be aiming for the Mount Baker area. The tracker will make them easy to find and deal with."

The leader of the Chinese contingent murmured something to Madam Hao, and she lowered her head and stepped back. Her boss spoke up.

"Madam Hao will expect your teams to meet her at the I.5 interchange for North Cascade in thirty minutes. You will then proceed north with her. Please depend on this lady being a most formidable foe if you cross her. I have made her personally responsible for the recovery of our property, and I do not expect failure."

Louie, who had been watching the show with fascination, took a quick glance at his employer.

"You goin' along with this, Mr Grillo?" Luca Grillo smiled easily, his eyes still fixed on the Oriental lady opposite.

"Right until the property's been recovered. Then the rules change. If they want extreme violence, they can have it, Louie."

Madam Hao, not hearing him, returned his smile courteously.

"Hey! Hey!" shouted one of the men from the pick-up. "It's all going to be just like that? We all just accept *her* running this treasure hunt? Listen, I don't think I'm happy with the balance

here. You guys could be leading us all into a trap, as far as we know. I wanna see this tracker!"

"Who's that, Louie?" asked Mr Grillo.

"Brad Harper, new mouth at the '*Sons of the Sunrise Patriots*'." You know, the ones that took over when Kincaid went down. They say they got a new image, but it's all recycled, far as I can tell."

"Mr Harper!" called Grillo. "I suggest you settle down and keep in your place here, unless you want to go the way of your parent company. Garrett Kincaid had a big mouth on him, too."

"I'll see you all in hell!" shouted Harper, shaking his fist. "This is a scam. You have your clambake, all of you. The Sons of the Patriots will go their own way!"

Harper stomped back to his car, and jumped in. The vehicle was already revving its engine and it immediately swung round in a tight circle to leave the boatyard.

There was a flash of movement within the Chinese group; the wave of an elegant hand and one of their men was now standing by the limo, aiming a grenade launcher. Louie's eyes popped. He'd never see the guy move, let alone retrieve the weapon.

There was a *whoosh* as the weapon fired, and then a sudden bright explosion; the grenade made a direct hit and the pick-up was blasted part. With every outward appearance of calm, the remaining groups at the boatyard meeting watched metal and body fragments falling back onto the concrete, some still in flames. Luca Grillo smiled broadly.

"Nice work!" he called to Madam Hao. The lady wore a look of disdain.

"Amateurs," she replied coolly. "I have no respect for amateurs."

Luca Grillo raised an eyebrow at his employee as he climbed back into his limo.

"Louie, we better think twice before messing with her rules."

*

"Are we nearly there yet?"

Jim gave Blair a dark look and went back to concentrating through the murk. Heavy rain and mist were coming down off the mountains - a Northwest Special. The road was none too good, either, and they hadn't even got to the more remote tracks yet. He had been regretting the light-hearted alacrity with which he'd acquiesced to this damn-fool jaunt since the rain had started to fall with deliberation, about an hour earlier. Already annoyed about a wasted afternoon, and a possibly griping Sandburg if they turned back, he didn't find his mood lifted by the next radio announcement.

"We interrupt 'Sounds of the Seventies' here on WDMR Mountain Radio to bring you an important update on today's weather..."

Blair leaned forward and turned up the volume.

*"Yeah, folks, we got it wrong! Sorry for that. Hope it's not spoiling too many of your plans. 'Cuz you remember when we said there would be heavy rain this afternoon? Well, it's turning into **really** heavy rain, right across the western mountain belt. So put that cooler back in the garage and pack up the fishing gear. You won't even be able to see the water, let alone the fish this afternoon! Now, back to Sutherland Brothers and Quiver, who've still got a thing about Mary..."*

"Like we couldn't have spotted that rain already," growled Jim. Blair peered out through the windshield.

"What do you think we should do?"

"What we should have done an hour back. We're canning this expedition. Yeah, I know. Don't look at me like that, and don't whine. I just don't think this weather front is going to push through that quickly. No point in trying to wait it out."

"Me? Whine?" sniffed Blair, pretending to be affronted. Then he smiled resignedly at Jim. "No, it's okay. I know it's stupid to carry on in this. And hiking up in the forest today would be pretty unsafe in this weather, anyway. Still, it was a fun idea while it lasted..."

He sighed, and Jim immediately felt guilty.

"Never mind, Chief. Maybe we can come back when the weather is better?"

"That'd be good," said Blair, sounding pathetically grateful. "And maybe by then, I'll have worked out this puzzle-box. I was aiming to get you to solve it tonight, see if you could sense your way in, you know? Still, we can have a little contest at home instead." He turned his attention again to the lines across the surface of the box.

"You know, I've got the sequence almost right. I just need to work out this bit..."

"Oh, damn," said Jim suddenly, as he glanced up at the rear-view mirror.

"What's up, man?"

"Traffic behind, would you believe? I thought we were the only idiots out in this weather. But I can see lights. A way behind yet, but there's a whole string of them. Maybe it's emergency vehicles. I wish I could find a decent place to turn. It's too narrow on this bluff."

Blair twisted round in his seat to look out the rear window.

"Can't see anything in this."

"They're there, all right, and getting closer, dammit!"

Blair picked the map up from the floor of the truck.

"Still no obvious turn-off," he said, peering at it.

"What the hell?" snapped Jim. Blair twisted round again; now even he could see bright headlights glaring through the mist behind them.

"They're fast," said Blair, surprised.

"Too damn fast. And they're not cops or rangers – no blue lights. What the hell do they think....?"

The lights bore down on them, closer and closer. Jim's foot hit the floor as he tried to gain distance, but in seconds there was a thump and a jolt as the vehicle directly behind rammed the back of the truck, sending Blair cannoning into the passenger door. The truck slewed sideways as Jim fought the skid and tried to keep them away from the edge of the bluff. Blair righted himself, and scrabbled on the floor.

"The box! It opened!"

"Shut up about the damn' box, and hold on!" barked Jim. "Here they come again!"

The next blow was more severe than the first. Blair heard an ominous cracking sound below them, and looked in concern at Jim's tense face.

"What was that?"

"Something in the suspension, I'd guess," Jim shouted, swerving again to avoid the next sortie from the car behind, which was accelerating up like a charging bull. This time the blow was only glancing, but the assailants' intention was now clear.

"They don't just want us off the road, Chief. They want us over the cliff!"

Jim swerved once more, but the truck was now sluggish. He pushed at Blair's shoulder.

"Get ready to jump!"

Blair went to open the door, looking back as he did so. But something had changed. The car directly behind had dropped back again, presumably for another attack, but there was a second set of lights visible now, very close to the first. As he watched, these second lights bore down on their attackers, driving forward like a tank.

The two vehicles collided, but instead of accelerating towards Jim and Blair again, they swerved violently to the right, toward the edge of the cliff. The lights separated; the second car had braked, but the first kept moving towards the edge, skidding sideways. With the light from the car behind, Blair could make out the driver fighting madly with the wheel. There was a moment when the skidding car just hung there, suspended over the drop, and then it fell.

"Jesus!" yelled Blair. "They pushed them off!"

"Better than us," shouted Jim grimly. He kept urging the truck forward while the murk around them was lit up by an abrupt orange flash as the falling car exploded in the valley below. Meanwhile, the second car, already joined in the narrow road by two more vehicles, was accelerating for them again. There were flashes in the fog behind them, and Blair heard the *whizz* of bullets, and the metallic clang as a couple hit the tailgate. He stared back in shock.

"Who *are* those guys?"

"Get your head *down*, Sandburg!" shouted Jim and the truck swerved again, this time down a steep, rough trail leading off the bluff. More bullets zinged past, but the pursuing cars hesitated before taking the same route as Jim.

"Maybe they think there's a better way than this," hazarded Blair.

