

ENVIRONMENTAL FRIENDSHIP FOSSLE by IAN STEWART

"The oldest crime in the book" may not mean quite what it sounds like....



Illustration by Broeck Steadman

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It happened so fast that I nearly missed it.

I'd seen the kid hanging about near Wang's stall, with a studied nonchalance on his face and a hardness in his eyes, but a lot of the street urchins do that and it's not illegal to look at tourist trash without buying any. And I can usually tell the thieves from the hopefuls--some kind of sixth sense, born of long practice.

This time, my extra sense let me down.

The kid was good, I have to admit. Wang Chin-Li was distracted by a potential customer, a willowy blonde just flown in from Amsterdam, still red around the eyes despite recent applications of eye-shadow and mascara. She was deciding whether to buy an expensive jade rabbit, and Wang, who has a bit of a thing for tall Western women and even more of a thing for their money, wasn't quite as alert as he would usually have been.

I only caught the actual act of theft out of the corner of my eye, because at the time I was trying not to trip over the old man.

I didn't know his name. You could usually find him, sitting in a small, none too clean alcove by the entrance to the butcher's shop across the road, dismembered ducks hanging from metal hooks, thick slabs of animals I couldn't identify, watching the world go by. He'd sat there almost every day for the last three and a half years, to my knowledge, and he looked old enough that for all I knew he might have sat there for the last fifty.

He didn't beg, he didn't talk, he didn't look unhappy. He just sat. Overhead, the Shelley Street escalator bumped and ground its raucous way towards the middle levels and beyond, all the way up to Conduit Street where the middle classes hung out. It was late morning, so the direction was up. In the morning rush hour it was down. Sometimes, and they were getting more frequent as the machinery slowly fell to bits, it didn't go either way. Then the locals started walking and the tourists started fretting. But today a steady stream of people glided up the slope, like Jesus walking on diagonal water.

The old man never acknowledged the escalator, the travelers, or me. He had sparse gray hair protruding in tufts from the edges of a flat denim cap that had seen better days. Rheumy eyes matched the faded blue of the cap. When he stood, you could see that his left ankle was frozen and his knees were none too sound either, but he didn't stand often, or for long. I noticed what the kid was doing when those eyes, suddenly imbued with life, flicked sideways. I tried to grab the little bastard's sleeve as he ran past, heading for one of the alleys down to Hollywood Road, but he avoided my clumsy lunge and darted away between the vendors' stalls, agile as a monkey. There was a shout from the woman who sold bags of unidentifiable sea creatures, dried and dyed, as a pile of what looked like pink teabags tipped over and spilled across the uneven stone steps.

Then he was gone.

"Sorry," I said to Wang. "I'm getting slow in my old age. It's the reflexes that suffer."

The sea-creature lady started scooping up her teabags--swim-bladders from some unidentifiable fish, probably. Waste not, want not. Protein is protein.

"No, I've seen that kid before," said Wang, bowing apologetically to the sea-creature lady. He spat. "A cheap little *ma jai* who pretends he's a *dai dai lo*. Very quick on his feet, too quick for the likes of you and me. Even quicker with his thieving paws. He'll grow up to be a fine young pickpocket, if you want my opinion."

Ma jai means "little horse," and it's the lowest level in a street gang. At the top is the *dai dai lo*--big, big brother. Most gangs are affiliated to triads, Hong Kong mafias, with a *shuk foo*, uncle, as their triad liaison officer.

Gangs are a nuisance. Triads are dangerous.

Wang brushed his hands against his jacket, sewn in the sweatshops of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, *a.k.a.* Shenzhen Sweatshop or Counterfeit City, a few miles across the border with the People's Rep. "It was only an ivory pig, Mike. Sells to tourists for fifty dollars, costs about two to make."

The Dutchwoman would have found this information fascinating, but she didn't speak Cantonese, so she carried on rummaging through the trays of carved wooden animals.

"Ivory."

It was a long moment before I realized that the old man had spoken. It was the first time he'd broken his silence since I'd been watching him.

