

Survival

by Bluewolf

Jim woke with a blinding headache, and lay still for a moment before trying to move. Headaches were familiar, but the last time he remembered one this severe was the morning after some of his army 'friends' had set out to get him totally blind drunk. He had in fact drunk them all under the table, but the resulting hangover had lasted for forty-eight hours.

But he couldn't remember having drunk anything the previous evening.

He blinked open reluctant eyes, and stared up at the... sky?

What the...

He sat up and looked around. He was lying in a forest clearing, with a still sleeping Blair lying beside him.

This was more than weird, he thought, suddenly realizing that Blair was shivering, and then registering that he, too, was cold. Very cold.

And then memory of a sort connected. The PD garage. He and Blair walking towards the truck but still some twenty yards from it. Two uniforms coming towards them, as if heading for their cars. A sudden attack...

Had those been genuine Patrol officers, or criminals dressed in Patrol uniform? But if they were genuine, then why...?

But he thought he knew. Not everyone was happy about Blair getting a detective's badge. Not everyone was happy that Jim had accepted Blair as his permanent, official partner. Not after Blair had claimed so very publicly that he had made up the facts Sid Graham had quoted to publicize 'The

Sentinel'. It had made at least some of the cops at the precinct determined to prove that Jim did have heightened senses, though most of their attempts had been easy enough to ignore. This could well be an extreme, more imaginative attempt to prove it. They would assume that he would need his heightened senses to discover where they were, to find a way back to civilization.

At least it wasn't raining, so they were dry, but exposure was a definite danger, and they must have been lying there all night without shelter, in mid-November.

Had their attackers left them their guns? He checked. No. But - Yes! They had either not thought of, or had missed, the back-up fastened just above his ankle. He patted Blair's pockets. Uh-huh - they'd either missed, or dismissed as unimportant, Blair's Swiss army knife.

At least they were armed, but they had to get warm, and quickly.

He was still wondering about the best way to get them warm when a big elk moved out of the trees, grazing. He thought he could see a few more still in the shelter of the trees. It was, he was glad to see, a male - a female might still have dependent young. Of course, if it had been a female, all he needed to do was wait until a male came in sight.

Moving very slowly, knowing he would get only one chance, he aimed his gun at an eye, knowing that was the most vulnerable part of the head, and fired.

The animal jerked, its head coming up, and then it fell. A clean kill. From the trees there came the sound of animals fleeing through the undergrowth

He scrambled over to it and, glad of his experiences hunting with the Chopek, removed its hide. *Just as well Blair always keeps the knife sharp!* he thought as he did so.

He dragged the hide back to Blair, lay down beside him and dragged it, hair side down, over them both. The exertion had warmed him a bit - that would help warm the mini tent he had created. Holding Blair close to share as much body heat with him as possible, he wondered what was their best move, once Blair regained consciousness.

Still mulling over options, Jim fell asleep again.

When he woke again, Jim estimated that it was some two to three hours later, probably very early afternoon. Blair was no longer shivering, he was glad to see. Indeed, it was surprisingly warm under the elk hide. However, he knew he would have to do something to it very soon to keep it supple. Difficult to do, since they also needed it as a cover against the early winter cold...

A grunt beside him alerted him to Blair's return to consciousness. "Blair?"

"Jim? What...?"

"Good question. What's the last thing you remember?"

"The PD garage... a couple of Patrol officers... That's odd, I didn't recognize them. Okay, I don't *know* all of them, but I thought I did know most of them by sight. Anyway, they jumped us. And that's all I remember."

"Me too," Jim said.

"They can't have wanted to kill us if they left us a blanket - "

"Not a blanket, Chief."

Blair sniffed. "Oh, man! What is that? You got your sense of smell dialed down?"

Jim chuckled. "You'd better believe it. It's an elk hide. I woke earlier - there was an elk grazing nearby, so I shot it. It was him or us, Chief. It's out of season and I didn't want to do it but we needed its skin - and we'll need its meat - and I'm prepared to argue the legality of it in court if necessary."

"They left us our guns?"

"Yes and no. Our main guns, no. They either missed my backup or decided to give us a slight chance by leaving us with one, and they left your knife. But I haven't a clue where we are - I can't hear any road noise, so we're nowhere near a road, and when I was up earlier I couldn't see a sign of any kind of track so I don't know how we were brought here. Anyway, we need to move, to make a start on figuring out a way to survive, and the first thing we need to do is start curing this hide before it stiffens to the point where we can't use it."

"And we can smoke or dry some of the meat, to give us a supply of food," Blair said. He pushed himself into a sitting position. "Leave me the knife for ten minutes, then you can get it to cut some of the meat off the elk, then start working on the hide."

He looked around, picked up a dead branch, and started whittling at it. "Hey, while we're out here, think we could prospect for some gold?" he asked.

Although he knew Blair was joking, Jim pretended to think about it. "Not really a viable prospect," he said at last. "I don't think anyone ever found gold in Washington."

"Pity." Blair finished carving a flat 'platform' on part of the branch, and started sharpening a much thinner stick to a point. That done, he dug a small hole beside the edge of the 'platform'. "Okay," he went on. "Here's the knife. It'll take me a while to start a fire, because I need to find a stick with just the proper curve to use as a bow, but then you're going to be busy for a while too."

Jim grinned, took the knife, and started scraping the inside of the hide to make sure it was smooth and clean. Once that was done, he'd start thinking about butchering the dead elk.

As Blair returned from the forest with his tenth or twelfth armload of dead wood, Jim straightened from scraping the elk hide. "How close are you to getting that fire started, Chief?"

"Well, I think I have enough wood to keep it burning for a while," Blair said. He dropped the wood beside the rest that he had gathered, and said, "Could you just cut me a strip off the edge of the skin - couple of feet long, maybe quarter to half an inch wide?"

"Coming up." He cut carefully and gave the strip of hide to Blair.

"And can I have the knife for a minute again?" He quickly sharpened one end of two longish sticks and carefully whittled the bark off them, then gave the knife back to Jim.

Blair retrieved the short curved branch he had found and tied the strip of rawhide to it, twisted it around the sharpened stick, put the point in the little hole he had dug into the flat wood; put a stone on top of the stick, holding it firmly, and started a steady sawing motion. Before long smoke started to rise from the point of contact. He sawed for a few moments more, then carefully tipped the smoking embers onto a handful of dry moss that he had found, and blew gently on it. First smoke,

and then, seconds later, a flame arose. He put the burning moss down carefully onto the stone 'bed' he had made for it and laid small twigs across it, then a 'tent' of bigger ones. Within a minute he had a small fire, which he nursed carefully; soon the fire was burning well.

Then he constructed a simple spit using two stout branches of equal length that had natural forks at one end, pushing them into the ground well clear of the fire, checking that the longer cleaned and debarked branch would fit across them.

Jim crossed to him carrying two big lumps of meat he had hacked from the haunches of the elk. Blair took them and carefully pushed his chosen stick through first one, then the other, and balanced the meat carefully above the fire. As Blair settled to watch the fire and the cooking meat, Jim went back to the elk and began cutting strips of meat from the shoulders. When he took those back to Blair, he didn't have to explain anything; Blair was ready for him, took the strips of meat, 'strung' them onto the second cleaned stick and placed them where they would catch the smoke. Jim went back to the elk, and although Blair couldn't see what he was doing, he knew that Jim had now started curing the hide. It was something that Blair knew how to do, but preferred to leave for someone else to tackle. He was, however, beginning to think about making a rough shelter for the night; November was not the time of year to try sleeping without some sort of shelter. Then in the morning they could try to find their way out of the forest and back to Cascade.

But how? If there had been a road anywhere near, Jim would, as he had said, have heard the sound of traffic on it. Here there were no landmarks; the trees hid everything. Which direction would be the best to take?

Westwards, he decided. Any other direction could take them deeper into the wilderness. But sooner or later, westwards would take them to the sea, to a road that paralleled the sea. He wondered if Jim had reached the same conclusion.

Probably.

He turned the meat on its primitive spit, and checked the jerky. Not that it would be *proper* jerky, since it would simply be smoke-cured, but it would keep longer than the cooked meat. He added some more wood to the fire.

"Jim?"

"Yeah?"

"Still using the knife?"

"Not for the moment."

"Great." Blair scrambled to his feet and moved quickly over to where Jim was still working the hide. Taking the knife, he went to the edge of the clearing, checking the trees there.

As he had already noticed, although most of the trees were conifers, there were some deciduous trees as well, and it took only a few minutes before he targeted a small clump of birches. Working quickly, he stripped the bark off the trunks and larger branches of two of them - with luck that would be enough and he wouldn't need to destroy a third - and returned to the fire. Before long he had manufactured two reasonably-sized birchbark containers that they could carry on their backs. He paused long enough to turn the meat on the spit and check the jerky again, then set to work twisting strips of the inner bark into cord.

By the time the meat was cooked, Jim had finished working the hide. They ate, but sparingly, both knowing that this meat might have to last them for several days; they couldn't depend on making another kill, and although earlier in the year it might have been possible to gather some vegetable food, by mid-November it was unlikely that they would find any. Pine nuts would have been good, but they were a bit too far north for any of the pinyon pines to grow, and none of the others had kernels big enough to be worth the effort of gathering. No, better to assume that this meat would have to last them until they found their way out of the forest... and although there was more meat on the elk, they were slightly limited by how much they would be able to carry, as well as how long the meat would last before spoiling. Cooking and smoking it had added some time to how long it would keep and the November cold would help too, but neither man thought that even the smoked meat would keep longer than perhaps a week before beginning to go off, since it was only roughly smoked. At least there were no flies to lay eggs on the meat.

Daylight was beginning to fade. Moving quickly now, both knowing what their next moves must be, Jim went back to the carcass and dragged it away from the clearing, while Blair gathered some more branches, and using the cord he had made tied them together to make a framework over which he draped the elk hide, tying it in place with more of the cord. By the time he was finished, putting it close to, and with its open end facing, the fire, its back to the wind, it was almost completely dark.

They would have to alternate watches, keeping the fire going and checking the still-drying jerky, but he put the cooked meat into one of the containers and stored it inside the little shelter.

Jim rejoined him just before he started actively worrying whether even a sentinel could see to make his way through the trees, and although it was still early - if they had been working by the clock - they settled down for the night, with Blair - who was used to a later bedtime than Jim - taking the first watch.

Jim's army training showed in the speed with which he went to sleep.