"You bet there's one. We just don't have time to find it." Jim's words ground out between his teeth. The truck belly-flopped into a stream at the bottom of the track and then started to climb the other valley-side, but there was a horrible rending sound as Jim accelerated up the hill, and suddenly he was pumping his foot against nothing. The truck was dead, though the engine still turned over.

"Drive-shaft's gone," shouted Jim. "No power. C'mon, quick!"

They tumbled out, Blair grabbing his backpack and the flashlight from the glovebox, Jim his store of extra ammunition. They slithered up the muddy hillside in front of them. Water was pouring off the ground in growing rivulets.

"Where?" gasped Blair, staying low while Jim paused for a second to look back for their pursuers.

"They're driving down the track now," replied Jim. "But we've got the advantage. We can go anywhere now, and I'd guess we're more used to being in the mountains than they are, from the look of their cars. We keep on pushing upwards and into the thick forest, and they're going to find it difficult to follow, let alone find us."

"I brought the map." Blair hauled the now-wet folds out of his backpack and Jim peered at it in the almost-darkness under the trees.

"Okay, there's some kind of building marked, high on the ridge more or less above where we are."

"Ranger station?" asked Blair, hopefully.

"Don't think so. May just be an old claim from the gold mining around here. There's a few of these things marked on this bit of the map. Anyway, it might give us somewhere to hole up after we've lost them."

"You're pretty confident," said Blair, looking worriedly down into the valley again.

"Trust me, they're not going to follow us up here. They have no idea where we're headed, and they'll not be able to find our trail in these conditions. We can wait it out longer than they can and, with luck, we'll get some kind of satellite signal up there, and be able to contact the county cops, even if we can't call Cascade." He suddenly stiffened.

"What now?"

"They're out of their cars, and they've got flashlights," replied Jim, a note of worry back in his voice." There was a pause.

"Get moving!" he snapped suddenly, pulling Blair up from the ground. "I dunno how, but they're heading this way."

"Dammit," breathed Blair, "who *are* those guys?"

*

Part 6

Mrs Eames down the hall had called the janitor, and the janitor had come up and pushed the door open, and had seen the mess inside.

And the janitor had called the cops, who had alerted Robbery, who had called Simon Banks to tell him that the residence of one of his detectives had been turned over.

And so it was that, at two pm, having used the news as a rather grim excuse to get out of the office, Simon and Joel were standing in the Loft amid piles of books and papers, upturned drawers and some wrecked ornaments.

"Is that thing broken, too?" asked Simon, pointing at a strange, seemingly-disjointed headdress from parts unknown.

"No, I don't think so," replied Joel, looking out from Sandburg's room, where he was surveying similar chaos. "It's supposed to look like that. The others are smashed, though."

"Captain Banks," asked the Robbery detective, "any chance you can tell whether anything has been taken?"

Simon shook his head.

"I've no idea if Ellison had valuables here other than the furniture and possessions you see. But I guess he may have done. Does it look like a robbery to you, though?"

"No, sir," replied the detective. "No self-respecting burglar would have done this. Too much noise, too much chance of being discovered."

"You think they were looking for something?" asked Joel, coming back from the other room.

"Yes, sir. Looks like that to me."

"To me, too," added Simon, frowning. He pulled out his cell-phone and punched a number, listened for a moment, then shut the phone off again.

"Still unobtainable. They're in the mountains, of course, so that's probably playing havoc with the signal. Okay, detective, I'd be grateful if you could make sure this apartment is secured, and I'll try to locate Ellison and break the news to him. Gently. You'll check for prints?"

"Yes, sir. There's always a chance."

"Right, Joel. Let's get back to base and see what's on Ellison's slate right now that might have encouraged someone to beat up his apartment."

They were turning to go when Joel's cell-phone rang.

"Taggart."

"Joel, it's Dave Greenbaum. Can you get down to General, pronto? Mr Oppenheim's awake and, from what he's telling me, you need to find Jim Ellison pretty darn quick!"

*

"Just through there," panted Jim, pointing through the dark trees.

"Thank God!" Blair couldn't see it yet, but Jim had found the building on the map. He'd been right about its condition, though. As they drew nearer, Blair could see it was a low hovel with a third of its roof tumbled in, and gaping holes in the stonework that had served as windows, probably. Not much, but maybe a bit of shelter. They were soaked through by now, and though at the moment he was hot and breathless from the long uphill scramble, he knew they were going to chill down pretty quickly in that weather.

They pulled away some fallen branches and stumbled in. There was a surprisingly large room inside, and dryer patches on the floor where the roof had held up to its job. Blair dropped down in a corner and rested his head back against the stones.

"My legs feel like I've run a marathon in concrete boots."

Jim gave no reply. He was still at the threshold, staring intently down through the trees.

"They're not likely to find this, right?" asked Blair, hopefully. Jim shrugged.

"I'd say long odds. There were several routes we could have chosen, and this was the most difficult and remote."

"Like I never noticed that," replied Blair, rummaging through his backpack. "Come get some food. I've got... ah, candy, some nuts, and a little bottle of water, and... what the hell?"

Jim turned round sharply at Blair's sudden change of tone. Blair held out his hand. In it was a small black cube about the size of a match-book.

"What the hell is this, Jim? It was in the bottom of my backpack. I never put it there!"

Jim's eyes widened. He strode back across the dirt floor and snatched the object from Blair's palm, staring at it with a concentration that meant he was bringing his senses to bear. Then, as if it were burning his fingers, he dropped it, and brought his boot down on it with some force, grinding the little object under his heel so that its fragments were spread in the dirt.

"It's a tracker, an electronic tracker," he said, in answer to Blair's questioning look. "High-end spec; I would guess it has GPS in it, for long-range detection."

"Jesus, who *are* those guys?"

"Dammit," snapped Jim, clearly angry with himself. "Why didn't I sense this before?"

"Maybe because it was wedged between McKee's book and my spare shirt," offered Blair. "It would have been muffled. But, hey, why would you anyway? If you weren't actively listening for it, you might have written it off as my phone. That's in here, too."

Blair pulled the cell-phone out and peered at the display.

"Well, that's predictable. No signal," he said glumly.

"We've got to keep moving," said Jim, and abruptly bent down to grab Blair's arm and haul him up. Blair groaned.

"You want to die here?" Jim snapped back. "They may already have a bead on this place."

"Okay, man! Okay!" But Jim had frozen, standing stock-still for an instant. Then he dropped Blair's arm, making for the door again.

"Oh, crap," he said, his voice flat. "They're already here, about two hundred yards away. "C'mon, we gotta run!"

No sooner had they got outside and started into the trees around the shack, than Jim grabbed his arm again and brought him to a standstill.

"Jesus!" snapped Blair, frustration winning over growing fear for a moment. "Make your mind up!"

"They're on all sides, Chief," replied Jim, looking stricken. "Dammit, there's a whole bunch of 'em! They've circled us!"

"So what do we do?" hissed Blair, shouldering this backpack. The rain was now torrential, and it flowed off his hair and down his face, blurring his vision

A shot rang out.

"This way," barked Jim, starting through the trees in the opposite direction. "Keep low!"

He grabbed Blair's hand to pull him forward, but in moments they had to part as the tree cover thickened. Blair stumbled against a tree-root, and in the dim light lost sight of where Jim had gone. He came out of his crouch, to try to spot his friend, and the beam of a

flashlight found him. He turned and ran, but managed only a couple of steps before there was a loud report and a simultaneous blow to his back that sent him flying.

He lay on the wet ground, his face pushed into the pine needles, and tried to breathe. But his chest didn't seem to want to work; he couldn't speak.

"Blair!" came the shout, somewhere in the trees above him.

"Stay back, Jim!" he tried to say, but he couldn't get the air out. The flashlights came closer.

"Sandburg!" Jim was there beside him now, breathless, worry all over his face, grabbing his arm again and pulling him up.

