

Leopards Kill

Note: This is all fiction. It's not supposed to be real. Even the things that are real have been changed, like the mass in Kabul, which is really at 1700, not 0800.

Half along life's road
I lost my way in a dark wood,
Savage and fierce, its
Shadows more desolate than death.

I do not know how I got myself there,
But this is how I came back.

- Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*

Pagans

1.

Vegas

You expect more things out of life as you get older, and you come to think of your expectations as natural. You start to think that the things you get are things that you're entitled to. You forget about the way luck plays its hand, about the little tricks of fate that take you to a certain place and time. You have what you deserve, then you are what you deserve, then the things that surround you become your identity. You start thinking of yourself as the man with the big house overlooking the hills, the guy with the well-kept lawn and the gunite swimming pool. You start measuring yourself by the vacations you take, and the car you drive, and the shade of granite your wife wants for the perfect kitchen counter. These become who you are, and you stop measuring yourself against the things that lie deep within your heart – the rage, the anger, the insatiable hunger.

You go on like that, unconsciously lulling yourself into thinking there is nothing else until you stand in a fancy hotel in Las Vegas, running your hand on the marble of the bureau top, gazing across the open room at your wife lying naked on the bed: you think this is what I am, the Italian pants and loafers, the bespoke sport coat, the Cuban cigars waiting on the table. This is what I expect out of life and this is what I am.

“I’m going now,” you tell your wife. “I’ll be back.”

She murmurs something. You tell her you love her. The voice comes not from your heart, not from that dark deep place where hunger and pain live, but from the surface, from the silk shirt and the gel that smoothes your hair. You remember how she felt beneath you an hour before. You tell her you love her again, vaguely uneasy, and you go, you leave, because it’s business, and it’s what you’ve come to expect.

#

When I left the room that night it was a little past eleven, Vegas time. My wife Sharon and I had come in from New York only a few hours before and our bodies were still on East Coast time. Most of my adult life has been spent changing time zones, and I’m used to the switches, but Sharon wanted to sleep. Which was fine with me, because I’d arranged to meet with the people who’d invited us here, security types who’d hired my firm to help review security at the Palatine where I was staying and another hotel further up the Strip. They were interested in beefing up their coverage for high rollers and other VIPs, which was one of our specialties. My partner and I had dozens of specialties; we used to tell our clients that our company Iron Rock would do anything for them from mow the grass to kill their competitors, though not for the same price.

Some people laughed when I told them that. Others asked how much contract killings cost.

The head of security at the Palatine was a man named Johnny B. McCann – Johnny or Johnny B to his friends, Mr. B to employees. Johnny had started out as a Teamster in New York. Judging from the stories he told, his main job had been to grab

stuff off trucks and walk picket lines when locals needed to strike. From there he got into restaurants, working as a front end manager. This was back in the late sixties and early seventies when the mob in New York had a heavy Teamster connection and ran about fifty percent of the restaurants, usually into the ground. I'm guessing that when Johnny went from trucks to tablecloths, he was simply moving from one division in the "company" to another, but Johnny would never be so indiscreet as to mention the mob, especially in Vegas.

Johnny's big chance came one afternoon when a fire broke out at the restaurant. He jumped behind the counter, grabbed the cash register, and hustled it outside – protecting it from the firemen, he says. The bosses noticed; in a couple of months he moved to a restaurant with a shortage problem and took over as manager. The restaurant's medical insurance skyrocketed, but the shortage stopped. After that, Johnny's employers sent him to Chicago, and for there he got involved with the Playboy Clubs, and then somewhere along the way, he got to Vegas and went legit, or at least as legit as anyone in corporate gambling can be.

Johnny B was waiting in the hotel lobby when I came down. He had one of his brighter lieutenants with him, a man called Peanut. Peanut had been in the U.S. Air Force and had left as a chief master sergeant. He'd had something to do with security on nuclear missile bases, which sounds damn impressive unless you happen to have visited them.

Peanut was a hulk of a guy, looming over me and I'm a good six-three. He wasn't in any sort of shape, but he was big, and size can cover a lot of mistakes. Unlike Johnny, who flashed a gold chain and exotic rings along with his black silk shirt and white jacket,

Peanut was turned out in a sedate black suit, fitted so perfectly to his frame that you couldn't tell he carried a good sized breadbasket with him. Where Johnny flashed a Rolex and a huge turquoise ring, Peanut's watch was tucked well up his sleeve. But it was a Patek Philippe, probably more expensive than Johnny's.