Sitting cross-legged at the 'doorway' of their tiny shelter, Blair sighed softly, knowing that Jim would sleep though whatever noise he made; Jim had long since imprinted Blair totally on his senses - his subconscious could identify every sound Blair made as being made by Blair, and these would not waken him unless they were caused by distress.

At least worry wasn't as invasive as distress. He was worried, and struggled to prevent that worry from disturbing Jim.

Just who had those guys in cop uniform been? For he was far from sure that they actually were cops, unless they were new to the precinct - and if they were new-to-the-precinct cops, what had they been told to make them think that kidnapping two detectives and stranding them somewhere in the middle of nowhere was a good idea?

Was it an attempt by some person or persons in the PD to show Jim that the 'fraud' had been lying all along, and - because it could be proved that he was a Rainier graduate - had only book knowledge, nothing more, and would be nothing but a liability as a detective?

Was it an attempt by someone to prove that Jim really was a sentinel? If it was, it certainly wouldn't be an effective proof, since basically all they had so far used to help them survive was their combined knowledge of the survival techniques used by various hunter-gatherer tribes, and that was what would *keep* them alive.

Blair put another branch on the fire, angling it so that the smoke swirled around the jerky, and then abandoning his thoughts as not-very-helpful speculation, looked up at the few stars he could see. They were very bright, and he knew the trees would be white with frost by morning.

He wasn't sure just how long he sat there, putting a new branch onto the fire from time to time. He was tired, but he didn't feel sleepy; he simply relaxed, not quite meditating - he needed to remain alert, keep feeding the fire - but letting his mind wander.

"Chief?" Jim's voice was soft.

"Oh, hi, Jim. Sleep well?"

"Yes - and now it's your turn. I'm sure you let me sleep longer than - "

"Nah, I'm not really sleepy. I didn't do all that much yesterday - you were the one who was busy, what with butchering the elk then dressing the hide then dragging what was left of it away. You must have taken it quite a long way - I haven't heard any sounds of squabbling animals."

"Not that far - there's a cliff of sorts - fifty, sixty feet high - a couple of hundred yards away, and I just pushed it over that." He fell silent for a moment, then added, "I can hear something at it. But whatever it is is safely at the bottom of the cliff and we're at the top. Now you curl up and get some sleep, let me take over the watch."

Blair looked at him, seeing him only faintly in the firelight. Going more by the decisive note in Jim's voice than anything else, he nodded, but reluctantly.

"Okay."

He uncrossed his legs and wriggled carefully back while Jim edged his way forward. Some heat had built up in the little shelter - not much, but they didn't want to lose what there was by accidentally tipping it over.

Once he was lying down, Blair realized that he was sleepier than he had thought. His last awareness before sleep took him was of Jim, carefully laying another branch across the fire...

When Blair woke, it was full daylight. Jim was still sitting patiently beside the fire, just outside their shelter, and as Blair blinked himself fully awake, Jim carefully laid a small branch onto the fire. It sparked for a moment, as if damp, and Blair realized that his forecast of frost had been correct; the ground was white.

Blair pulled himself forward, and once he was fully out of the makeshift 'tent', said accusingly, "You should have wakened me earlier."

Jim shook his head. "You let me sleep far longer than you should," he replied. "I know you don't seem to need much sleep, but you do need more than just two or three hours. We'll get on better today if you're rested enough to waken naturally."

Blair nodded as if accepting that, then made his way over to the trees, ducked behind one and relieved himself. Wakened naturally? Well, if you could call waking desperately needing to pee 'waking naturally', then yes, he had...

He moved briskly back to rejoin Jim, noting as he went that the trees were mostly Christmas-tree-frosted. But the sky was still cloudless, and on one side of the clearing the sun was hitting the tops of the trees, and the frost was melting.

While Blair had been 'busy', Jim had reached into the shelter and retrieved the lump of meat they had already begun to eat, and by the time Blair rejoined him, he was carefully carving two fairly thick slices off it.

"Breakfast," he said as he handed over a slice. "Then we'll have to think about moving."

"I thought westwards would be the best direction," Blair said, and bit off a mouthful.

Jim chewed and swallowed. "I think you're right," he agreed, then grinned. "Which way is west?" There was a teasing note in his voice.

Blair glanced at him. "Like you don't know," he muttered. "Approximately that way." He pointed a little to the left of the thawing trees.

"But can you hold that line?" Jim asked, more seriously.

"Probably," Blair said, "but why have a sentinel along and do my own route-finding?"

They took another slice of meat each.

When they had finished eating, they began to disassemble their makeshift camp.

Blair carefully untied the cord he had used to fasten the elk hide to the framework he had made, then carefully separated the branches that formed it. Jim rolled the hide up carefully; it just fitted into one of the birchbark containers. He put the meat into the other one, carefully sliding the partially-smoked meat off its 'skewer' and putting it on top of the cooked meat. Then he kicked up earth to toss onto the fire while Blair fastened all the branches together, including the ones he had used to start the fire. The wood 'platform' that was part of his fire-making kit he put into the container, and then coiled the rest of the cord he had made and put it on the top along with the pieces he had used to tie the 'tent' together. He fastened the bundle of branches to the back of the container.

"Ready," he said.

Jim checked - unnecessarily - to make sure his gun was safely in its holster, and that he had Blair's knife; double-checked that the fire was out; glanced around the clearing once more.

"Ready?" he asked.

Blair nodded, settling the carrier more comfortably on his back.

Side by side, they headed into the forest, heading westwards.

"I don't think we'll have to worry about bears," Blair said after a while. "This late in the year, they're probably hibernating."

"Still leaves wolves and coyotes," Jim replied.

"They're not really as dangerous as people think," Blair said. "They need to be really starving to come after humans. I doubt they're desperate enough yet to do that. Oh, it made sense to shift the

elk carcass away - no point in tempting fate - but any time we've been camping - how often have we had a problem with wild animals?"

"We don't usually come camping in the winter."

"We're only just into winter. At least part of November counts as still being Fall."

"You could have fooled me," Jim muttered.

Blair suppressed a grin. He had a suspicion that Jim was trying to distract him, keep him thinking of things other than their current situation. "Okay, I grant you that north of the Arctic Circle they're well into twenty-four-hour nights by November, and it really is winter. But, Jim, when I was twenty I spent a full year living with the Inupiat near Barrow - and before you ask, that's in Alaska, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean. I'd just finished my Masters, and up till then I'd concentrated on studying the tribes of the rain forests. Eli suggested that it could be useful for my career if I had some knowledge of the Arctic peoples too, so... " He shrugged.

"Eli?" Jim asked. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"Eli Stoddard, my mentor? The guy who offered me a place on an expedition to Borneo?"

"Of course. I knew the name, just couldn't quite remember... "

"Anyway, I learned a lot from them. They knew about sentinels too, though - like all the tribes I met on expeditions - they wouldn't admit to having one. I was never quite sure I believed them - there were two fairly young guys who lived on the outskirts of their settlement and who were given a degree of respect that was unusual, given their age - or, rather, lack of age. They went out with the hunters a lot of the time, but never when I went along, which always struck me as odd. But I reckoned it wouldn't be polite to ask why.

"I think if I'd stayed longer than the year they might have opened up to me... but although I enjoyed the year, my interest was still mostly with the South American tribes."

They fell silent as they walked on, but it was a comfortable silence.

After a while they came on a stream, and stopped to drink; both hoping that when they had to stop for the night, there would be another stream nearby. Thirst satisfied, they carried on.

It was fairly dark under the trees, though here and there a shaft of sunlight did reach the ground. But then the sunlight started hitting higher up the trees, and when they reached another stream, they stopped and looked at each other.

"Time to stop for the night, I think," Jim said.

"Yeah."

Jim set to work gathering fallen wood for a fire while Blair reassembled the framework for their 'tent'. Then while Jim threw the elk hide over the framework and fastened it, Blair lit their fire. It would give them heat for an hour or two, before they allowed it to go out - no need to keep it burning this night, with nothing more to cook.

They ate, took turns going to the stream to drink, then having let the fire die down they wriggled into their shelter, lying together for the warmth, and went to sleep.

Four days later they were still walking through forested country, though the steep downhill slope of the first two days had lessened to a more gradual, but still downhill, incline.

They hardly spoke as they went, their silence comfortable even though their circumstances weren't. Jim had half expected Blair to reel off facts and figures about the explorers who first opened up America and the difficulties they encountered - he had no doubt that Blair's mind was full of such knowledge - and wasn't sure whether or not he regretted Blair's silence on the subject. It would have given him something to think about other than the constant, depressing mental reiteration of 'Who, who, who, why, why, why?' that occupied his thoughts.

In the one thing over which they had absolutely no control, they were lucky. Although it was cold, the weather remained dry.

And then, between one step and the next, they came to the edge of the forest. They were standing at the side of a very rough road, and a short distance to their right was a house... with a car parked in front of it, and Jim could hear voices.

Blair glanced at him. "What's our story?"

"Story?"

"Well, we either tell them the full truth or we slant it a bit. I'm in favor of slanting it a bit - "

"I'm not sure," Jim said. "We don't know how much publicity our disappearance has caused. Bound to have hit the papers - even if they moved the truck, so that nobody knows we were kidnapped from the station garage, even if they hid the truck where it hasn't been found yet, there was going to be an alarm raised when we didn't turn up for work and couldn't be contacted at the loft. Even if Simon tried to sit on it someone - even one of the kidnappers - is bound to have said something where a reporter could hear it."

"So we just say that we were kidnapped, we don't know who was responsible, and dumped?"

Jim nodded. "It's the truth, after all."

They walked up the track, paused for a moment at the door, then Blair knocked.

The voices went silent, and moments later the door opened. The woman who stood there had a brisk, no-nonsense look about her, and in her right hand she was holding a rolling pin. She looked perfectly capable of using it in self-defense if she had to.

"Hello," Blair said. "You have no idea how glad we are to find this place. We were kidnapped five days ago, and dumped in the forest - we've got no idea where we are. When we were jumped, we were both knocked out, and all we could do, once we regained consciousness, was pick a direction, start walking and hope to find a road. Yes, I know that sounds crazy, and I don't even ask you to trust us enough to let us into the house - but could we ask you to phone Cascade PD, central precinct, ask for Captain Simon Banks in Major Crime, and tell him that Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg are here - wherever 'here' is - and could he please send someone to collect us."

"Cascade PD? You cops?"

"Yes, but we can't prove it right now - the kidnappers took our shields."

"The cops reported missing nearly a week ago were called Ellison and Sandburg." Another woman entered the hallway from what had to be the kitchen, moving easily into view. She, too, had a no-nonsense look and while she wasn't carrying anything that could be used as a weapon, she moved like someone who was well able to defend herself.