"You hit? Blair, where're you hit, dammit? Answer me! Are you hurt?"

Flashlights were blinding his eyes now; the group of pursuers had gathered around them in a rough circle. Jim gave them a dismissive look and turned back to Blair, pushing his hands up underneath Blair's jacket and around his back, feeling between his shoulder-blades, and then dragging the backpack off him. Blair started gasping now, the air gradually coming back into his chest.

"It's okay, Chief. You're okay. The backpack took the bullet. It didn't make it through."

"Winded," Blair choked out.

"Yeah, you're lucky it wasn't more, at that range. Fabian McKee got in the way." Jim gave a humourless chuckle. "It got stuck in the book. In the goddamn pirate book! Look!"

He hauled out the Laurenson book out by its corner, and Blair could clearly see, in the flashlight beam, a bullet lodged in the leather cover.

"My lucky day, huh...?"

Jim wrapped one arm around him, and gave him a brief hug.

"Mine, too, buddy. Mine, too. Frying pan to fire, though, huh?"

"Jim, I'm sorry, man." whispered Blair.

"Shush," soothed Jim. "Not your fault, Chief." Then he turned to stare impassively into the flashlights around them, and raised his voice.

"Okay, let's get this over with, shall we? What do you want? We're both cops, you know. Hurting us is gonna get you into a world of trouble."

Finally in control of his breathing, Blair was able to take notice of what was going on around him. By now, additional flashlights had gathered with the others. He and Jim were lying in a small clearing between thick trees that let in hardly any light. People surrounded them, all with the rain streaming off their clothing, and he counted ten men in total, each with a handgun prominently displayed.

"Come on," repeated Jim, his voice louder now, with that defiant, reckless edge to it that emerged whenever he was staring death down the barrel of a gun. "Who the hell *are* you?"

*

Part 7

The line of men parted and a woman stepped forward. Although she was just as wet as the others, she retained an air of composure. Her smile was brilliant, if not friendly, and her bright red lipstick showed up weirdly in the flashlight beams.

"Eleanor?" gasped Blair.

"What?" said Jim, startled. He turned to look at Blair, who pointed at the woman.

"Eleanor Hao. I met her this morning. She's a new grad student at Rainier. She's studying..."

His voice tailed away. Eleanor Hao smiled even more broadly, and Jim gave a deep sigh.

"I somehow don't think so, Chief." He turned to Madam Hao. "I guess you got hold of his backpack somehow? Got the tracker in?"

Madam Hao nodded.

"You have both cooperated beautifully, without knowing it," she beamed.

"So, who are you?" repeated Jim, his eyes narrowed against the bright lights.

"I myself am a member of the 17K *Triad* in Cascade. My colleagues are here." She indicated three other men standing beside her. Then, pointing at the other men in the circle, she went on. "These are from the *Bratva*, and the other gentlemen are *Yakuza* people."

"What is this," snarled Jim, "some kind of organised crime team-building exercise? What happened to the guys you pushed off the cliff? Didn't you want them in your little gang?"

Madam Hao frowned.

"That was necessary. They represented Mr Luca Grillo's business interests, but they didn't use their brains. They could have killed you and destroyed the directions at the same time. They had to be removed."

"Directions to what?" spat Jim. "Why the hell are you after us?"

"You have something which belongs to us," replied Madam Hao sweetly. "It contains directions to a great deal of money, which belongs to all of our organisations, in different shares."

"Oh, my God!" breathed Blair. "The treasure map! You're after the treasure as well?"

He pulled at his backpack, ignoring the guns that were immediately brought to bear on him, and dragged out Laurenson's book.

"Look, this is it! The treasure map's inside! You can have it! Can't they, Jim? Please, just take it!"

All the men surrounding them burst out laughing. Eleanor Hao shook her head sadly.

"Not your silly book, Mr Sandburg, but something else that you found in that bookstore."

Blair and Jim exchanged a glance; the puzzle-box? Why would all the crime syndicates in Cascade be after that?

"You want the box?" asked Blair, putting a note of disbelief in his voice. "It's just a box. It doesn't even open. It's a dud."

Madam Hao smiled and held out her hand.

"The box, please."

Blair looked at Jim, and swallowed. Once they had the box, what would stop Hao and her friends just killing them, there and then? He had no idea what to do, or whether Jim was planning something. He really hoped so, but Jim's face gave nothing away.

Pretending to cooperate might give the two of them some time, he reckoned, and so he reached into the backpack once again, and pulled out the puzzle-box. He saw each of their captors become visibly more tense as he turned the box around in the beams of light for them to see.

"This it?"

Madam Hao reached for it, but unexpectedly one of the Russians stepped forward.

"I take this," he said, snatching it from Blair's hand. Madam Hao lashed out at him, but he struck her aside. His colleagues moved forward to give him cover.

"You run this game too long," said the first Russian, his voice heavily-accented. "We take box for now."

"Go to hell!" snapped one of the *Yakuza*. "We do this as agreed!"

"Asshole," returned the Russian contemptuously. "Your *Pakahn* act like little boy. I tell you today, you not get away from me next time we meet. This is next time, *chuvák*." He brought up his gun, but another *Yakuza* sprang forward in an instant and smashed his own weapon down the Russian's wrist. The man dropped the box and it rolled towards Hao, but now the *Yakuza* men were squaring up to the Russians, and blocking her access to it. Her face was twisted with anger and frustration, and the Chinese guns turned away from Jim and Blair, and towards the other members of the group.

"Well, that didn't take long," muttered Jim, drily. "Be ready to move, Chief!"

A second *Yakuza* turned his gun towards the Chinese in retaliation, and made a move towards where the box lay on the ground. Then, someone on the Russian team fired, and that was that. The *Yakuza* went down, but not without taking one of the Russians with him. Bullets started flying everywhere. Blair felt himself grabbed by Jim and hauled away, and as he scrambled to his feet he stuffed Laurenson's book back into the backpack. They both dived for the shelter of some boulders at the edge of the clearing and, keeping low, turned to judge whether they could make a clean break for it.

It was carnage. Three *Yakuza* were down and, as they watched, the final *Yakuza* took out the second of the Russians. A Chinese team-member lay on the floor, also clearly dead. That left one and one, plus Hao and the other two from the Chinese team, who had been sheltering behind the trees, waiting for their erstwhile colleagues to despatch one another.

But Hao had fumbled the recovery of the puzzle-box, which still lay on the ground near one of the dead Russians. Now, she stepped out from her shelter and calmly fired at the remaining *Yakuza* and Russian, killing them both.

"Keep firing!" yelled Blair, and dashed out, ignoring Jim's shout of protest. Jim's bullets hit the ground ahead of him, making Hao and the rest of the Chinese team duck back behind cover again. Blair dived for the box, and rolled away towards the edge of the clearing. Then he was up and running through the darkness of the forest; he heard more firing and, seconds later, the pounding of Jim's feet as he caught up with Blair.

"Goddamned idiot!" Jim cuffed Blair's head as they came close to each other, but Blair could see he was grinning. Blair grinned back. It might be a short-lived triumph, but boy, it sure felt good.

They were out of the trees, and suddenly faced with a bare portion of hillside, looking like the result of a landslip some years before. Blair was shocked to realise that the dim light filtering through the clouds meant it was still only late afternoon. It felt like they'd been running for an eternity. On the other side of the cleared area, the forest looked even denser than before, and capable of providing better cover.

Blair found he was high on the adrenaline of the chase; he couldn't stop grinning.

"Where to now, Oh Great Sentinel?"

"Eight down, three to go," replied Jim, blackly. More shots rang out; the Chinese were firing again, and Jim grabbed Blair's arm once more, and pushed him forwards.

"Run! Run for those trees!"