"The man himself," said Johnny as I got off the elevator. He walked toward me, pointing his finger like a gun. Johnny was a short guy, and though well into his sixties, he still moved with lithe grace, a boxer skating across the ring at the start of a fight. The strains of Hell's Kitchen played in his voice, and he had a way of tugging at your jacket and poking you when he said hello that suggested something beyond intimacy. The first time you met him you came away thinking he knew you all his life. You could go for months without seeing him, and there he'd be in the hotel lobby, pulling you along, asking where your cigar was, demanding whether you were finally ready to give up drinking that crap bourbon and move up to Scotch.

We shook hands, I said hello to Peanut, and we walked outside. A limo was waiting. All the doormen – there were a dozen – snapped to attention when we came out. My first drill sergeant in the Army would have thought he'd found heaven.

"We'll pick up Freslevan and have a little fun," said Johnny. "You know Chris?"

Freslevan was the vice president for security at the Kingdom Casino, the other hotel I'd come to look over.

"I talked to him on the phone. That's it."

"You'll like him. Great friend of mine. Real character."

In Johnny's world, you were a player, a character, or a jerk. Most people were the latter.

The Kingdom was just as big as Johnny's casino, and while they were owned by the same conglomerate, in many ways a bitter rival. But the security staffs often worked together, sharing data and techniques; keeping the scumbags out was in everybody's interests. And getting along with other people when it was in his interest was Johnny B's style. His ego didn't get in his way, and he seemed not to be particularly jealous or competitive – at least not in the ways that most of us are. He could stand apart from things, above them really. That was what I admired about him. That and the fact that he knew his business pretty damn well. He came off like a backslapping politician, and he was that, a throwback to the old-school glad-hander, the hustlers he'd grown up with in New York City. But his eyes saw a hell of a lot, and his ears caught what his eyes missed. The fancy suit and jewelry were a costume, camouflage for something very hard, very ferocious if it needed to be, but also very controlled. I had no doubt that if I ever got into a fight with him, even a fistfight, it would be a close thing. And that's the highest compliment I can give a man.

After we picked up Freslevan, we went over to a small club a few blocks off the strip. It wasn't a casino or even a bar; it was a shooting gallery. Johnny had arranged for us all to bust up some paper with vintage Tommy guns. The Thompson is the weapon that gangsters made famous back in the 1920s and '30s. Most times in movies you see it with the drum in front of the trigger. There's a belt of bullets there; fifty or a hundred bullets can spurt up through the gun in only a few seconds. It's a real rush the first time you use the gun, mostly because of the romance from the movies. The design's outdated now – the Thompson can't really compare to something like an H&K MP-5N, the

submachine gun of choice for most counter-terror and SWAT teams. But it can still get the job done and it's got a hell of a roar when it lets loose.

People think I'm a gun nut because I had a marksman's badge and was a weapons sergeant in the Army. I'm not that into guns though, no more than a carpenter is into hammers or saws. They're tools. I like good tools, but I don't make a fetish of them. I did the best at the range but it didn't mean anything special to me, not nearly as much as it did to Peanut and Freslevan especially. He would have liked to have beaten me. He had a competitive glint in his eye and that locked-jaw frown some people get when they block the rest of world away and really concentrate on an objective. But he had a little trouble with the gun's initial kick and couldn't keep it steady enough through the burst to do as well as I did, even after a few turns.

"Winner buys," laughed Johnny B after our hour was up.

They all thought that was funny. I even laughed, and when we reached the bar on the observation deck at Stratosphere I lay down my credit card. The bartender glanced at Johnny, then pushed the card away.

"Mr. B's friends don't pay in this town," he said.

I put away the card and took out a hundred bill to leave for a tip. Such largess deserved to be rewarded.

"Here's to Paradise," said Freslevan, holding up his drink.

"Vegas is more like the desert where Jesus was tempted," said Johnny. "Forty days and forty nights, then taken to a mountain top and shown the universe. That's Vegas – the mirage at the bottom of the peak."

I smiled, even as I was thinking it wasn't any of those. Metaphors are easy. A thing is what it is, a place is itself. You could get anything here, true, but it wasn't a fall from grace as Johnny implied. At least not for me.

"If it's not Paradise, it's close," said Freslevan. "Hell on you if you gamble, though, huh Jack?"

"I guess," I told him.

"How's Merc?" Johnny asked. "Getting along?"