The one standing at the door glanced at her, then, "All right," she said. "Come in." She moved to one side as they entered, and the second woman indicated the kitchen door.

The rolling pin was clearly something that had been picked up as a potential weapon; there was no sign in the kitchen that anyone had been baking.

"Have a seat."

Blair caught Jim's eye as they slid the birchbark containers off their backs and put them down at their sides before they sat. They weren't totally trusted yet - and it was possible that living out here as they did, the two women had reason to be wary of strangers.

"Coffee?"

"Please," Blair said before Jim could say a word. "We've had nothing to drink but cold water for five days - hot coffee will be sheer nectar."

As the second woman began preparing the coffee, the first one said, "I'm Linnet and my sister is Robin."

Blair grinned over at Robin. "Hello," he said, and then to both, "I'm Blair and this is Jim. Now - will you phone Cascade for us? Or the local Highway Patrol? I don't ask to do it myself; what guarantee would you have that I *was* phoning the cops?"

Linnet nodded. "Okay." She went back into the hall, but left the door carefully open.

Robin brought the mugs over to the table. As she gave them the coffee, she asked, "Hungry?"

Robin, it seemed, was a little more trusting than Linnet... but something about the way she was holding herself...

"You do karate?" he asked and took a mouthful of coffee.

"Black belt," she admitted.

"I wish more women went in for martial arts," Blair said. Jim nodded agreement.

"Amazing how many men feel threatened by a woman who's able to defend herself, though," Robin said. There was a touch of bitterness in her voice.

"That sounds like experience talking," Blair murmured.

"At least he walked away before we got married," she said tightly and then, clearly dismissing the subject, repeated, "Hungry?"

"Yes, but we're not starving," Blair said. "Jim managed to take down an elk the first day, we cooked some of the meat and it's been cold enough that it didn't spoil, so we've had food, but it's almost finished."

"I'll heat up some soup," she said. Some moments later, as she emptied the contents of a tin into a pan, she added casually, "Five days. You've got survival skills, then?"

"Jim spent eighteen months living with a tribe in Peru a few years ago, and when I was at university I went on several expeditions where we were interacting with hunter-gatherer tribes. They were always happy to teach the ignorant white man who was willing to learn their skills."

Jim grinned and sat back, savoring the coffee, and let Blair chatter on, knowing that he was, in effect, fishing for trust and carefully reeling in this woman who - unlike her sister - seemed willing to believe their story without being given any proof other than their word.

Linnet moved into view. "Captain Banks would like to speak to one of you," she said.

Blair made a tentative movement, but Jim gulped the last of his coffee and pushed himself to his feet. "You just relax, Chief," he said. "I'll go."

He picked up the phone, noting that Linnet was still watching him cautiously, and wondered again what problems she and Robin could have had that they were so wary. "Hello, Simon."



"Jim! What happened? Where the hell have you been?"

"Simple answer? I don't know. I don't know who was responsible, I don't know where or how they dumped us and I don't know why.

"We were jumped in the PD garage. Just two guys, but I think they stuck us with something to knock us out. We woke in the middle of the forest, no obvious tracks, no sound of traffic so we weren't anywhere near a road, took a day to get ourselves organized and spent the last four hiking out, and lucky to hit this house. If you can get directions to here from the lady who phoned you and send someone to get us - "

"Yes, she's already done that. Joel said he knows the area - he's on his way, but reckoned it'll take him at least two hours."

"Thanks, Simon."

"And Jim - you are okay? Both of you?"

"Yes, we're okay - but we'll be glad to get home."

He rang off and put the phone down. "Thanks, Linnet." At least she looked a little more relaxed now that she'd had it confirmed that they were who they'd said they were.

As they went back to the kitchen, Jim said casually, "Do you have much trouble with - oh, people like hunters?"

"There's been the odd one who thought that two women living alone and as isolated as this would make an easy target. We'd some trouble two or three years ago from a group of white supremacists, but they haven't been around for a while - called themselves Sunrise Patriots. But we heard they'd been caught."

Jim grinned. "Yes. There might be one or two of the small fish still around, but most are in prison, sentences ranging from twenty years to life. Three are on death row, including their leader. His third appeal is coming up soon, but it won't get any further than the last two; he made the mistake of threatening to kill the players in a top basketball team. He'd have done it, too. I don't think you need worry about any of them coming back any time soon."

Blair drew in his breath sharply. "Jim - like you said, some of the small fry might still be around. You don't think we were kidnapped to keep us from testifying against Kincaid at his appeal, do you?"

Joel arrived a little under the two hours Simon had said he would take. When Robin answered his knock, he was careful to show her his badge; she led him into the kitchen.

Jim was sitting where he had a clear view of the door; as Joel entered, he seemed to relax. "Joel!"

"Jim. Blair. You guys all right?"

"Well, Robin and Linnet have been very tactful about it, but we're both desperately in need of a shower and clean clothes," Blair chuckled.

Joel sniffed. "Hmmm. Something certainly smells pretty ripe," he agreed.

"That's probably the elk hide," Blair said. "It smells even more than we do."

"Elk hide? I see there's a story here," Joel hinted.

"Unless you really want to take it as a memento, we can dispose of it for you," Robin said.

Jim and Blair glanced at each other. "Might be a good idea," Jim agreed. "We didn't have time to cure it properly. We don't need the last of the meat, either - it hasn't begun to spoil yet, so if you can use it... but if you'd rather just dump it, we won't be offended." He began to unpack the meat from its carrier and put it on the table.

"And if Jim says it's still good to eat, you can trust his word," Joel added.

"Thanks," Robin said. "It is all cooked, right?"

"Some of it is part smoked, so it's pretty rare," Blair said, "but it can still be stewed."

"Just slice up the roasted meat so you don't have to defrost too much at a time and get it straight into the freezer, if you're keeping it," Jim said. "There should be enough for three or four meals since it'll be augmented by potatoes and vegetables. Since we'd nothing to add to it, it would have done us maybe one more day - then we'd have had to go hungry unless we found something else to shoot; and we haven't seen anything big enough to shoot since we started walking."

"You might as well keep the carriers too," Blair said. "Again, use them if you can or dump them if you can't."

Joel looked at the carriers. "You made these?"

"Blair did," Jim said.

"Part of your anthropology training?" Joel asked.

"No," Blair said. "Naomi spent some time on a reservation when I was ten, eleven... one of the elders saw I was interested in their history, and showed me how to make containers like these... among other things. I think he was glad to find someone my age who was interested, so that he could pass on the knowledge, even though I wasn't one of his people."

"Are you sure you don't want them?" Robin asked.

"I wouldn't mind having one," Joel said.

"They're nothing special," Blair said dismissively.

"Blair, they're beautifully made," Joel told him.

Jim handed him the one the meat had been in. "The other one might smell a bit - it was the one we had the elk hide in. It's up to Robin and Linnet if they want to keep it."

"Thanks," Joel said.

"Now we'd better get moving," Jim went on. He looked at the sisters. "Thank you, ladies. If there's ever anything we can do for you, just call Major Crime in Cascade and ask to speak to one of us."

"I doubt we'll need to take you up on that, but thanks," Robin said. "Good luck finding whoever it was that kidnapped you."

They went out to Joel's car. Joel put the carrier carefully in the trunk, the three men got in, and as Joel started the engine, Blair waved to the two women, twisting around to watch until the car turned a corner and the house and its owners were lost to sight.

They drove for some distance before Joel said, "So what exactly did happen?"

"How much do you know?" Jim asked.

"Just that you disappeared five days ago, and then a couple of hours ago Simon said you'd turned up back there." He gestured backwards.

Jim explained what had happened, then added, "Is my truck still in the garage?"

"I think so."

"That's odd," Jim said. "I'd have expected it to be moved, hidden, to delay when we turned up missing, but according to Linnet and Robin, we were reported missing almost immediately. Leaving it in the PD garage was definitely going to mean we were missed very quickly."

"Maybe the men who attacked us didn't know which was our vehicle," Blair suggested. "We were grabbed when we were still several cars away from it."

"And even if they went through my pockets for the keys they wouldn't want to waste time trying every vehicle along the way we were going. Yes, that makes sense," Jim agreed. "Knock us out, throw us into their vehicle, and away."

"That rather falls into line with it maybe being someone attached to the Sunrise Patriots," Blair said. "Anyone who worked in the PD would know that old truck of yours."

Jim glanced back at him. "That truck's a classic," he said, throwing Blair's usual defense of his ancient car back at him.

Joel chuckled. "You'll never convince each other," he said.

They were met at the PD by a crowd of reporters - "How the hell did they hear about this?" Jim muttered irritably as Joel was forced to a stop by the sheer number of them.

"How do reporters hear about anything?" Blair responded and only Jim's sentinel hearing made it possible for him to make out Blair's words, drowned as they were by the questions being shouted at them.

They looked at each other, then Blair quietly wound down his window. "Sorry, guys," he said, projecting his voice in a way that had once been second nature as he lectured to a large room full of students, and the reporters quietened to listen. "We have to report to our boss, and until we've done that all we can say is 'no comment'. I'm quite sure you will get an official press release as soon as possible."

"Are you both all right?" someone asked.

"Yes, thanks," Blair replied, startled by, but appreciating, the question. "We weren't hurt at all."

Not really satisfied, but accepting that they would get no more information, the reporters drew back, and Joel drove on into the garage.

It was getting close to shift change, so there were a fair number of people around, and both men were a little embarrassed, but also somewhat touched, by the greetings they were given. Everyone, it seemed, was pleased to see them back and - well - moving under their own steam.

In the bullpen they were immediately surrounded, and submitted resignedly to pats on the back and a babble of voices greeting them. They gave their fellow detectives a minute, then Jim said, "Thanks, guys, but we have to report to Simon," and the group opened to let them approach Simon who was standing at the open door of his office.

Instead of taking them in, however, he said, "Warren wants to see you."

Both nodded; neither was really surprised. Simon went with them as they turned and left the bullpen; behind them Jim could hear the questions being thrown at Joel...

Their meeting with Warren went fairly quickly, but he had gained points with both of them for speaking to them himself instead of just waiting for Simon's report.



The next few days passed relatively quietly. Everyone they saw seemed happy that they were all right, and Jim heard nothing to make him think that anyone was irritated in any way by their safe return. It did rather indicate that the uniforms who had approached them were not in fact PD personnel, which lent credence to Blair's suggestion that they had been small fry in Kincaid's Sunrise Patriot organization.