Jim turned and fired a fusillade of shots into the pines behind them, scattering the flashlights for a few moments. Blair dashed across the clearing in a zigzag path, trying to avoid any more bullets. He reached the far side and dived for cover. Looking back, he could see Jim half-way across the clearing.

Then Jim fell. Blair's stomach turned. Was Jim hit? He rose, intending to run back towards his friend, but paused. Jim was up again, and haring in the same serpentine path across the hillside to where Blair was crouched.

"Something's happening," he said breathlessly, as he slid down beside Blair.

"What?"

"Something's happening with the mountain! I can feel it. The ground was moving out there. It knocked me off-balance. It's like it's shuddering."

Blair stared at him blankly. Across the clearing, the Chinese were out of the pines and running towards them. He rose to go, but Jim held him back

"No, wait! Something's coming!"

And Blair could now feel it himself. The ground was indeed shuddering and vibrating, making the large trees around them shiver and shake like little twigs. Then it started; trees further up the slope slid downwards, faster and faster, first of all bizarrely upright, and then toppling over. It was a huge landslide, Blair realised; the mountainside had been undermined by the torrential rain. Behind the fallen trees flowed what looked like a wall of mud and rocks, straight down through the clearing.

The Chinese group were already half-way across. They ran, but the mountain was too fast for them. Blair saw one of them carried down the slope on top of the sliding mud; then the mud covered the man, and he was smothered under it. The second man was knocked off his feet by one of the fallen trees that were now tearing down the hillside on the mud wave. The huge trunk went right over him, crushing him, and the mud behind buried him as well. Blair looked for Hao, but she had run in the opposite direction to her team, and was nowhere to be seen.

But the mountain was still moving.

"Come on, Chief!" shouted Jim, and pulled him up by the arm. Trees now started falling where they were standing, and in horror they looked uphill to see another wave of mud rolling down directly towards them – wide and relentless, and carrying all in its path.

Nevertheless, they ran, Jim still holding on to Blair's arm, though they knew it was hopeless. They were still running, the mud wall right above them, when the ground opened up under their feet, a crevasse about three feet wide forming in seconds. Even as the Earth above tried to smother them, so the Earth beneath swallowed them up. Their grip on each other was torn apart by the violence of the sudden drop, and they plummeted downwards, to a smooth dirt floor some twenty feet below.

Blair landed hard, winded for the second time that day. Above the roar of the mudslide above, he heard Jim cry out sharply, but could see nothing. Over their heads, the mud and trees rolling down the hillside cut out any light, and rocks, dirt and broken branches fell constantly through the gap. He could only think of curling into a ball to protect his head from the stones, and waiting it out. And all the while, the sound of Jim's sudden cry haunted him.

*

Part 8

It had all gone terribly quiet, now the mudslide had finished its deadly work. A few stones and bits of dirt fell occasionally through the gap above but, otherwise, everything was hushed. Jim attempted again to move his right leg, and bit back a groan of pain. Yeah, definitely broken. He tried to visualise the bones, where they might have snapped; it felt like his lower leg. Jesus, this was gonna be difficult. And where was Blair?

"Sandburg?" The word ended in a cough, and he spat dirt from his mouth, shocked to hear how weak his voice sounded. He turned his head, trying to see. The air looked murky, but he could make out they were in some kind of natural cavern deep under the hillside, walled by large, smooth boulders that must have made their way down the mountain in millennia past, while the forest concealed it above ground.

"Jim? Jim! You okay? I can't see you!"

"Over here....." The words died in his throat. There was movement in the boulders a few feet to his right, and an ominous rattle. He twisted his head further round, and saw what looked like thick coils of rope, moving sluggishly. *Oh, holy shit...*

"Jim, you okay, man? I'm coming! Hang on!" Blair, scrambling over a pile of dirt and fallen branches a couple of yards away, looked miraculously unscathed, to Jim's relief. Jim put out an arm to wave him back, and the rattles sounded again, louder and more numerous this time.

"Sandburg, stay back! It's a rattler den!" Jim tried to move again, and cried out involuntarily at the pain. He dug the heel of his good leg into the dirt and pushed back, away from the snakes, but rocks were hemming him in and he couldn't slide away. Some of the rattlers moved towards him.

"Oh... ah..." said Blair, as he crawled up to Jim. "Now, this is lovely. Hibernation den, I assume."

"Sandburg, do I *care* about their reason for being in this hole?"

"Chill, man. It means they're sleepy. I guess the mudslide would have woken them up. But it may be okay if we don't disturb them any more."

"It would be more okay if I could get further away."

Blair now looked at Jim properly.

"Oh, crap. Broken bones?"

"Right leg. Just can't seem to move myself. No, don't look like that. It's not my spine. I just can't shift off this dirt."

Blair moved closer to Jim, next to his shoulders, and Jim felt his hand ghost over his forehead; a touch of reassurance for both of them.

"Okay, I ought to splint you, right? Though probably not while you've got company." Blair nodded at the snakes, still restless in their corner. "So what I'm gonna do is try to lift you at the shoulders, and drag you further back. But this is gonna hurt, man."

"Just do it."

"Okay, okay. Move your other leg if you can, just try not to kick the snakes." He put his hands under Jim's armpits.

"One, two, threeeee....."

They'd moved a foot or so, but the pain was almost more than Jim could bear. His shout filled the cavern. The snakes moved closer, coiling nervously.

"One more time, okay? Come on, one, two, threeee....!"

This time, Jim kicked down, pushing hard with his heel. He was moving, but his good leg was showering the snakes with dirt. It was too much for them; agitated, several reared up.

Blair dropped Jim and dived for the dirt between Jim and snakes, lashing out with a fallen branch he'd grabbed from the floor. Most of the snakes slunk backwards, but two were braver, or perhaps just more riled than the rest. Their heads shot forward, latching on to Blair's forearm.

Blair gave a cry, something between a yelp and a howl. He shook his arm and hit at the snakes with the branch. First one dropped off and retreated, and then the other. In an instant, Blair was back at Jim's shoulders, pulling him up again.

"Right, this has gotta work!" he barked. He pulled Jim's torso right off the dirt floor and dragged him back, Jim helping all he could, and trying not to shout with the pain. This time, they didn't stop until they were right at the back of the cavern, as far from the snakes as they could possibly get. Then Blair let Jim drop, and fell beside him on the ground, panting hoarsely.

"Jesus, Sandburg!" gasped Jim, staring in horror at him. "You got bit!" He pointed at Blair's jacket, where puncture holes were clear in the fabric.

"It's fine, man," said Blair with a smile, struggling upright again. "They never got through the sleeve. Anyway, it's well known that rattlers in hibernation are barely poisonous. I mean, why would evolution have let them build up all that venom if they were gonna sleep for months, huh?"

Jim frowned; it sounded convincing, and he didn't know enough about the habits of mountain rattlesnakes to argue the point. But his internal obfuscation-meter twitched.

"Come on," said Blair briskly. "I think they've slithered away somewhere quieter, so let's get you splinted." He cast around him, and spotted another long branch on the floor. As he picked it up, he laughed, and bent down to grab Jim's gun from where it had been lying, under the branch.

"Here you go, man," he said passing it over. "I think you get excused for dropping it this time!" He walked back across the cavern.

"Where are you going?" asked Jim, crossly.

"Backpack," replied Blair, returning with the bag in his hand. Jim could see he was trying not to use the bitten arm. Blair threw the bag on the ground, settled down beside Jim and rummaged inside it.

"Water," he said, producing a little bottle and uncapping it. "Take a bit. Not too much, though. This is our total supply. Now, let me see..." He pulled out some bits of plastic. "Oh, right. Phone smashed, just like it would be. Where's yours?"