Merc Conrad was my partner.

"Merc's Merc," I said.

"Not around, huh?"

"Overseas."

Merc spent a lot of time overseas, mostly on projects for the government.

"Something for Uncle," we called them. We had things going in Iraq, Afghanistan, Morocco, and Italy. I hadn't seen Merc since back around New Year's or maybe just after, but that wasn't unusual. We handled different parts of the company and were busy as hell. A lot of our time was spent traveling in opposite directions. We used satellite and cell phones, email, and instant messages when we had to communicate, depending on the circumstances.

"You were in the Army like Merc?" Freslevan asked as my glass was refilled.

"That's where I met him, yeah."

"Special Forces?"

I gave him my standard reply: "If I tell you, I'm supposed to kill you."

Lame, yeah, but everybody laughs. And they generally move on, getting the idea that you don't talk about it.

"Why'd you leave?" Freslevan asked.

Sometimes I say that my hitch was up, that it wouldn't have made sense to stay much longer because with the pension, I'd be working for half pay. Sometimes I say I got bored. Sometimes I say I thought I'd get out and get rich. Each has some truth to it. Even better, each one is the sort of thing people like to hear. Ties things into knots for them, makes them think they know something about me.

Tonight I just shrugged.

I took one of the cigars I'd had in my pocket out and cut it, aiming carefully with the double-edged razor and pushing hard against the tobacco so the tip snapped off with a loud click. I leaned my elbows against the bar top and took out my Zippo to light it.

"Nice lighter," said Johnny. "Old one?"

"Actually it's not," I said. "Hard to get the right fluid for the old ones." I finished lighting the end of my cigar and handed him the lighter. Then I took out a cigar for him. It was a Cohiba Esplendios – a Cuban cigar that cost nearly fifty dollars American. It tasted fantastic – but let's face it; I didn't buy it for the taste. I bought it because Cohiba Esplendios are outlawed in America, and are therefore very expensive to get here. And because Johnny would know what it was.

"You have good taste, Jacky," he told me as he slid his fingers up and down the cigar, turning it over as if it were a jewel to be examined. "Very good taste."

He lit it and then took a long, slow taste, staring at the glow at the end pensively. Then he started telling some of his stories.

I'd met Johnny four years before when I first came out to Vegas with Merc; I'd seen him at least twice a year since then and he always told stories. I'd never heard the same one twice.

Tonight he talked about growing up on the Lower West Side of New York – aka Hell's Kitchen. The Irish gangs there were tougher than the Italians, he said. The Italians would try to get their money out of you if you were late; they might beat you up, but they'd let you live, figuring that was the best way to get you to pay. The Irish would just kill you, and get the money from your relatives.

We drank for a while more. Freslevan was from the Midwest and had been an FBI agent. He'd worked on some pretty big cases, he claimed, and told us one about a politician who'd accepted bribe in exchange for awarding contracts to build a sewer system in a local town.

Johnny B smiled through the story. "That's nothing," he said. "Show me a town where the mayor, the highway superintendent, and the building inspector isn't on the take, and I'll show you a ghost town. You think anybody in the world's honest?"

"Most are," said Freslevan. "Most."

Johnny turned to Peanut, who was silently sipping his rum and Coke. "Most people honest?" he asked him.

"I'm surprised how many are," said Peanut. "Truly surprised."

"Are you honest, Jack?" Freslevan asked me, leaning down across the bar.

"Jacky's an exception," said Johnny quickly. "He doesn't count."

"I'm honest," I said. But Johnny had already launched into another story and the others weren't listening to me.

At some point four very good looking women wearing pretty silk dresses descended on us. They wore a light veil of perfume, each one subtly different, each the clean scent of someone who'd just stepped from a bath. Johnny bought them all drinks. He looked at me. I shook my head slightly. The girls stayed for a drink and then they left.

We hung around until it was nearly five a.m. I smoked two cigars, and had several drinks, though not nearly as many as the others. I didn't offer any stories. I'm not a talker and besides, the best stories I have are ones I can't tell.

As we walked to the elevator Freslevan mentioned something about Central America and what a shithole it was. He'd been there for a month on an FBI assignment and came away convinced it was the armpit of the world. I disagreed. I said the jungles there were beautiful, or they had been when I was there.

"You were there?" asked Freslevan. "In the jungles?"

I explained that I had helped train some government troops to deal with rebels in Guatemala. I'd also spent a little time in Nicaragua and Peru. All of that came before Afghanistan, my last assignment before leaving the service.