Simon did keep them off the street, however, giving them some cold cases to check over until he was sure they had completely recovered.

Life, it seemed, was back to normal.



Jim woke with a blinding headache, and lay still for a moment before trying to move. Headaches were familiar, but the last time he remembered one this severe was the morning he woke in the forest having been dumped there by persons unknown. And he was very cold.

He blinked open reluctant eyes, and stared up at the... sky?

What the...

He sat up and looked around. Once again he was lying in a forest clearing, and was aware of a horrible sense of *deja vu*. Only this time he was alone; there was no Blair lying beside him.

He forced himself to think.

As before - the PD garage. Lunch time. He and Blair walking towards the truck but still some yards from it. Three men - not uniforms this time, but men wearing ordinary clothes, as if they were detectives - coming over, one starting to say - a reference to one of the cold cases they had been given. And then...

Not an attack per se. He had felt a sharp sting, like a bee or wasp, on his neck. He had tried to gasp, "Run!" and then just as he lost consciousness he realized that beside him Blair, too, was falling.

It was almost a repeat of the previous incident, only this time he and Blair had obviously been dumped some distance apart.

Last time he had had his back-up gun. He reached down and checked... They hadn't missed it this time. The holster was there, but no gun.

And it was even later in the year. Colder. Harder to survive, stuck out here with nothing, not even a weapon.

Had their previous kidnapers still not believed that it was their combined knowledge of survival skills that had saved them? Were their - yes, enemies - still trying to determine whether Jim really was a sentinel? Were they trying to see if either man could somehow survive on his own, assuming that it would be the sentinel who had an advantage and would survive - if either of them did?

Or was this simply a twisted murder-by-the-elements? It had failed the first time, so whoever-it-was was trying again, only with the parameters slightly altered?

Jim had the uncomfortable suspicion that in these conditions this late in the year Blair, who had lived for a year with the Inupiat in Alaska, stood more chance of surviving than he did.

He rubbed his forehead, trying to will away the ache that was keeping him from thinking clearly.

Had he and Blair been dumped reasonably close together? It was possible. It would take too much time to take them to totally different places. Assume they had been brought here in some sort of vehicle, although he had seen no signs of one on the previous occasion. Drop one off ten minutes before the other - nothing could go fast in this terrain, so they wouldn't be more than two or three miles apart.

But even as little as a mile apart, what chance would they have of finding each other?

Jim thought about it for a minute, then looked around. Ah! Jackpot! He picked up two small stones and began to rotate them in one hand, engaging his sense of touch. Then he extended his hearing.

There! At pretty well the limit of his range, he could hear a voice, although he couldn't make out individual words; Blair, talking to himself, and clearly annoyed. Jim grinned, and, still playing with the stones - although the movement would also keep him from zoning - began to jog towards the voice.

After a few minutes Blair fell silent, but Jim had the position pin-pointed and jogged on. Instead of the annoyed voice, Jim could now hear a sort of hammering noise. Now what...?

Jim wasn't sure just how far he had traveled when he saw Blair through the trees. The younger man was sitting methodically knocking one stone against another, and pieces were breaking off the stone in his left hand.

"Hi, Chief," Jim called as he pushed his two helpful stones into his pocket.

Blair swung around. "Jim!" He dropped both of his stones and ran towards the sentinel, throwing his arms around him.

They clung together for some minutes, then Jim said, "You sounded a bit pissed off a while back."

"A bit?" Blair growled. "What are those... those..." He fell back on one of Megan's favorite insults. "Those *drongos* playing at? They dumped us in the middle of nowhere once and we got out safely. Now they've done it again, but this time they've stolen my knife - and I suppose your spare gun?"

Jim nodded.

"Dumped us *separately* with absolutely nothing, it's even later in the year..."

"Killing us without getting their hands dirty," Jim said. "Death by exposure. I'd guess that this time they've moved the truck - and it's Friday. We won't be missed till Monday - last time it was mid-week and we were missed immediately, not that that helped anyone find us." He glanced over to where Blair had been working. "What were you doing?"

"Oh. Making a knife."

Jim's jaw dropped.

"Anthropologists and a lot of archaeologists know how to knap flint or obsidian," Blair went on. "We get a class in it. Well, really just the basics. I didn't tell the lecturer, but I already knew everything he was teaching. Actually I suspect I knew more than he did. The elder at the reservation who taught me how to make birchbark containers also showed me how to make an axe of sorts out of ordinary stone. Not as sharp as flint or obsidian, but better than nothing. It's amazing how much you can do with just a stone you've picked up, but an edged tool... well, gives you an edge."

Jim groaned silently at the pun as he followed Blair over to where he had been working.

"How long have you been working on this?" he asked. The stone already looked surprisingly serviceable.

"Since I woke up and realized that I didn't have my knife." He looked at the stone. "Maybe two hours."

"I made my priority finding you - it was pretty certain that they'd brought you out here too, and that we weren't too far apart - "

"But you had to find me. No way could I find you."

Jim grinned. "We don't need to broadcast that." He glanced up at the sky. "It's getting dark. We're going to need a fire. Can you... ? Of course you can."

"You go ahead and collect some wood."

While Jim gathered fallen branches, Blair made a quick fireplace out of stones, collected some dead grass for tinder, then used his almost-finished 'axe' to prepare a long stick and hack a platform out of a thicker one. He searched around, found a bent stick, then unlaced one of his Nikes and used the lace as a cord. By the time Jim had brought back his sixth armful of wood, Blair had a small fire going and was carefully building it bigger.

"There's a small stream over there - " Jim said, pointing.

Blair nodded. "I'll just go and pee, then get a drink," he said, knowing that Jim had probably already done both.

With the fire as a guide, it didn't take him long to get back.

"One of us will need to stay awake to keep the fire going," he said when he returned.

"If you take first watch," Jim said, "I'll waken about midnight and take over."

"Right," Blair said.

When Blair woke in the morning, once again they took turns going to relieve themselves and drink. Then Jim said, "I want to scout around a bit. Last time, we just headed west. This time... I don't think we can be too far from a road. We were probably brought in on some kind of SUV, maybe carried a couple of hundred yards to get us away from the track it left." He glanced up at the cloud-heavy sky. "I want to try to find that track. Keep the fire going - it'll give me a landmark."

"Be careful."

"Of course."

Ignoring the direction from which he had come, knowing that if there was any sort of vehicle track there he would have seen it, he headed off to the right of that route, once again playing with his two small stones. Behind him he could hear the steady chink, chink, as Blair continued working on his axe - or possibly starting work on a new one? No, probably just touching up the one he'd already made.

Jim went - he thought - about quarter of a mile before deciding that there was no vehicle track on this side; he couldn't see their kidnappers carrying them further than that. Turning, he went back.

"Nothing?" Blair asked.

"Not that way. Let's see what's on this side."

He had gone possibly three hundred yards on 'this side' when he saw the flattened grass left by wheels. He studied it for a moment, seeing where the vehicle had stopped, then carried on; the marks of the vehicle returning weren't quite on top of the first set. It wasn't a straight line by any means; the vehicle had been forced into a sort of slalom route by the trees, and there weren't the ruts that would have indicated a track in any kind of regular, or even semi-regular, use. These had to be the marks left by the vehicle that brought them to this deserted spot. But even if they were left by a different vehicle - which didn't seem likely - they had a direction to follow.

Turning, he headed back to his partner, and found him in the middle of making another birchbark carrier, but one a good bit smaller than the ones he had constructed the previous time.

"Chief?"

"Found something?" Blair asked.

"Yes - but what are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'll need something to carry the fire-making kit and the stone knife. Yes, with the knife I could make another fire-making kit, but why should I? This one is fine. We'll certainly need it - we don't know how long it'll take us to get back to civilization. And if we manage to kill something, we'll need a carrier for the meat."

"How long till you finish?"

"Almost done. So - you found the way they brought us here?"

"It's not a proper track, they just drove through the trees - but it'll give us a route back to a road. Once we're on a road... "

Blair nodded. "I just wish, though, that we knew what these idiots are playing at."

"I'd say that by separating us, they were trying to find out which of us had the better survival skills. I'd guess they thought I would."

"Yeah - the sentinel, ex-army, bigger, more butch, bound to know more about survival than the undersized ex-student - "

"Who has survival skills that make mine negligible."

"No, they're good," Blair said. "Just different. We complement each other. What you don't know, I do; what I don't know, you do."

"All of my knowledge comes from rain forest near the equator; you have the knowledge to survive in these conditions. I couldn't have made a knife just by banging two stones together - "

"Not a very efficient one."

"Efficient enough," Jim said.

"Eagle Wings would laugh his head off if he saw it, and tell me he had made better when he was five years old." Blair sighed. "I really need to find the time to practice more. It's not an ability I want to lose, but if you don't do something for a long time... you don't forget how to do it, but you lose the ability to do it well." He fastened off the last cord he was weaving. "There, it's done."

He packed the things he wanted into it, stood and slung it over one shoulder. "Right - let's go."

"You've forgotten something."

Blair looked at Jim, looked around... "Gods, the fire!"

"Yeah. It'd probably burn itself out inside an hour, but do we want to take the chance?"

So they carefully extinguished the fire, kicking earth over the embers. Once they were satisfied it was no longer in any danger of re-igniting, Blair picked up the carrier again and they set off.

When they reached the track Jim had found, they set off along it. They soon found that the track was half following a stream - and drank often, gratefully using the water to give themselves the illusion of having something in their stomachs. Both were getting very hungry, but they had seen no animals, large or small.

"Hold on!" Blair said suddenly. He put down the carrier, took out the stone 'knife' and began hacking at the bark of a pine, long sweeping downward strokes.

"Chief?"

"Not very appetizing, but we can eat the inner bark of this." He took a strip, handed another to Jim, and began chewing.

Jim took a tentative bite. It wouldn't have been his first choice of food, but he'd eaten worse-tasting things, and he trusted Blair's expertise when it came to finding plant food in the wild.

Blair carefully stripped off some more of the inner bark, which he pushed into the carrier. "If we don't find a road by the time we have to stop, we'll at least have something to eat tonight," he said.

They carried on.

The vehicle had taken what was clearly the easiest route, so it was easy enough walking; but the search for the tracks had taken time, and the days were short. They had covered what Jim guessed was five to six miles when he stopped. "I think this is it for the day, Chief."

"We can go a little further," Blair protested.

"I still can't hear any traffic, so we've still got a fair way to go; and it'll take time to collect firewood and start a fire. We don't want to be stumbling around in the dark. And I think..." He glanced up at the sky. "I think we might have snow before the morning, so if you could make us some sort of shelter while I gather wood..."