"Not a clue," replied Jim, sipping at the bottle. He offered it to Blair, who shook his head and instead pulled his spare shirt out of the backpack and started ripping it into strips. Then he brought the branch as close as he could to Jim's broken leg. Between them, they straightened the leg out, with Jim being his most macho and biting back yelps of pain, and then Blair quickly and methodically tied the branch to the leg with the strips of fabric.

"There," he said, as the last one was finished. "I have no idea how good that is, but it's gotta help, right?"

Jim looked at him. Under the dirt he looked pale. He was sweating hard and small tremors were running through him. Jim grabbed the bitten arm, pushing Blair's jacket back to see his skin, and what was there horrified him. Two sets of puncture-holes stood out clearly; already the flesh around them was deep blue with haemorrhaging under the skin, and the arm was swelling up.

With gritted teeth, Jim pulled at Blair's jacket, ripping it off his shoulders, Blair barely protesting. Then he got hold of the cuff of Blair's shirt, and tore it up to the shoulder.

"If it's swelling, gotta keep it clear of clothing," he said sharply. Blair nodded, staring quietly at the wounds in his arm. Then he looked up and smiled brightly at Jim.

"See, it's fine. It'll just be localised." Jim stared into his eyes and saw the lie in them.

"Come here," he said, pulling Blair down to lie on the dirt beside him, and wrapping his arm around him. Blair went willingly, as if the fight had suddenly gone out of him.

"Do we need a tourniquet?" he asked softly. Jim considered.

"Not the recommended thing, I believe. But pressure would be good." He put his hand around Blair's upper arm and took hold.

"Give me a minute," said Blair, his voice muffled by Jim's jacket, "and then I'll try and climb up to the gap, and get out."

Jim tilted his head back and stared at him.

"Are you crazy? It's a sheer twenty feet up at least, and there's nothing to climb on that would get you close to that gap. Plus, I know enough about snake-bites to know that we need to keep your heart-rate low, and try to stop the venom circulating round your body."

"Someone's gotta get help, Jim!"

Jim felt hopelessness seep through him, icy cold.

"Look," he said, keeping his voice reassuring. "Even if we can't get out of here, the county rescue people will know there's been a landslide. They'll be out looking for possible injured and trapped folks. They'll be looking here."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Trust me."

Blair shivered some more.

"Okay, man. Cool."

Jim held him tighter, and tried to remember how quickly you needed to get medical attention for a rattler bite. One thing he was sure of, was that survival from a bad bite depended on getting anti-venom within a given time; and Blair had gotten two of the sonsabitches in his arm.....

He heard movement on the hillside above.

"See?" he said to Blair, giving him a little shake. "I was right. They're here already!"

Blair raised his head, and looked at him disbelievingly. But the sounds of someone stumbling over the debris above became louder, and eventually Blair heard them, too.

"Down here!" shouted Jim. "Help! Down here!"

There was a moment's pause, and then a face appeared at the rim of the gap; Eleanor Hao.

*

Part 9

"My, my," said Madam Hao. Her hair was down around her shoulders and her face was muddied; her eyes looked a little crazy. "So my little friends are waiting here for me, are they?" She levelled her gun at them.

"For Pete's sake!" shouted Jim, in exasperation. "Don't you ever stop? Look, you kill us now, you'll never get the box. It's down here with us." Beside him, Blair struggled up, and dragged his backpack closer to him. But Jim wasn't ready to give the puzzle-box up yet.

"You go and get us help," he continued, in what he hoped was a more reasonable tone, "and we'll give you the box. Yeah, and the directions in it, okay? How's that deal sound?"

"Stupid," said Madam Hao, her mouth hard. "You're a cop. You won't give me the box later. Give it to me now, and I *might* go and get you help. How's *that* deal sound?"

Blair was getting the box ready, Jim could tell. He put a hand on Blair's good arm to still him.

"No deal," he bluffed.

"Look, Mr Ellison. You don't have a lot of prospects where you are. If you don't give it to me now, I'll come back with a backhoe. And a gun if you've not died of thirst and are still breathing. Either way, you'll be dead. Give me the box now, and I might be reasonable."

Blair touched his arm. The contact made Jim flinch; just the brush of his fingers conveyed to Jim all the fever and pain that Blair was feeling.

"Let her take it, man," said Blair softy. "There's a chance, right?"

Jim opened his mouth to reply and then froze. Blair looked at him quizzically, but Jim just smiled, and turned back to Hao.

"Helicopter's on its way, Eleanor. I can hear it. That'll be state police. Help us now, and you've got a friend in court."

"Really?" breathed Blair, out of the corner of his mouth.

"I can hear a 'chopper," whispered Jim. "Probably mountain rescue, but hey, who'd be picky at a time like this?"

"Box," said Madam Hao. Blair stood up; the box was in his hand.

"Okay, here it is. Catch!"

He threw it up towards the light, and they saw Hao fumble at it and then take hold.

"Sandburg..." began Jim, in frustration.

"Cool it, big guy," said Blair, his smile shaky. "It was the only option, you know."

Before Jim could answer, Eleanor Hao's face appeared at the gap again.

"I thank you both," she said sweetly. Her gun came up. "Now, goodbye."

The bullets slammed into the dirt floor of the cavern. Jim twisted one way, and Blair threw himself the other. Jim waited for the final blow, but there was sudden silence, and then the sounds of someone above picking their way slowly downhill.

*

"Chief? Sandburg?"

Blair wasn't answering. He was sprawled on the ground where a dirt pile had gathered around some low boulders. Panicked, Jim dragged himself further along until he could touch Blair's foot; Blair's whole body was trembling.

Jim pulled himself up into a sitting position and grabbed at Blair's belt, turning him over. The reason for the trembling became apparent as Blair turned his head. He was laughing; it was rather hysterical laughter, but laughter nonetheless.

"What the hell is so funny, Sandburg?" growled Jim, angry and relieved at the same time. Blair held up a small piece of paper, folded into a square.

"She got the box, Jim, but she didn't get the directions."

"What?"

Blair moved closer to Jim and handed him the paper. Jim unfolded it; written in a rather flowery script were a series of letters and digits.

"When the car got rammed," said Blair, grinning, "the box fell onto the floor and opened by itself. I saw how the mechanism worked. But we were kind of busy at the time, so I just stuck it together again, and put it in the backpack."

Jim stared at him.

"And you couldn't have told me this?"

"I did even know it was important until they caught us in the forest. At that point it seemed a bit too busy for explanations."

Blair was still grinning, and Jim couldn't help grinning, too, despite their situation.

"Son of a gun!"

"Ain' I?" replied Blair, triumphant; then his expression suddenly changed, and he collapsed back onto the ground.

"Sandburg!"

"It's okay, it's okay," puffed Blair in reply, opening his eyes again. "I'm just, you know, real tired."

"Maybe we can get you more comfortable," said Jim. He dragged himself nearer, looking for a flatter piece of ground where Blair could stretch out. "There's something sticking out of that dirt pile, and it'll be hurting your head."

Jim shifted him slightly, and then pulled at the object. It was the edge of a wooden casket which, rotted through, came away easily in his hand.

"Hey," said Jim, intrigued despite himself. "What *is* this?"

Blair roused himself, and they pulled more fragments out. The only apparent content of the box was an oiled cloth bag, tied tightly with rope.

They looked at each other with wide eyes, then Blair reached into his backpack again, and pulled out his Swiss Army knife. He handed it over to Jim.

"You do the honours, man."

Jim cut through the fused strands of rope and tipped up the bag. They both flinched slightly as a heavy silver necklace slid out with too much the appearance of a snake. There was a document with it. Blair picked up the necklace.

"Man, look at this! South American, Caribbean, maybe. Malachite and silver. This is a great find!"

"It's not exactly elegant," said Jim peering at it. "I couldn't see Naomi wearing it."

"It's for a man, doofus! An amulet, for a ritual or a ceremony, I would guess. Hugely valuable to the people it belonged to."