As we were talking, another guy got into the elevator with us. Johnny and the others didn't notice him, but I did. He stared at me with bloodshot eyes. They didn't go with the rest of his face, or the rest of his body. If you took those eyes away, he'd have looked like a normal working-class guy, maybe a truck driver or a factory hand who'd managed to put a little money away for a few days off. But his eyes – they were locked into something that wasn't middle class. They weren't the eyes of a driver or a carpenter or a clerk who worked 9 to 5 and dreamed of winning his retirement stake on the roulette wheel. These were eyes I'd seen before, though not in a Vegas elevator, not in a real

fancy hotel. They were violent eyes, the kind that sizes you up a split-second before striking. They radiated anger. Taken by surprise, I could feel my heartbeat jump.

“You were in Guatemala?” said the stranger.

“Yeah.” I snapped the word out, quick and flat, without any emotion – certainly without an invitation to talk.

He didn’t get the message.

“You were in the Army, right? I heard you talking. You were in Special Forces.”

“Nah.”

“You’re not that tough.”

“Hey, now.” Johnny B pointed at the guy. “Leave my friend alone. Don’t be a jerk.”

The idea of an older, shorter guy sticking up for someone obviously stronger and younger than himself baffled the man. He probably was insulted at being called a jerk, but he didn’t know what to say. The elevator stopped, we got out. As we walked, I took my last cigar out of my pocket, turned back to see if Johnny wanted it.

The man in the elevator had pulled out a gun. It was a small pistol, an old one, snub-nosed, a revolver. He stood maybe eight feet from me, and only four or five from Johnny. No one spoke.

“Put that away,” I told the guy. “Or you’re going to regret it.”

He didn’t move.

“If you don’t put it away,” I said, “you’re going to be damaged very badly.”

Thinking back, it may have been Johnny who moved first. It would be very much like him. Even at sixty-something he was still a fifteen-year-old at heart; even in Vegas

he acted like he was on the streets of Hell's Kitchen. All I know is that the man started to bring the pistol up, extending his arm to fire. I pushed down with my left foot, took two steps and launched my right foot into his arm. It was a straightforward move, something I'd practiced many times in Krav Maga, an Israeli self-defense discipline originally designed for just such situations: unarmed defenders facing people with guns. The gun went off, but by then my foot had pushed the man's arm away and the bullet flew toward the ceiling. In the next moment I had the bastard pinned on the ground with both knees on this arms.

And then I started hitting him. I don't know how many times. I lost control of myself somewhere after the kick. It wasn't the way I had been trained, neither in Krav Maga nor in Special Forces, nor anywhere else. You train always to be in control. It wasn't the bourbon, or the jet lag. It wasn't anything chemical or external. It was me.

Johnny B finally stopped me. He put his hand on my shoulder and gripped it, hard.

"You want to back off now, Jacky. These fellows will take it from here."

I looked up as if I'd been woken from a dream. Two of the hotel's security people were standing there. I rose, and they grabbed the man off the floor. Another had already retrieved the gun.

"I appreciate what you did for me there," Johnny B told me, straightening his collar. "That son of a bitch would have gut shot me. I appreciate it. You're a real player."

My hands were red and raw. I looked over at the guy I'd been hitting as the security people got him up, finally aware of how hard I'd been pummeling him. I worried

for a second that I'd killed him. He was coughing and moaning, and as the security people prodded him forward he walked on his own power. Barely.

"I think maybe Jacky oughta go get cleaned and get some rest," Johnny told Peanut. The Stratosphere's security supervisor had appeared and was standing nearby. "Why don't you take our friend back over to the hotel? Make sure the woman he sleeps with tonight is his wife." He grinned, and then pointed at me. "I owe you one. That's a good thing."

A good thing.

I walked out of the hotel, still slightly dazed. I was thirsty, but I knew better than to stop for a drink. The car had been parked in a VIP slot on the front drive and the valets brought it forward instantly. One of them opened the door for me and I slid in. Peanut got in and put it in gear, and we went out onto the Strip.

My cell phone began to vibrate.

"Jack," I said, pulling the phone open. I expected it was my wife, asking where I was, or maybe Johnny telling me the security people or police needed to talk. But instead it was a male voice I didn't recognize.

"Is this Jack Pilgrim?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"I'm calling for Jason," said the man. "You're needed right away."