When Jim returned with his third armful of wood, Blair was well on the way to constructing a small wigwam with a sort of roof over the front to protect the fire. He had, Jim noted, sacrificed an undershirt in the process.

"Almost finished," Blair said as Jim dropped the wood on the pile of what he had already gathered.

Jim nodded and headed out again.

By the time he returned with his fourth armful of wood - fallen branches were scarcer in this area than they had been at their earlier 'camp' - Blair had moved the pile of wood to beside the wigwam and constructed a rough 'roof' over it as well - enough to give it a little protection from falling snow. He had also taken some of the smaller branches into the wigwam itself.

"Kindling," he explained. Jim nodded, dumped his armful of wood on top of the main pile and turned to head off again. "Jim - don't go too far. You're compensating, but it's getting pretty dark now."

"You'll have a fire lit soon?"

"Yes - just about to start working on it."

"Well, if I go this way, I'll be able to use it to guide me back."

"Okay, but I say again - don't go too far."

Jim just grinned and set off.

He carefully didn't say anything when he returned, but he had been glad of the glow from the newly-started fire to guide him back in the almost total darkness of a night with a thick cloud cover. He dumped his last armful of wood beside the rest.

Blair had draped some of the bark over the fire to roast it. Jim looked from it to Blair, then looked back at the fire. Blair chuckled. "Odd as it might seem, that will cook it and make it a little more palatable. Just a few minutes longer... "

Blair was right, the roasting did improve the taste of the bark, though not by much. But it was food.

They settled down to a night much the same as the previous one, with Blair staying awake to keep the fire burning, and Jim waking around midnight to take over.

The snow Jim had tentatively forecast had stayed off, and although the sky remained ominously low, it didn't even start raining. They ate the last of the bark, packed up their few things (Blair retrieving his shirt, although he pushed it into the carrier, obviously planning on using it again in making a shelter) made sure the fire was safely extinguished, and set off, still following the trail of flattened grass. In a way Jim was glad it was so late in the year; earlier, with the grass still growing, inside two days it would have mostly recovered from that flattening and risen to stand erect again. This late in the year it remained flattened... at least sufficiently that he could follow the trail.

Had they known, Jim and Blair had been missed within five minutes of their abduction.

Rafe and Brown, who had taken to car sharing, had left the bullpen just behind their fellow detectives. They had chosen to take the stairs rather than wait for the elevator to return, and reached the garage just after Jim and Blair had been drugged, pushed into the back seat of a car and driven off. Rafe's car was parked a few places further from the exit than Jim's truck, and as he started the engine Brown glanced towards the truck. "That's odd."

"What?"

"First, where's Hairboy? Second, I don't know the guy in the driver seat of Ellison's truck."

Rafe pulled out, and carefully stopped again in front of the truck, effectively blocking it. Brown got out and went to the driver's door of the truck. "Hello - where's Ellison?"

"Oh... he wasn't feeling real well, and asked me to take his truck back to his house. My partner's driving him to the hospital for a checkup."

"Must have come on suddenly, then - he was okay when he left Major Crime."

Rafe had joined his partner. "I don't think I know you?"

The man in the driver's seat of the truck scowled, and said nothing. One hand dropped off the steering wheel, and Brown promptly pulled out his gun. "Keep your hands where I can see them. Now, I ask you again - where's Ellison?"

Silence.

"Who are you?"

Silence.

The elevator door slid open, and Megan walked into the garage.

"Megan! Over here!" Rafe called.

She looked at the truck, looked at the man in the driver's seat, and said, "Who's that?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. All right, you!" Rafe turned his attention to the stranger. "Out of the truck. And don't think you can do a runner - my partner's already got a gun on you, and Megan here - you really don't want to piss her off. She'd cheerfully have you for dinner."

The stranger's scowl deepened, but he climbed obediently out of the truck. Leaving Brown and Megan to keep an eye on the man, Rafe reached into the truck and took the keys. He locked the door, then said, "Okay, let's go - we'll let Captain Banks decide what to do here."

In Simon's office, with Brown still keeping his gun carefully aimed at the man and Megan guarding the door - and only an idiot would have ignored the feral look on her face - Rafe, having explained the situation to Simon and making sure he was never in a position to be grabbed to be used as a hostage, searched the man. First he removed the gun at the man's waist, then went through his pockets... and found a detective's badge.

"Well, well," Simon said, deceptively lightly. "And what department are you in, Detective?"

Silence.

Simon shook his head, more in sorrow than in anger. "You're just delaying the inevitable," he said and crossed to the door. "Rhonda!"

The secretary moved quickly over. "Yes, Captain?"

"Would you contact the captains of all departments and ask them to meet me here *now*."

"Right away, sir."

Simon looked at his three detectives. "Right, I'll take it from here. But stay in the bullpen and at least one of you keep an eye on the door, and if he comes out on his own - "

"He won't leave the bullpen," Brown promised.

The captains started arriving within two or three minutes. As each one arrived, Simon simply asked, "Is this man in your department?"

The fourth one to arrive was Captain Clegg of Homicide. "Yes," he said. He looked grimly at the detective. "What have you been doing, Trafford?"

At least they now had a name.

Trafford's scowl intensified. "Ellison asked me to take his truck back to his house. A couple of detectives stopped me and brought me here."

"At least he's consistent," Simon murmured. "That was what he told my men - but they, and I, didn't believe it. Ellison won't let even Sandburg drive his truck."

Clegg nodded. "Where were you taking it?"

"Ellison's house."

"Let's be a bit more positive. The address?"

Silence.

Clegg glanced at Simon. "I see what you mean," he said. He returned his attention to Trafford. "Normally I'll back my men - you know that. But if I'm to give you my support I need to know a little more than you're saying. Where is Ellison?"

"Idno." The mumbled reply was virtually inaudible.

"Louder."

"I don't know."

"Who has him? And I presume Sandburg too?"

"I don't know." It was obvious that Trafford had suddenly realized just how deep in shit he was.

"So what do you know?"

"I don't know who they were. They..." He stumbled to a halt.

"Go on. If I'm to salvage anything for you I need to know more," Clegg repeated. "Did they pay you for your help?"

Trafford shook his head. "How they found out I don't know, though I haven't been exactly quiet about it. They... they knew I was jealous of Ellison's cop of the year award. Once would have been okay, but he kept getting it every year. And then there was all that fraud stuff from Sandburg. I... I didn't believe that. He might have made some of it up, but Ellison getting cop of the year every year for the last four? He had to have an edge. I'm a good detective, you know that, Captain... I knew I might have a chance for the award this year - but even if I didn't get it, someone else would - if Ellison disappeared again. So I agreed to help them. But all I had to do was hide the truck somewhere.

"I don't know where they were taking Ellison and Sandburg. But one of them said something about dropping them off separately, not together."

"And it didn't occur to you that if they were 'dropped off' somewhere at this time of year, the odds on either one surviving are far from good. They were lucky last time they were kidnapped, but this is deeper into winter." Clegg allowed the disgust he felt to show in his voice.

"It... it occurred to me," Trafford mumbled. "But it also occurred to me that if I - well, refused to help those men, since they'd approached me and I knew what they were planning, I'd get a bullet in the brain... if only because I could identify them."

The two captains looked at each other, silently acknowledging the extreme probability of that.

"We can be pretty sure that Ellison and Sandburg won't have been dropped off anywhere near where they were last time," Simon said. "But that still leaves a helluva lot of territory where they could be."

"I'm sorry," Trafford said, so quietly that they could only just hear him. "All this... because I was jealous..."

"I don't suppose you were the only one," Simon said, "but the man kept getting the award on merit, on the number of cases he had closed. Yes, he has an edge - he has excellent eyesight; it's better than 20/20 - but all that does is allow him to help forensics find evidence that can be used to convict a criminal. It's not a magic wand that he waves. And Sandburg, even when he was just an observer, could make connections nobody else saw, but as an observer he couldn't benefit from that; Ellison did. What Sandburg wrote was a novel; unfortunately he wrote it in the form of a thesis, so when the publisher presented it as fact, of course he had to deny it, and saying it was fraudulent was the quickest way of doing that. The Chief of Police knows all that - how else was Sandburg offered a detective's badge, coming into Major Crime as soon as he finished his time at the Academy? His four years as an observer counted as previous experience. And you can tell your friends that."

"I'm sorry," Trafford said again.

"All right," Clegg said briskly. "If you're to redeem yourself, the rest of your day today will be spent looking at mug shots - see if you can identify the men. This has to be some kind of revenge attack."

"Sandburg wondered if it might be some of the very small fry in Kincaid's Sunrise Patriot organization," Simon suggested. "We got all the top guys and most of the rank and file, but we never did think we'd got them all."

"And there wouldn't be mug shots for any that weren't caught," Clegg muttered. "Yes, I see where that could be a possibility... but I still think we need to check out the mug shots."

"Oh, I agree," Simon said. "And if Trafford can't identify anyone, that could be why."

Clegg nodded. "Right, Trafford - time to stop taking up Captain Banks' time. March!"

Trafford looked at Simon. "Thanks, Captain. You... you've been more generous than I had any right to expect."

"Don't give me cause to regret it," Simon said.

With the clouds as low as they were, Jim and Blair could only guess at the passing of time.

At least it was easy walking; steadily downhill, and relatively smooth ground.

Unfortunately Blair didn't see another of the pines with edible inner bark, or anything else he recognized as edible, and they had to resign themselves to going hungry.

Finally Jim stopped. "I think the light is beginning to fade," he said.

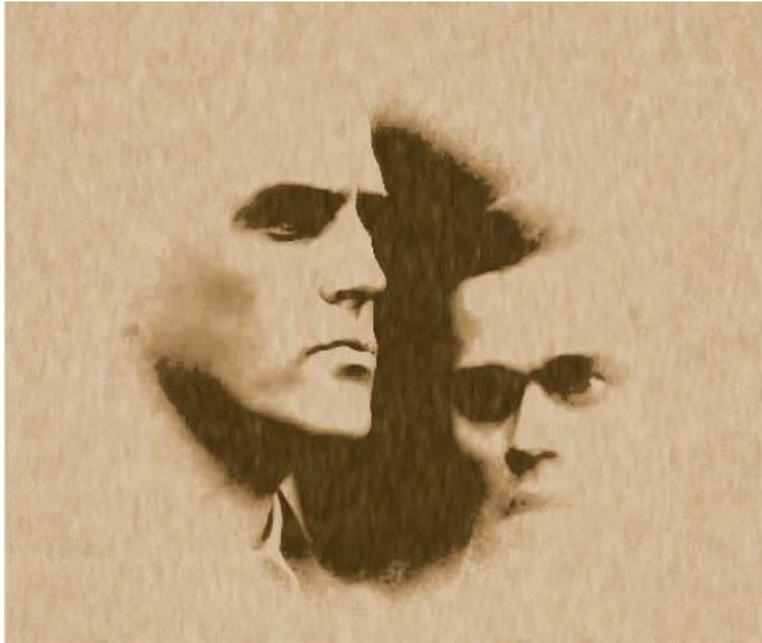
"Okay."