"And they were...?"

"Not sure, but this is probably eight or nine hundred years old, judging by others I've seen." He kept staring at the stones, while Jim opened the folded document.

"Chief, you are never gonna believe this."

Blair looked up.

"*'I, Fabian McKee'* ..." began Jim.

"What? You're kidding! We *found* it? He was *here*?"

"Uh-huh. *'I Fabian McKee, being of sound mind'* ... well, that's not entirely true, is it?... *have travelled to this Holy Spot to conceal my Secret Wealth....'* "

Jim grinned at Blair and handed the document back to him. Blair scanned it eagerly.

"*'with Godde's help ... left my Shippe and all worldly Things ... this Secret is the Goal of all Philosophers and Kings... my Calculation I write here now... the Secret of turning the base Ores of the Earth to Purest Gold'*. Oh, for Pete's sake! That's all it is? He thought he'd found the secret of alchemy?"

"All that glitters, Chief," replied Jim drily. Blair dropped the document and picked up the amulet again, still fascinated. "You've got your necklace, anyway."

Blair looked at him, his eyes dark with sorrow.

"Think it'll get us out of here, Jim?"

"Never say never," replied Jim.

Blair reached out and touched Jim's arm

"I'm sorry, man," he said, his face full of fever and emotion. "I'm so sorry for getting us into this."

"Hey, hey!" Jim patted the hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault, Chief. No one could have predicted this. Really, they couldn't."

"The helicopter?"

"Ah, gone away for now. But they'll be back." Jim took up the document again as a diversion, turning it over to inspect the reverse. There was more writing on it there, very faint.

"Hey, Chief, listen to this. *'I pray to Godde as I sit on this Holy Mount that I shall be forgiven for my sins, and by way of atonement I leave here the Sacred Amulet which came from the Forests of the Southern Landes, and the Noble Peoples we met there.'*"

"And....?" asked Blair, his eyes wide.

Jim read on. " *'We travelled for many weeks in the High Forests, searching for the Golde that was fabled to lie there. Thus we did meet many different Familees, or Tribes, who lived a Pagan Life in these Forests, but whom I found to be Noble and Brave Menne. And I did observe how in each tribe we encountered, one of their menfolk...' – oh, wow, listen to this – '... one of their menfolk could see and hear all manner of Strange Things, and foretell what would occur as if by some Magicke. And by doing so, they did keep their Familee safe. The Worde they did use for these Menne was akin to what we might call a Watchman...' "*

"A watchman, a sentinel!" breathed Blair. He gripped Jim's wrist. "Go on!"

" *'And My men and I fell sick and one Familee gave us food and cured us of the fever, and while we rested some time with them, I did observe that on their feast days the Headman would lay a Sacred Amulet upon the Watchman, and this Amulet did give the Watchman his Strange Powers and the wearing of it did keep them strong. And so when we left that village, may Godde forgive me, I resolved to take the Amulet with me, so that I might wear it and take its power.'* "

"Ceremonies, Jim! He was there!"

" *'But Wild Beasts and Tempests beset us on our journey to our Vessel, and on our way home, we were nearly wrecked upon the shores of the Americas as we travelled North. I saw this was my Punishment from Godde for my terrible Act against the peoples of the South. And Godde did speke to me in a dream and he did say to me, 'Take the Amulet and hide it so that*

it remains for only Goode Menne to wear. And not a Thief like thee.' And so I leave it here, on the slopes of Koma Kulshan, and I will hope that some Goode Menne may find it when I am but dust, and keep it safe.' That's it, Chief. There's no more writing."

"Oh, my God," whispered Blair "He saw them! Fabian actually saw them!" He was shivering uncontrollably now, and Jim knew it wasn't from the excitement of the find. Then Blair slumped down onto the ground, his eyes closing, and Jim put an arm around his chest and pulled him close. Blair's pulse thrummed through his body, weakly fluttering like a captive bird.

"A Watchman, a Sentinel..." he repeated

"Hey, what am I, chopped liver?" asked Jim, in an attempt to be cheery. But Blair had slipped into unconsciousness.

*

Eleanor Hao stumbled down the rocky track towards the road. She could no longer see the helicopter circling, but there were vehicles parked up on the trail, their blue lights flashing. Police cars, but that was fine. After all, she was a victim, wasn't she? A survivor of a terrible natural disaster, lucky to get out alive.

Police rushed to her as they spotted her. She was disconcerted to see their guns were up. She quickly threw her own gun into the scrub and walked on calmly, but they still looked hostile. Then one stepped forward, a tall, imposing black man with a scowl like thunder.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"Who?" she faltered. "Please, some water? I have had a very bad time. Please, help me!" She tried a winning smile. The big man grabbed her, twisted one of her arms behind her back and took the puzzle-box from out of her other hand.

"I'll take that. Ellison and Sandburg, where are they?"

"That box is mine," she said calmly. "And its contents are mine."

The big man dropped the box on the ground and smashed his boot on top of it. It shattered into jagged pieces, breaking along the lines of the puzzle mechanism, and Madam Hao shrieked, all composure gone. The box was empty.

"Now you got nothin' " said the big man. "So, where are they?"

*

"So you see, Jim" said Blair, awake again in his fever, the amulet gripped tightly in his fist, "McKee confused ritual with the giving of power. An easy mistake to make. But where he may have a point is in the hieroglyphics that were in the puzzle-box."

Jim bathed Blair's face again with a piece of torn shirt soaked with their remaining water. It wasn't doing much good; Blair's breathing was fast and shallow, and his mind was now in turmoil.

"There's no hieroglyphics, Chief," soothed Jim. "They were map references."

"Oh, were they? Not Fabian's, huh? I guess he wouldn't have had GPS, right...? Sorry, I'm kinda confused right now. But hey, you know what's really interesting about this? McKee and McKay!"

"What?" said Jim, still straining to listen for a helicopter.

"You know! McKay was who I pretended to be when we first met! It's so close to McKee! Almost the same name! Spooky, huh? It's like we have this destiny goin' on here, pulling us together; you and me, Fabian and his treasure, the box...."

"... this hole in the ground?" put in Jim, amused despite his feeling of despair.

"Could be, could be," nodded Blair, sagely. "We'll make an anthropologist out of you yet, Jim!"

Jim held Blair tight as his ravings got less voluble. His whole arm was now swollen, right up to the shoulder, and ugly blue-red lines of internal bleeding were coursing into his chest. His skin was like fire and the sweat poured off him. Jim didn't think the guy still had that much fluid in his body.

"Hang on, buddy, please," he whispered into Blair's hair, but Blair wasn't listening, just muttering about 'treasure' and 'paper' and 'McKay'. Too long, thought Jim, it's been too long. They won't get to us in time, not for Blair, anyway.

Treasure; Jim turned it all over in his mind. Money and gold and secrets and bearer bonds; all some kind of treasure to someone. All he could see it brought was unhappiness and death. Ten men had died that afternoon on the mountain, all looking for a scrap of paper; McKee had driven himself mad believing he had the world's most valuable secret to keep safe; Jim himself had been brought up in a house that worshipped the getting of wealth above all other things, including love. And although he'd bought out of that belief long, long ago, the isolation and distrust it cultivated was harder to shake.

He looked down at the man in his arms. All these people searching for treasure; they just didn't know where to look. The day riches entered Jim Ellison's life for the first time was the day some guy calling himself McKay walked into his hospital room and straight into his face; a man who put no store on material wealth, but who had more richness of spirit than anyone Jim had ever met. Ah, that was destiny, all right – for both of them. It had taken a while to recognise that treasure for what it was, but by now it was second nature. And he didn't want to contemplate life without it. He felt his throat tighten, and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push the thought away.

He was still rocking Blair in his embrace when he picked up faint sounds above them. He listened hard; lots of people this time. With their luck, he thought, it would be the entire West Coast *Cosa Nostra* coming to get Sandburg's piece of paper.