Jason wasn't a person; it was a program we were running for Uncle in Afghanistan. It was Merc's deal; I didn't know much about it.

"I'll have Merc get to you as soon he can," I said. "He's really the expert."

"You're going to have to be here by noon. It's about your partner."

“He’s not dead is he?”

I don’t know why I said that.

“It’s about your partner.”

“Noon’s impossible,” I told him.

“I thought your business was to do the impossible.”

The phone clicked dead. I stared at it for a second, then folded it up and put it in my pocket and turned to Peanut. “I think you better take me to the airport.”

2.

D.C.

They called the company “Genius Imports.” Whoever says the CIA doesn’t have a sense of humor has never dealt with them.

Or maybe they dealt with Cody Unsel.

Unsel’s face looks like one of those fancy fossil rocks they put inside board rooms to impress visiting VIPs. It’s possible he had acne as a kid, but more likely that his personality ate its way through his skin. By the time I met him, he was on the dark side of forty and wore his pants high under a dark suit hoping to disguise the basketball he carried around where his stomach should have been.

The CIA literally had hundreds of agents with experience in Afghanistan, stretching back to the 1980s when the Russians tried to rub out dissension in the Muslim workers’ paradise once and for all. Unsel wasn’t one of them. I’m not even sure he had ever even been there. He was well qualified for his job though, since the main requirement was that he be a prick to deal with.

Unsel was an officer from the covert side in charge of coordinating what Uncle called “external projects” in Afghanistan. He had a business card claiming he was executive vice president of Genius Imports; according to the company’s website, it

imported clothing from “exotic Asia.” It was a front, of course, and a damn elaborate one – you could buy everything from Iranian rugs to Afghan hats off the web site. I was tempted once to see what would happen if I ordered an Iranian rug, which supposedly were illegal to import.

Genius Imports was set up so the CIA could hire companies like mine to do jobs that were too petty or too nasty or too important for the government to do, without making it too obvious who hired us. It was a very small part of the overall Afghanistan program, and the amount of money Genius Imports doled out was nothing compared to the overt aid projects that brought food and other supplies into the country. Genius Imports also didn’t deal with the big security and contractor firms like Blackwater and Halliburton. It was simply for small fry like us, who could stay below the radar.

Contractors have gotten a lot of ink, most of it bad, because of Iraq, but all most of them do is what they are hired to do. They’re not really replacement armies, even if in some cases they’ve been pushed into that role. Armies are trained to fight wars, not fix electric grids or build schools, or even provide security for local officials. I’ll grant you that in a lot of cases it’d be cheaper for the government to invest the time, money, and lives to do the job itself. But you could say the same thing to anyone who hires a lawn company to take care of the grass.

Jason was one of those special jobs Genius Imports handled, something that had to be kept quiet and confidential – not for security reasons, but because of international politics. It called for us to provide a number of different training sessions for police officers and officials from around Afghanistan, everything from first aid to hostage negotiation. Most of the sessions were in Kabul, the capital. While we ran some of the

classes ourselves, mostly what we did was arrange classroom space and instructors, make sure there were refreshments, then sat back and collected the money.

Thirty years ago, the State Department would have handled Jason itself. But the penchant for outsourcing of government functions made outside coordinators necessary, if only because the government no longer had the expertise in-house to run the programs – and yes, the sort of expertise I’m talking about mostly involved picking up the telephone and offering people money.

There was a twist in Jason’s case, which was the reason we were selected in the first place. The UN mandate for “nation building” in Afghanistan called for funds from private groups, rather than governments. To keep the UN happy, the paperwork was arranged to make it look as if non-profits – not Uncle – had hired Genius Imports to hire us. We’d done that sort of thing before, most importantly in a project to count poppy production in the eastern provinces. A UN-designated group did the counting while we provided security, ostensibly funded by a grant from an anti-drug group. But the dollars came to us directly from the CIA.

Not so coincidentally, arrangements like this were perfect for getting money to people in the outer provinces whose support for the central government was shaky. The money was virtually untraceable by GSA auditors. No embarrassing questions, no unworthy answers. That had happened in the poppy program, where Unsel gave us a list of people who were to be given “expense money” prior to the start of the operation. This was in addition to the “rental payments” which were essentially bribes to local warlords to keep the UN surveyors alive in the southern provinces. As far as I knew, those sorts of arrangements weren’t part of Jason.