While Jim gathered firewood again, Blair lit a fire, then manufactured a rough shelter. Again they split the night so that one would be awake to keep the fire going.

At first light they carefully extinguished the fire - which Jim had, in any case, allowed to die down - Blair shouldered his 'pack' and they carried on walking.

"How far do you think we've come?" Blair asked after a while.

"Hard to say... at least twenty-five miles, possibly a little more."



"Yeah, that was about what I thought," Blair agreed. "They wouldn't have brought us more than about forty miles, tops, surely? Driving over this terrain, a long hour from the road, a shorter hour back?"

"They certainly wouldn't have expected us to be able to follow the tracks of their vehicle," Jim said thoughtfully.

"Gods, even I can see the tracks!" Blair exclaimed.

"They carried us about quarter of a mile from their vehicle - they probably assumed that was far enough that we wouldn't be able to find the tracks. And we were far enough apart that they wouldn't expect us to have found each other either. I don't know that we would have if I hadn't heard you insulting them and their ancestors for ten generations back... "

"I suppose if we'd thought to look last time we'd have found vehicle tracks then, too," Blair suggested.

"Probably."

"Though it's a pretty safe bet they assumed that just because we didn't know where we are, we'd... well, do what we did last time, pick a direction and head that way."

"It's as likely that they assumed that the first night would kill us." Jim's voice was very somber.

"Well, I wouldn't say we've been exactly comfortable, but it's stayed dry and that cloud cover - " Blair glanced upwards - "meant there wasn't any frost."

"They also didn't realize that you had survival skills learned in Alaska."

"I haven't really had to lean on those yet. It's if it snows that I will. Incidentally, what do you think about the possibility, now?"

"I think we've been lucky so far, because there's definitely the feel of snow in the air."

"And if it snows we'll lose the track. It's been following a pretty direct line, but can we guarantee it'll continue along that line?"

"Depends how steep the hillside gets," Jim said. "They could have driven in at an angle to get to above a very steep bit, then headed pretty well straight up."

Blair nodded. That was what he had suspected might be the case. "If we carried on straight down a steeper bit, could we assume we'd reach the road?"

"Not necessarily." Jim glanced at the sky again, scowling at the thick cloud cover that totally hid the sun; even he couldn't make out a brighter patch that would indicate where the sun was. "Yes, going in a straight line would probably mean that we'd reach the road eventually but they probably took some wide, gentle zig-zags that in this light we're not really noticing, and if we set off in a straight line we could head off in a totally wrong direction. Even with your survival skills..." He shook his head. "We're using energy all the time - you know that - and we're not getting any food to replace that energy. Hell, just keeping warm uses energy we aren't going to have much longer!"

They passed another stream that was tumbling down the hill, and stopped to drink. The cold water wouldn't help their energy levels, because it had to be warmed in their stomachs, but that was preferable to dehydration.

They walked on.

It was getting darker - time to stop again. Their 'camp' this time was a more makeshift affair, offering them the barest minimum of shelter; there was no fallen wood, no possibility of making a fire, and they huddled together, sharing their body heat, through a mostly sleepless night, and moved on again as soon as it was light enough to see.

As soon as Clegg and Trafford left Simon's office, he called in Brown and Rafe.

"We need to move Ellison's truck," he said. "The kidnapers are expecting it to be gone - it's a pretty sure thing that they'll check to make sure. See to it - somewhere hidden, but safe."

Brown grinned. "You got it, Captain." He glanced at Rafe. "I know just where to take the truck; if you follow me, you can bring me back."

"Right."

They left Simon's office. Simon stared after them. Good men, trustworthy, but... although he counted everyone in the bullpen as friends, only two were his *friends*. Where *were* Jim and Blair?

Trafford studied book after book of mug shots, and came up blank.

That certainly lends credence to Banks' suspicion about the possible involvement of the Sunrise Patriots, Clegg thought. Or no, Banks said it was Sandburg's suspicion.

Clegg allowed himself a few moments to think about Major Crimes' newest detective.

He knew that there was some prejudice directed towards Sandburg, partly because of the way he looked, partly because some of the PD personnel thought that for four years he had been filling a slot that should belong to a 'proper' cop. But Clegg was well aware that as an observer, Sandburg had not been 'filling a slot'. Certainly he had been doing more than merely observing; he had actively helped Ellison and indirectly helped the other Major Crime detectives. Clegg knew that Banks

thought very highly of the 'observer' - if he hadn't, Sandburg's time in MC would have lasted ninety days and not half a second longer.

But even without that awareness, Clegg had learned, very early in his career, never to make snap judgements about anyone. He had made that mistake once, and a murderer had nearly evaded justice because of it. Only his senior partner's experience had led him to over-rule Clegg's certainty that a pretty nineteen-year-old girl couldn't possibly have killed her parents and younger brother... but the evidence had been there. Triggered by years of resentment because their parents had valued the low-achieving, spoiled son more than the highly intelligent daughter, she had finally snapped... It had been a valuable and lasting lesson.

And so Clegg had considered very carefully what Sandburg had said at that notorious press conference when he had labeled himself a cheat. Then he had considered Banks' willingness to have that 'cheat' in his department as a detective; the willingness of the other MC detectives to accept the 'cheat'; the willingness of the Chief of Police to accept the 'cheat' into the PD; Ellison's willingness to continue working with the man who claimed to have lied about what he could do - and decided that there was far more to Sandburg than was immediately obvious. Indeed, Clegg was pretty sure that the only lie Sandburg had told was when he claimed to have lied - which meant that Ellison was indeed a sentinel.

And Clegg fully appreciated why that was something best kept secret.

A few flakes of snow were beginning to drift down from the overcast sky, and Jim and Blair glanced at each other before speeding up slightly. Not that they had been wasting time, but both were convinced that they couldn't be far from a road, and if they could reach one before the snow covered the marks they were following it would make escape from this second stranding easier.

After about ten minutes, Jim raised his head. "I can hear a vehicle," he said. "Not more than a mile at most."

"Thank goodness," Blair muttered. "The snow's getting heavier."

Jim nodded. He had been aware for two or three minutes that the snow was beginning to cover everything, and even he was beginning to lose sight of the flattened grass that had guided them for so far. "This way," he said, and cut downhill at a little more of an angle.

They made their way down, slipping occasionally and sliding for some feet before recovering their footing, and if they were worried about a fall that might cause an injury neither voiced it. And then, almost before they had expected it, they were standing at the side of a road. There were not-quite-covered tire marks going in both directions, but nothing to indicate which way would take them to safety faster.

"Something coming," Jim said. "Heavy truck, by the sound of it."

As soon as they saw the shadow appearing through the falling snow, both men started waving frantically.

The truck stopped and the driver opened his window. "You gotta problem?"

"Sorry, but we're lost," Blair said. "Can you tell us which way it is to the nearest town? And how far?"

"How the hell could you get lost enough not to know that?" the driver queried.

"We're cops," Blair explained. "Cops are often threatened by criminals we put away. Usually it's just hot air, but once in a while... once in a while they follow up on the threat. Could be years later, once they've done their time. Anyway, we were jumped on Friday, knocked out and woke up there - " he waved at the forest behind them. "Whoever it was apparently took us to where they dumped us in a vehicle of some kind - we found the tracks it left and followed them out. But now we just want to get in touch with our boss... "

The driver looked at them for a moment, clearly wondering how accurate their story was.

"If you don't trust us, fine, I can understand that, but could you point us in the direction of the nearest town so we can start walking, and the first chance you get phone Cascade PD, central precinct, and tell Captain Banks where you saw us? Ellison and Sandburg."

The man looked at them for a moment longer, then said, "Okay, guys, get in. I'm heading for Cascade and I'll take you there... to the police station."

"Great! You're a life saver!"

They hurried round to the passenger side. Blair scrambled in first, guessing that the driver would feel more comfortable with the smaller, less threatening-looking of them beside him.

Jim followed, knowing what was in Blair's mind, and well aware that if it came down to it, his normally peace-loving partner was in fact the more dangerous one.

"How far are we from Cascade?" Blair asked as the driver restarted his truck.

"Close on fifty miles," the driver said.

"In that case, we definitely owe you!" Blair said. "I'm Blair, by the way - the quiet guy beside me is Jim."

"Denny."

"And the only reason I'm quiet is that Blair doesn't give me a chance to get a word in," Jim said.

"Fastest tongue in the west, he has - and he can hold forth on pretty well any subject you care to mention."

"Any subject?" Denny asked.

"Well, I haven't found one yet that he can't say something about."

"Weight lifting?" Denny asked.

"Ah - that's more Jim's line," Blair said. He glanced at Jim. "Hey - just giving you the chance to say something."

Denny chuckled. "So you don't know anything about weight lifting."

"Not really. I can't even spot for Jim - I couldn't begin to lift some of the weights he handles."

They talked desultorily as they went. The road dropped lower, and the snow turned to rain; and after a little more than an hour reached Cascade. Denny finally pulled in beside the PD. "Right, guys, here you are."

"We can't thank you enough," Blair said. "If there's ever anything we can do for you, just contact us here - Ellison or Sandburg, Major Crime."

"Glad to be of help," Denny said, then - "just before you go - you mentioned your second names before, but I wasn't thinking... You wouldn't be related to Andy Sandburg by any chance?"

Blair grinned. "A trucker? My uncle - well, unless there are two with the same name. He taught me to drive big rigs - I spent a summer sharing the driving with him when I was twenty-two."

Denny shook his head. "It's a small world."

"Might have ended up as a trucker if I hadn't been seduced into the world of law enforcement. Well, you look after yourself, Denny, and if you see Andy give him my regards - I haven't seen him myself for three or four years."

"Will do."

Jim jumped down, Blair right beside him; he slammed the door shut and they turned towards the PD entrance. They exchanged greetings with two of the cops they passed who were heading out of the door. Behind them they were aware of the truck beginning to move off; Blair glanced round, half meaning to wave goodbye, but Denny's attention was totally on the road as he pulled into the line of traffic.