"Down here!" he yelled, but his throat was as dry as the dirt floor, and he hardly made a sound. He concentrated his hearing, and with horror heard them turn in another direction. With a flash of inspiration, he grabbed his gun and fired three shots up through the gap above them.

The sounds stopped for a moment, and then started to get louder, converging on their position. He fired three more times, to make the point.

"*Jesus H. Christ!*" yelled a familiar voice. "Those sonsabitches are *shooting* at us!"

Jim put his head back and laughed. He was still laughing when the first of the rescue crew slipped down beside him on a rope and pulled Blair - still breathing, still raving - from his arms.

*

Epilogue

The door cracked open.

"Jim?" Simon whispered. "You awake?"

There was a chuckle from inside the room, and Simon poked his head round the door to see Blair grinning at him. Jim, who was lying on his back under crisp white sheets, with his leg neatly harnessed and a thick dressing on his temple marring his patrician features, groaned and opened his eyes.

"Yeah, Simon," replied Blair. "He's awake. So'm I, now. Why don't you just come in?"

Simon Banks pushed the door open the rest of the way and tiptoed in. It was a small two-bed ward and, once inside, he felt he pretty much filled what space was available.

"It's just..." Simon went on, sitting down gingerly on a tiny chair, "... I have to go back to Cascade right now. Wanted to see how you guys were doing."

"We're doing fine, Simon," said Blair in a tired voice, shifting slightly in the bed to face in Simon's direction and smiling at the big man. "Aren't we, Jim?"

Jim grunted.

"If you call having one hell of a headache and a crocked leg fine, yeah, I'm just peachy."

"Don't mind him," sighed Blair. "We all know what a bundle of joy he is when he's laid up. Look, Simon, I want to thank you again for what you did, in coming after us. We ... well, I'm sure Jim would have got us out of that cave, somehow..." - there was a snort from Jim at this

– "...but... you know... time was kind of the essence, and I don't see how we woulda got down the mountain without you."

Blair's expression was serious, and Simon thought back to the anxious hours on the hillside when he wasn't sure they would get Blair out in time. Bleeding, shaking, sweating and delirious, with an arm the size of a marrow, Sandburg had been faintly gibbering on about maps, and pieces of paper, and 'McKee is McKay', and had seemed at the end of his resistance. The mountain rescue crew from the 'chopper had looked unhappy, to say the least.

"Well, if truth be told, you owe it to Eleanor Hao. Sure, I'd got the local boys and the rescue 'chopper out. It was a pretty good bet there were people after you, and we thought the 'chopper was the best way to find you. But even though they were using their heat-detecting cameras – the ones they use for avalanches, lost hikers and stuff – they couldn't pick you up. Couldn't pick *anyone* up."

"Because we were all buried," intoned Jim.

"Yep. But they saw there'd been the mudslide, and they were looking in that area when they picked up the heat image of Eleanor Hao, making her way down the mountain. We found her, and persuaded her to tell us exactly where you were."

He smiled grimly to himself as he remembered how quickly the woman had caved, after he'd told her a few home truths about her situation.

"But if you ask me," Simon went on, with a significant look at Jim, "being bitten by a horde of rattlers is a damn sight worse than getting a knock on the head. And you aren't making a tenth as much fuss about it. Seriously, Sandburg, don't you feel *ill*?"

"Thank you, Captain. I love you, too," grumbled Jim, under his breath. Blair smiled at his friend's response, and then shrugged.

"Weird, isn't it? Boy, I was pretty out of it by the end. I think I was lucky that these were sleepy rattlers. They'd probably only recently got in that hole to hibernate. There's still a lot of swelling..." – he indicated his bandaged arm with his good hand – "... and I can't claim to feel tip-top, but the anti-venom has been working. They're happy with me."

Though he was still very pale, noted Simon, with big dark rings around his eyes, and odd bruising along his left shoulder and upper arm where here had been other haemorrhaging symptoms. Tip-top was hardly the term.

"You know," went on Blair, his eyes shut now, "if you hadn't turned up when you did.... if you hadn't got the county cops and mountain rescue on our tails... Well, the docs say there was probably enough venom there to kill, because of the multiple bites, so you have to get the anti-venom pretty quick to avoid that kind of outcome. Within two hours, they say. Yeah, I was a bit over that, I know, but luckily the rescue guys carry anti-venom as standard. If they hadn't, well, maybe it would have been a different story."

Different story, right enough, thought Simon. The doctor in charge had explained the potential outcome if the anti-venom had failed with Sandburg – organ damage and possible heart failure.

"Yeah, well, I'm just here to get you guys out of trouble. You should have worked that out by now," Simon mumbled, abashed. He got up and walked to the window to peer out.

"Weather's better. The trip back won't be that bad, I guess." He turned again towards the two beds, and saw that Blair's eyes were still shut, and Jim had moved his head on the pillow to fix a concerned gaze on his friend, a crease of worry on his brow. Simon harrumphed

"Well, to bring you up to date, it seems that by sheer dumb luck you two managed to thwart a consortium of some of Cascade's worst gangs in recovering some hidden stashes of bearer bonds – seven million dollars' worth in total."

Jim's eyes popped.

"Wow! Well, they did say they said they were looking for a lot of money. And that bit of paper had the locations, right? But we only found that out when they told us. How did you piece it all together?"

"I *am* a detective, as you may recall," replied Simon haughtily. "Also, Eleanor Hao, having failed to get the box for her employers, is now worried about her own odds of staying alive and keen to talk to the Feds about making a deal. She's been a mine of information. So, the story is that the owner of the puzzle-box was this elderly guy called Conrad Dixon. He'd been a kind of unofficial banker for Cascade's bad guys for years – completely under our radar, as it happens."

He went back to the little chair, and sat down again.

"It was assumed he had a lot of personal wealth as he was a dealer and collector in antique European furniture, so large cash transactions he made in his business were pretty much ignored by the authorities. In fact, it was mostly a front. He did have *some* money, but what the various mob outfits wanted was his reputation. He laundered money for them, and then held on to the cleared funds in bearer bonds, hidden at locations known only to him. At an agreed point, he would tell his customer the GPS location, and they would go and retrieve their money."

"Modern treasure," mumbled Blair from the other bed, his eyes still closed but with a smirk on his face.

"And he kept the GPS details in the puzzle box?" queried Jim, frowning as he concentrated on Simon's story.

"Yep. Robbery Division have been keeping me up to speed with their investigation while I've been waiting for you two to wake up. The box was kind of a quirk with him, I gather. That's why he always had it with him. I guess he thought it went with his dashing role as banker for Cascade's Most Wanted, and his various customers all left him alone, out of mutual interest.

Anyway, a number of them had deposited cash with him a while back for laundering, and were waiting for the word to collect their bonds. Except that Dixon dropped dead of a heart attack yesterday, without talking to them. From what the delivery guys have told us, it seems that, by accident, the puzzle-box ended up in one of the crates they collected from Dixon yesterday, and were taking to Blair's pal, Mr Oppenheim. And he in turn sold it to you."

"Gave it," said Blair suddenly, eyes open now and pushing himself up in the bed. "Mr Oppenheim wouldn't have known anything about that! It was a kind of throwaway gift to me. He didn't even *want* the thing! He wouldn't have had anything to do with the money laundering!"

Simon leaned over and pushed Blair back on the bed with the flat of his hand.

"Cool it, Sandburg! We know that! Poor guy was just caught in the middle. That's why they attacked him and turned over his store yesterday evening, after he gave the box to you."

Blair struggled up again instantly; Jim's head snapped up from the pillow.

"What?" exclaimed Blair in concern. "Is he okay?"