Genius Imports' office building looked about as fancy as a rental storage unit. There were plenty of names on the directory in the reception area, but I didn't see anybody else in the building except for the two bored security guards at the front desk. They didn't bother asking my name when I came in, and I didn't give it. I'd been watched by security cameras from the moment I drove into the parking lot, and no doubt Unsel had already told them to let me through. I took the elevator to the second floor and stepped out into the dimly lit hallway. Steel gray doors lined the corridor, the occupants identified mostly by numbers and letters, though here and there a small plaque next to the door gave a name: First Central Security, Infra-Circuits, Acme Testing. Front companies all, I'm sure.

Genius Imports was at the end of the line. The door buzzed open as I reached for the knob.

"You look like hell, Jack," said Unsel, sitting behind the steel desk at the center of the room.

"Yeah, well, I blew off an appointment with my hairdresser to get here."

"You could have at least taken a shower."

"Is Merc in trouble?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'm not his babysitter."

"Where is he?"

"In Afghanistan, last time I checked."

"Where in Afghanistan, Jack?"

"Kabul, I think. The capital."

“I know what the capital is.” Unsel’s tone, not particularly pleasant to begin with, got two or three degrees nastier. “He’s not there, Jack. Where the hell is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not his babysitter. Is this about Jason, or what?”

I wasn’t trying to be uncooperative. At this point, I figured Merc was in trouble – serious trouble – and the fact that neither I nor our office coordinator Cynthia Munson had heard about it only made it seem more dire. I’d had Cynthia send several text messages to our Kabul office, a rented desk in an office we shared with several other foreign firms. She hadn’t gotten an answer.

Unsel frowned. “When was the last time you saw your partner?”

“Saw him? I don’t know. A few weeks back.”

“Weeks or months?”

“You know, Unsel, I’m starting to feel like I’m under an inquisition here. Or like maybe you have the mistaken notion that I’m back in the army and you’re a colonel and I’m a punk private.”

“You should be so lucky.” Unsel got up and grabbed a small briefcase that had been propped against the empty bookshelf at the side of the room. “You know what’s going on in Afghanistan, right Jack? The media says the UN is taking over, but really we’re bugging out. In two weeks, Jack.”

“Two weeks? I thought it was by the end of the year.”

“Two weeks. All military units will be out, except for token forces.”

“How does that affect us?”

The official line was that our guys and the NATO people were no longer needed, and Afghan troops were taking over, with the UN people there more or less as window dressing. I had a natural prejudice against most of the Afghan units – based on bitter experience – but the bottom line was, we couldn't stay in the damn country forever.

Unsel slapped the briefcase flat on the desk and opened it; he fished out a photograph and slid it across to me. "Is that Merc?"

The man in the picture had a beard and wore an Afghan greatcoat over nondescript pants and shirt; the photo was so grainy I couldn't tell whether the pants were gray, green, or maybe even brown. He wore a traditional wool pakol, an Afghan hat that can be rolled down for warmth, or, maybe in this case, to help hide some of the face.

The man in the picture could have been just about anyone – except for the lightning-shaped scar that ran from the corner of his right eye down his cheek and into his beard. I knew that scar as well as I knew any of the wounds on my own body, including the three healed bullet holes. Merc got it saving my life.

"Looks like Merc when we were there in the army," I said.

"It was taken a month ago. Look at the date."

"Is that when it was taken, or did you just have the computer stamp it like that?"

"Stop playing games, Jacky. Where the hell is your partner? He took off with the money for Leopard. We want it back."

"What's Leopard?"

#

Unsel didn't explain what Leopard was. He didn't believe I didn't know. I don't blame him.

I didn't know what Leopard was, but obviously it involved money that the CIA hadn't gotten back. Pleading ignorance didn't get me very far, and I just shut up when he wouldn't explain. Maybe it was the influence of lawyers, or maybe it was just plain old common sense finally kicking in.

Combat sense, really – receive the situation before committing your forces.

Unsel told me I had a week to account for the money, which meant, get it back to the CIA. If I'd been in a better mood I would have laughed. Nothing happens in Afghanistan in a week. A week there is like an hour here.

Or an eternity, depending on the circumstances.

“Two million dollars Jack. We want it back and accounted for. You got it?”

“Listen –”

“No, you listen. I don't care about Afghanistan, I don't care about the Taliban, I don't care about you, and I sure don't care about Mercury Conrad. That money comes back and is accounted for in a week. If it's not, you're going to prison. And it won't be a cushy place like Danbury, I guarantee.”