With a mental shrug Blair followed Jim into the building.

From the reaction - or rather, the non-reaction - of the men they had already spoken to, both men suspected that their absence this time - only a couple of days - had not been noticed, even though they were late coming in for a Monday. Of course, detectives sometimes did go in late, having been checking out something.

They reached Major Crime and went in. They were halfway to Simon's office when - "Jim! Hairboy!"

It couldn't be said that they were surrounded - not by two men - but Rafe and Brown did their best. "What happened? We know you were kidnapped again, but what happened?"

"Come on," Jim said. "We need to report to Simon - you might as well come in too so we only have to say this once."

"And say it again for Joel and Megan and - "

"Okay, it'll cut one telling."

Jim let Blair do the telling.

As he finished, Simon nodded. "I think your guess that these are some of Kincaid's men could be right. We did catch one of the men involved this time, but - "

"But?" Jim asked.

Simon nodded towards Rafe and Brown. "They were just behind you. The man they caught was just about to drive your truck away. But we identified him as a detective in one of the other units - and no, I'm not telling you his name. That's between him, his captain and me. He said he'd been

approached by a couple of men he didn't know, and agreed to help them kidnap you - partly because he was jealous, thought someone else deserved the chance to be cop of the year, partly because he was afraid that if he didn't go along with them they'd kill him because he could identify them.

"He... let's say he realized the error of his ways, and he's been as helpful as possible; he searched all the mug shots we have but couldn't identify the men who spoke to him. That would indicate that they don't have a criminal record - at least not in Cascade - which had to mean they work for someone who does have a criminal record and wants to get rid of you. Doesn't automatically make it Kincaid, of course, but... "

"Seems probable," Jim agreed.

"We've got a description of the men - for what that's worth. It's more than easy for someone to change his appearance. Not his height or general build, but hair color, facial hair - hell, even an identifying scar could be theatrical makeup!" Simon's listeners were all nodding agreement.

"The one thing I can be sure of," Jim said, "is that these two weren't the ones dressed as Patrol cops who took us out last time. I know the parking garage isn't as well lit as it might be, but although I didn't really pay them much attention, I did get a good enough look at the first ones to know that none of this lot were the first two."

"The first ones gave the impression of just being there, of having either just parked their cars because their shift was due to start, or just finished their shift and were on their way home," Blair agreed. "You know what it's like - you see someone in the garage, give them a passing glance in case it's someone you know, just say a polite 'hello' if it isn't - if you say anything at all - and forget them. This time they came over as if they wanted to ask us something."

"One of them was speaking as they came over - he was making a reference to one of the cold cases we've been looking over," Jim said. "As if they knew... "

"Easy enough for one of them to walk in at some point when the bullpen was quiet and check your desks. I know there's usually someone in, but at lunchtime, say? Whoever is supposed to be there has gone off to the restroom, is away for five minutes, leaving the room empty - that would be long enough," Simon suggested.

Clegg had had one of the police artists draw the faces of the two men who had approached Trafford.

Jim and Blair looked at the sketches, and nodded. "Definitely two of the guys," Jim said grimly. He looked at Simon. "The one who gave the descriptions - he was the third man? The cop?"

"Yes," Simon confirmed. "And Jim - " He repeated what he had said earlier. "Let it go. I'm not telling you who it is; and if you do see and recognize him - remember, once we identified him, he actually proved very co-operative."

"You know... "

"Yes, Sandburg?" Simon found the note in Blair's voice strangely compelling.

Blair tapped one of the pictures. "I didn't make the connection when we saw them in the garage - but this one looks vaguely familiar from somewhere... if I could only remember where." He continued to stare at the picture, going very still.

Simon opened his mouth to say something, and Jim reached over, touched his arm, and shook his head. Then he jerked his head towards the door, and crossed to it. With a slightly bemused expression on his face, Simon followed.

Jim pulled the door closed, without shutting it, and said softly, "I've seen him like that once or twice. It's a combination of meditation and something to do with him being a shaman - "

"Do I really want to know?" Simon asked.

"Probably not. Anyway, he's trying to recall the memory. Might come to him in just a minute or two, might take half an hour... or it might be so vague that he'll eventually give up because he can't make the connection. I suspect, though, it won't take long." He pushed the door open and glanced in.

Blair hadn't moved.

"A noise - even us speaking - would disturb him?" Simon asked quietly.

"Not if we were speaking to each other and keeping our voices down," Jim said. "By coming out here we've given him a minute of solitude to sink into his mind, block out the outside world; now he has, he won't really be aware of us if we go back in. Speaking direct to him, or raising our voices, would disturb him, though."

Simon grunted in acknowledgement of the comment, and led the way back into his office.

"It has to be the same group as last time, though," Jim said quietly. "Two different groups using the same method? Not likely."

"Not very intelligent, though," Simon muttered. "You'd already shown once that you could find your way back to civilization... "

"Yes, but maybe they thought that by changing the parameters a little we wouldn't - couldn't - survive." He sighed. "I suspect they still think I'm the one with the survival skills, and in the Amazon rain forest they could be right; but here? It's Blair who really knows how to survive." He fell silent for a moment, before adding, "If they'd had the sense to drop us off five miles apart - and they could have, considering how far from the road they took us - I wouldn't have been able to find Blair. He would have survived for a while alone, maybe even until the spring, but I wouldn't. He even managed to find something for us to eat! But if we had died out there... Odds are our bodies would never have been found. This time of year, a couple of bodies - a windfall for the animals and birds."

"Ventriss!"

"What?" "Blair?" The two voices were in perfect chorus.

Blair raised his head and looked at Jim. "Remember when I was attacked by Ventriss's goons?" Jim nodded. "That guy was one of them."

"You're sure?" But Jim had no doubt that Blair was indeed sure.

"I didn't have long to see them before they started hitting me, which is why I didn't recognize him instantly in the garage on Friday, but it was long enough that once I started thinking about where I'd seen him, I remembered him."

Simon looked from Blair to Jim and back to Blair. "Attacked by Ventriss's goons?"

"Remember the Ventriss case?" Jim asked.

"That was murder, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but Blair had already clashed with young Ventriss over an academic issue. The boy wasn't happy about it and had some men attack Blair with a baseball bat. Luckily I was nearby, heard what was happening and was able to intervene."

Simon looked from Jim to Blair.

"And you think this guy was one of them."

"Not just think, Simon. I know."

Simon frowned. "But if this Ventriss was taking an anthropology class... "

"Yeah?" Jim asked.

"Wouldn't he know that Sandburg had survival skills?"

"Doesn't follow," Blair said. "He attended lectures, yes; but I doubt he paid much attention. And I suspect he thought everything I said in my lectures was book knowledge. Even things I mentioned from my own experience - I remember... When I *was* still a kid, reading an adventure story where the hero had an encounter with a shark. A few years later, reading an anthropology-type travel book that pre-dated the fictional one, I found that same incident, almost word for word. So, again, I'd guess that he thought I was making a book-read incident 'personal' to impress the class. In any case, at his level anything that was included concerning tribal survival would be very basic - the men hunted, the women gathered plant food. It'd fit with his sense of humor to have me dumped in a situation where I knew survival was possible but not how to survive... and in any case survival in a North American winter wouldn't be like survival in a tropical rain forest; even he would understand that."

"Hard to prove that Ventriss had anything to do with kidnapping us, though," Jim said.

"I suspect it would have had to be his father," Blair said slowly. "Apart from his attack on me, there was nothing to prove that Junior was employing anyone on a regular basis... or even just occasionally. He did his own breaking in to Chung's house, for example. That could have been for the adrenaline rush, of course... "

"But would his father have been willing to kill the two of you just for revenge?" Simon asked.

"Well, he and Nadine were willing to break the law to get the kids out of the country," Jim pointed out.

"That's not quite the same thing... "

"I know, but I think it might be an idea to have a word with Ventriss senior. See if he knows anything - remember, I can easily tell if someone is lying."

Simon went to Questscape with Jim and Blair as a mostly uninvolved third party. Although he had been there when they went to arrest Brad Ventriss, it was Jim and Blair who had done the actual chase-and-capture.

The girl at Reception looked up with a smile that froze as she saw who was standing there; it was clear that she recognized one or more of them.

"Can I help you?" Her voice was professionally expressionless.

But you'd rather not, Blair thought. But it was interesting - the PD had chosen not to charge Norman Ventriss (or Henry Nadine) with anything, so she couldn't be resentful on behalf of her boss. But had Brad Ventriss flirted with her, making her think there was a possibility that he would... if not 'take her away from all this', improve her position in the company? Get her moved from Reception to a 'more important' upstairs office if she slept with him?

Simon stepped forward. "Captain Banks, Major Crime." He flashed his badge. "My colleagues, Detective Ellison and Department Consultant Sandburg. We'd like a word with Mr. Ventriss."

All three could see that she would dearly like to deny them access, but professionalism defeated what Blair would have described as spite. She reached for a phone.

"Yes, sir. Captain Banks from Major Crime would like to speak to you. Yes, sir." She put the phone down. "Third floor, first door on your right."

"Thank you," Simon said and turned towards the elevators.

Norman Ventriss was standing in the open doorway of his office when they exited the elevator. Once again Simon took the lead.

"Mr. Ventriss. Thank you for seeing us so promptly."

Of course he did, Blair thought. *It gets us out of his hair faster!*

"I didn't really expect to see the police again," Ventriss said. "I'm not aware of anything... ?" He led them into his office and returned to his seat behind the desk.

Simon took the two sketches out of the envelope he was carrying and put them down on the desk. "Do you know either of these men, sir?"

Ventriss looked at him with a slight frown, then turned his gaze downwards. He laid the first sketch aside and studied the second. "This one," he said. "I employed him approximately two years ago as a bodyguard for Bradley. At the time, Bradley was being threatened by a group of young men - I'm not sure that he knew why, and I certainly didn't know."

I could guess, Blair thought. *They were trying to keep him away from the sister of one of them?*

"He remained in that position until Bradley was arrested."

"His name? And do you have an address for him?" Simon asked.

"Pete Arnold," Ventriss said. He reached for one of the phones on his desk. "Rose, can you look up Pete Arnold's address and bring it through to me." He hung up. "I would point out that he was employed for one specific reason, and is no longer in my employ."

"I understand that," Simon said. "However, we have reason to believe that he might still be working for your son."

"What - ?"

"Does Bradley have access to any money?"