"Don't worry," replied Simon, in attempt to soothe. "He's recovering well. He's a tough old bird. He's talking about opening again next week. His nephews came over from Wenatchee way to repair the store and get it all in order for him. Sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you all this last night. But you guys..." - he baulked at saying how ill they'd both looked - "... you guys looked out for the count. Everything is in hand, anyway, and I wouldn't be surprised if there are citations galore on this. After all, looks like the two of you managed to eliminate some of the best men our local crime barons have to offer."

"To be fair," muttered Jim "they did quite a bit of that themselves.... "

"That being the case," continued Simon expansively, "I think we can overlook that you two took off on a whim after buried treasure on a fake pirate's map."

"Nothing fake about it..." came Blair's defiant voice.

"Don't listen to him, "said Jim with a smile. "So, how did it all come together?"

"Robbery Division alerted us to the attack on Mr Oppenheim, because they could see you'd been the last customer, Jim. And Mr Oppenheim talked to Joel and me as soon as he regained consciousness. He was very concerned for you both, and very contrite. He said they had asked him repeatedly about the puzzle-box and he'd done his best to keep you two out of it, but eventually they saw his credit card slips and guessed what had happened. You were the only customers that afternoon."

"The Japanese Chinese takeout, Jim," said Blair, in a knowing tone, earning himself a nod of confirmation from Jim and a look of bafflement from their captain.

"All sorts of odd people kept turning up, one way or another," clarified Jim, "including some late night Oriental visitors. Two cars tried to run me over before we left Cascade and, before that, Sandburg had a run-in with Miss Hao. Always a sucker for a pretty girl, hey, Chief?"

Blair pulled a face.

"Oh, like *you've* never had that problem," he muttered to Jim, who just grinned at him.

"Mr Oppenheim reckons his attackers were East European; Russian probably," said Simon, musing. "It's like the United Nations of Crime, this case." Then he frowned. "And I'm afraid there's more. Not only did they burgle Dixon's house out in Woodlands just after he was taken away to the morgue, but I'm sorry to say they also turned over the Loft. It must have been just after you left."

Jim collapsed back on the bed with a groan of frustration.

"Oh, man..." began Blair in a stricken voice, but Simon held up his hand.

"Seriously, I don't think there's much damage. They just pulled out books from the shelves, and stuff from the cupboards. Oh, and a couple of those weird mask things got smashed."

"Oh, my God," intoned Blair, his eyes wide. "They were on loan from the Rainier collection. I am so dead."

"Look on the bright side, Chief," commiserated Jim, "you almost were. Maybe they'll take that into account. Works for me..." he added in an undertone,

"*Anyway*," said Simon heavily, miffed at the many interruptions to his story, "putting everything together, we guessed this is where you and the bad guys must be headed, all of you after buried treasure, and got the rescue guys out to scan the area. Didn't realise we'd be finding buried *people*, though."

"The treasure's not buried anymore," said Blair, with a significant look at the bag on the table at the foot of his bed. Simon went over and poked inside.

"What the hell is that?"

"What we brought out of that cave, at Sandburg's insistence," said Jim, his lips twisted in wry humour. "The last testament of Fabian McKee, the Greatest Privateer in the World, and nutty as a fruit cake."

"Turns out he thought he had the formula for turning base metal into gold; you know, alchemy," continued Blair. "So you can guess how successful *that* was going to be."

"There's something else..." said Simon, peering into the bag.

"An old piece of junk," said Jim dismissively.

"Excuse me!" retorted Blair with dignity. "It is a rather rare piece of Pre-Columbian jewellery, in fact; a necklace, or amulet, which no doubt had ritual meaning. McKee must have picked it up on his travels. It's a very nice find. Stop poking at it."

"Okay, okay..." sighed Jim, and Simon withdrew his fingers quickly.

"And so, whilst Fabian's hoard will not make us rich beyond our wildest dreams, I for one am very pleased with what we've found," continued Blair, with a significant look at Jim. Then he settled back on his bed, shutting his eyes again.

Simon looked at them both, considering.

"I'll be back in a couple of days, okay?" he said softly. "Maybe we can get you moved soon."

"Thanks, Simon," said Jim, clearly making an effort now to keep awake. Blair, meanwhile, had gone quiet, his breathing evening out. *Asleep again*, thought Simon.

"Yeah, okay. Be good, you two."

*

Blair was awake. It was early morning and, though he had slept a fair while, he still didn't feel anything but exhausted. *We were lucky*, he thought to himself, gazing over at Jim's bed where the unusual shape of James Ellison with a leg in traction was a vague shadow in the predawn light. *I was lucky. Man, I've been real lucky.*

And not just because he had such good friends, he reflected; people who looked after him and saved his neck on a regular basis. No, the big picture was that he'd somehow landed in a place where his life was entwined with that of a remarkable man.

He looked at the bag at the end of the bed. They hadn't told Simon the whole truth – after all, it would only have confused and probably disturbed him; he was uncomfortable with Sentinel stuff. But Fabian McKee's testament, scribbled on the document that had been left in the cavern, had been emphatic.

Almost two centuries earlier, McKee had made a discovery in his travels amongst the tribal peoples of South America. They were people he called Watchmen, who possessed special powers, and he believed that it was the wearing of an amulet, of the kind he had hidden in the buried casket, that gave the wearer such powers.

But McKee's conscience had stricken him. He had stolen the amulet, and for his penance, he had determined that he could not wear it himself, but rather wished to hide it for better men to come. Thus he had decided on his long and arduous trek into the wilds of the northern forests, abandoning his ship and crew, to find a hiding place amongst the mountains that were sacred to another tribal culture.

Yep, as Jim had said, nutty as a fruit cake. Whether it was the guilt that turned McKee's brain, or whether his madness was already a feature, Blair could not tell from this distance. But the man had clearly been obsessed.

Blair smiled to himself; he knew the feeling. And it was, of course, gratifying indeed to find more information on Sentinels to corroborate Burton, though he doubted whether the product of Mad McKee's ravings would stand up well in academia. But to Blair, the main point was that McKee had clearly seen Sentinels in action, just as Blair now did himself in his daily life and work with Jim.

However McKee had got the wrong end of the stick. He'd been insistent on the wearing of the amulet as being the key. Blair knew differently; whatever the device - amulets, rituals, fetishes – the token didn't matter. What mattered was the person; a Sentinel's powers were a natural gift.

And in Jim Ellison, the values of the Sentinel were reflected in the man's own character and attributes. Observing Jim day by day, Blair's strong conviction was that a Sentinel in the truest form would be one whose powers were allied with strength of mind and principle, and where the individual served their friends and community selflessly and with dedication. It was a calling, not simply the consequence of having special senses, and it was a calling that Jim exemplified.

He looked back again at the sleeping figure in the bed next to his. Academic perspective was getting harder to maintain. In spite of Blair's grand theories, Jim was no longer a research subject; he was a colleague, companion, and a beloved friend. That was treasure, all right.

Blair mentally raised a toast to Fabian McKee, who was now relegated to wherever in Paradise was reserved for pirates, no matter now delusional, but who had seen Sentinels all those years ago with his own eyes, and had become as fascinated and entranced as Blair himself.

Fabian had got it wrong, but Blair... well, as far as Blair was concerned, he had got it right. Because, deep down, he knew he had his treasure already. It was hiding in plain sight every day, and he felt with every fibre of his being that it was down to him to keep that treasure safe.

He smiled at Jim's inert form, and then lay back, shutting his eyes, but still with the smile on his lips.

Yeah, it was a crummy job, but, hey, someone had to do it.

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*A/N - Notes on vocabulary used:*

*Yakuza* – Japanese crime syndicate

*Triad* – Chinese crime syndicate

*Bratva* – Russian 'mafia'

*Pakhan* – boss, head of strategy in *Bratva* grouping

*chuvák* – buddy, kiddo (used insultingly)