"Not that I know of," Ventriss said.

Simon glanced at Jim, who was pushing his lips out slightly in an 'I'm not sure I believe that' expression. "None at all?"

"Well, I did make a few hundred dollars available to him - even in prison it's possible to buy some things - but it's not enough to be what you'd call *money*. More like pocket money."

Jim nodded slightly. Of course, to someone like Norman Ventriss, a month's 'pocket money' would probably be something most of his employees would consider a reasonable annual wage.

"Would that be monthly, sir?" he asked.

Ventriss turned his attention directly to Jim for the first time since they had entered the office. "Yes and no," he replied. "Approximately a thousand dollars a year. I gave him \$175 the first month, and he gets \$75 a month for the rest of the year."

"Did he have a bank account of his own?" Blair asked.

The look Ventriss threw at Blair was far from friendly. "Yes, but I don't see how he can access it."

"All he needs is a trusted friend on the outside," Blair said.

Ventriss sighed. "If I'm honest... he didn't have any friends. Not ones he'd trust. Not even Suzanne Nadine - " He broke off as a side door opened and a mature woman entered, carrying a sheet of paper.

"Here's the address you wanted, sir."

"Thanks, Rose."

She glanced at the three visitors, without acknowledging them in any way, and left, closing the door behind her.

Ventriss handed the paper to Simon, who took it with a word of thanks.

"You've been very helpful, sir," Simon went on. "I hope we won't need to trouble you again."

"Captain - "

"Yes?"

"Why are you so interested in Arnold?"

"We're looking for him in connection with a kidnap."

"So why come to me?"

"He was seen at least once in your son's company."

"Well, of course - he was Bradley's bodyguard, after all," Ventriss said. "Oh - you thought... if you asked Bradley... He would deny knowing him?"

"Do you think we were wrong?" Jim asked.

"No," Ventriss said, so quietly that even Jim could barely hear him. "My fault... " He looked directly at Simon. "He was actually my fourth child - the other three died before they were a year old. But he survived... and I was so pleased to have a son that I utterly spoiled him. My wife tried to persuade

me that I was wrong... She did discipline him... but she died in an accident when he was ten. Fell off a cliff when we were on a seaside holiday. He was with her... and he was so upset... so I ended up spoiling him even more... I never realized I was turning him into a self-centered brat."

"He would have hidden that from you," Blair murmured. "You were his main source of income, after all."

"Until he decided to steal a program worth \$20 million from me. If he'd succeeded... Would I ever have seen him again? Or would he have hidden it, carried on living off me, and five years down the line stolen another valuable program? Stashed away another \$20 million?"

There was nothing any of them could say.

Back in Simon's car, Blair said quietly, "I'd even hesitate to say that his mother was the first of Brad's victims."

Jim, sitting in the front passenger seat, half turned to glance back at his friend. "You thought that too? You never used to be so cynical."

"Jim, where Brad Ventriss is concerned... it's not cynicism. It's being realistic. By spoiling him, his father might have been at least partly responsible for the way he turned out, but I think a lot of it was nature, rather than nurture. I think his nature was always to resent anyone who tried to discipline him. If his father had agreed with his mother... he might have submitted for a while, seeing it as being in his own best interests - Dad was the goose providing golden eggs, after all - but I'm pretty sure that his father would also have had a fatal accident by now. Whether Brad would have been able to run Questscape is a moot point - probably not, though he could have employed a manager.

"But I also think Questscape would probably have ended up bankrupt. He had no idea how to manage money - it was just there. How did he plan on 'earning' more? By stealing from his father. If his father wasn't there... And any manager who tried to point out to him that you can't realistically spend more than you earn - grounds for instant dismissal."

"You think Junior was definitely paying Arnold to be a bully-boy on top of what he got as a bodyguard?" Jim asked.

"Would a mere bodyguard be willing to beat up someone just on Junior's say-so?" Blair replied. "No, I suspect Junior's bank account is bigger than his father realizes, however he amassed the money - at a guess, it was stolen - and Arnold has access to it - even if Junior somehow managed to sign withdrawal slips to let Arnold get the cash to employ the extra men he needed to kidnap us."

"Jim," Simon said suddenly, "call for backup. It wasn't just Arnold, after all - and even though there are three of us, there are probably at least three others with the man." He fumbled the paper with the address out of his pocket and gave it to Jim.

Simon was right, but faced with seven men - six of them armed - Arnold and his three companions surrendered without a fight.

Back at the PD, the four men were booked, and then, while three were taken direct to holding cells, Arnold was taken to an interrogation room.

Because Jim was one of the kidnap victims, he had to leave someone else to do the questioning; Simon chose to do it himself, with Jim standing beside the officer on guard at the door.

Simon sat in silence for a minute, just studying the prisoner, who reacted by showing more and more signs of nervousness. Finally, Simon spoke.

"I understand that some two years ago you were employed by Mr. Norman Ventriss as a bodyguard for his son."

Although it wasn't actually a question, Arnold answered, "Yes."

"Was that all you did?"

"That... That was my job."

"But young Mr. Ventriss used you as more than a bodyguard, didn't he? He paid you to work for him, any time he felt he had been victimized by someone? There was an occasion when you and two other men attacked a Rainier TA who had given your employer a fail mark - yes. Mr. Arnold, the young man in question remembered your face when he saw it again in the police garage."

Arnold had a slightly shell-shocked look as Simon went on. "You didn't expect to see him - or Detective Ellison - again so soon, did you. Not very imaginative, dumping them twice in the middle of nowhere. It didn't occur to you that if they could do it once, they wouldn't have any great difficulty finding their way back to Cascade a second time. They both have well-honed survival skills."

Arnold's body slumped in resigned defeat. "We wasn't sure of Ellison, but Mr. Brad said Sandburg only had book knowledge."

"Wrong. It was Sandburg who had the knowledge of how to survive in these winter conditions. A few years ago he spent a year with an Eskimo tribe in Alaska, and the conditions were little more than an inconvenience to him."

"They shouldn't even have been able to find each other," Arnold muttered, an aggrieved note in his voice.

"Never underestimate what an ex-army ranger can do," Simon said. "But seriously? Together, they were always going to beat the odds. Separately, Ellison might or might not have survived, this deep into the winter; but Sandburg - the one your Mr. Brad really wanted dead - would certainly have survived."

"Now - The other men with you. Were they already on Brad Ventriss' payroll, or did you employ them specifically to kidnap Sandburg and Ellison?"

Arnold hesitated, but one look at Simon's face convinced him that he would be wiser to spill the beans. "We all worked for Mr. Brad."

"And while he's in prison... how are you paid?"

"He fixed it for me to take money out of his bank... the paperwork's all sent to him. An' I know - if I try to cheat him, he can send someone else after me to kill me. He pays well... but he ain't a good man to cross an' we all knowed it."

Simon nodded. "You've been charged with kidnap and leaving two police officers abandoned in circumstances where their deaths were intended. If you give evidence that your crime was ordered by Mr. Bradley Ventriss we can arrange for your sentence to be served in a different prison, and

even under a different name. However - were you the only person he trusted to withdraw money from his bank account?"

"Far's I know."

"We can arrange for the account to be frozen until such time as he is released from prison... if he ever is. So there'll be no way he can employ anyone else - even if he knew which prison you were in - to attack you." Young Ventriss might be getting \$75 a month from his father, Simon reflected, but no way would that pay for a hit man! "And if you co-operate, it could persuade the DA to ask for a more lenient sentence."

"I'll do it," Arnold said.

Simon nodded again. Yes - Arnold's loyalty to Ventriss was well seasoned with self-interest. Once it was no longer expedient for him to remain loyal, once it was more in his own interests to leave Ventriss hanging, Arnold would certainly not try to cover up for the young man.

The rest was anticlimactic. Given Arnold's testimony regarding the orders they had been given - and that of his fellows, once they realized the score - Brad Ventriss found his sentence increased with no possibility of parole. His four employees were given short sentences, and all four left Washington State as soon as those sentences were served.

Blair did make a point of going to see Norman Ventriss after the dust had settled.

"We don't blame you for anything, sir," he said quietly.

Norman looked him. "He had everything. Everything he wanted. Why wasn't he satisfied with that?"

"Who knows?" Blair asked. "I don't think it was anything you did or didn't do. You get two siblings - treated exactly the same way by their parents - one is generous, outgoing, friendly, the other is selfish and only out for himself. Nobody knows why. Some genetic quirk. You could say that selfishness is a survival characteristic for an individual, even though co-operation is better for the survival of the tribe. It could be that for some reason he felt inferior, and was trying to prove that he had what it took to be successful, even though the tactics he used weren't exactly law-abiding."

"But to kill... "

"Chung? Self-defense, even though he was already in the wrong. That was justification in his mind. Ms. Roberts? Hard to say. Tying off a loose end, perhaps; she could always have admitted to you that she'd sold the program to him. Jim and me? Revenge; we'd stopped him doing what he wanted to do. In addition, I was refusing to give him a grade he didn't deserve, hadn't worked for. Seriously, I don't think there was anything you could have done to improve the way he thought. If you'd tried... I think he'd have found some way to kill you, because it would have made you an enemy."

Norman remained silent for a moment, before saying, "I have to admit... since all this blew up... I had wondered... " He hesitated. "Mr. Sandburg - is he completely sane?"

"I don't know. He could have tried the insanity route; the fact that he didn't makes me think that he preferred to be considered sane, thinking that a sane criminal would be more 'respected' than an insane one. In addition, in Conover he would have to attend psychiatric meetings, training designed to 'improve' the way he thought, and - "

"He would resent that," Norman finished. "Yes; looking back I see so many clues... " He sighed. "I can only apologize again for his behavior."

"As I said, sir, not your fault, and we don't blame you for anything. What you do about him in the future is up to you; but I would recommend that you cut him out of your will."

Norman smiled ruefully. "Already done. My heir is now one of my nephews. He's a hard-working young man who, I'm sure, will not go bad the way Bradley did."

"Well, I won't take up more of your time, sir. You have our best wishes for the future, and I hope you're right, and that your nephew is a worthy heir."

"Goodbye, Mr. Sandburg - and I do appreciate your understanding."

Blair waved as he walked out.

He left the building, crossed the road, walked briskly to the next block and climbed into Jim's truck.

"How did it go?" Jim asked as he pulled smoothly into the traffic.

"He was very apologetic; I don't think we need worry about him trying to get Junior freed under any circumstances. Now - where are we going?"

"Lunch first - then back to the PD. I think Simon has a new case for us... "