"Not real ivory, grandad," I said. "Mammoth ivory--see the sign?" In the window behind the stall was a faded yellow card: ALL OUR IVORY IS ENVIRONMENTAL FRIENDSHIP FOSSLE FROM REAL MAMMOTH TUSK. There was a time when the signs had said one thing and the ivory was something else, but after the Sino-African Conservation Treaty of 2016, the flow of illicit elephant and rhino tusks into China had pretty much dried up, and Wang's funny little animals very probably had been carved from the fossilized bones of Pleistocene mammoths and mastodons melted out of the Siberian tundra with jets of superheated steam. I hoped so, because that way I wouldn't have to arrest him. The paleontologists were none too happy at this development, but at least no noble beasts were getting slaughtered to make tourist trinkets, and the economy of the Siberian Collective had improved enough to stop them slaughtering Russians, most of the time, so I figured there was a significant net gain.

"Mammoth ivory," the old man stated, as if it was a proposition put up for debate. "I have hunt mammoth."

As a reminiscence, it was a lot more interesting than most old men's utterances, but no more plausible than tall tales of mermaids and dragons, or sexy blondes in bars, come to that. "I can see you're old, grandad," I told him, "but not *that* old." He probably meant "elephants." "Did you hunt the mammoths in Africa?"

"In Siberia," he insisted. "When I was still able to move without pain." His accent was strange, sounded vaguely ... Mongolian? Perhaps he had been to the Collective, long ago. But not long enough for there to have been mammoths to hunt.

"Ah, the famed Siberian elephant, the terror of the Steppes," Wang joined in, giggling. Possibly with embarrassment.

The old man waved his hand dismissively. "Young people got no respect for their elders no more," he complained. He turned his back on us and returned to some inner contemplation--I wondered what he saw in his mind's eye.

Mammoths, maybe.

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Salima was waiting for me at Speedy's, a tiny eatery with an even tinier kitchen, not quite hole-in-the-wall but that was mainly because there wasn't room for a wall. It had a bar, a row of wobbly tables on plinths, a couple of extra tables jammed into what counted as spare space, and a few stools lined up against the window, which was always wide open. You could get passable Mexican food at the Speedy Gonzales restaurant, and a pretty good margarita for the lowest price in Hong Kong. Great cuisine it wasn't, but it filled the gaps and beat the pants off the rather bland offerings that the Cantonese like to eat. My jaded palate needs something with a bit more *zing*.

Salima had zing, and better still, she had a first-class brain. Her mother was Cantonese, her father Egyptian. Both had died when she was a teenager--train crash, maglev failure. It could have destroyed her, but it brought out her fighting instincts, made her tough and independent. She'd worked her way through college, and was currently doing a part-time Ph.D. under a certain Professor Zhao in the Paleontology Department of Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her topic was mesolithic hunting and its contribution to extinctions, and she was paying her way by acting as one of Zhao's lab technicians. His department hadn't existed twenty years ago--Hong Kong does have a few fossil species, but nothing worth setting up a department for. But when control of Hong Kong reverted to the People's Rep, the University of Shenyang set up a satellite operation at HKPU to take up some of the workload generated by the Yixian sediments in Liaoning Province, and Zhao had been hired from Beijing. The list of important fossils that have come out of the Yixian deposits is as long as a *Diplodocus*'s backbone, and considerably more significant for the history of life on Earth, I gather.

Right now, Salima's income derives from cleaning up dinobird remains. Zhao had spent several years in northern Asia, which is where he'd first gotten interested in the effects of mesolithic hunting. But as soon as the Liaoning dinobird remains were discovered, he returned to Beijing and started working on the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary. His long-term aim was to document the precise sequence of events that killed off the dinosaurs. But he'd kept the Pleistocene research going, too.

Over two burrito supremes (that meant they came with guacamole *and* sour cream) we caught up on each others' days. She'd spent hers cleaning up one leg-bone of a fossil *Confuciosaurus*. Apparently an entire flock of them had dropped out of the sky one Late Jurassic afternoon, probably caught in a cloud of carbon monoxide from a nearby volcano. They'd splattered into the mud of a lake and ended up as strata.

"But the really exciting news," she said, breaking off in mid-flow, "is the new mammoth graveyard near Yerekhtenya-Tala. I should be able to get really good data if Zhao swings us access to some specimens."

"I'm sure you'll pester him until he does. Graveyard?"

"Well, it's not really a graveyard--I mean, the mammoths weren't buried deliberately. But there are so many frozen corpses that it looks like one."

"Ah."

"What's fantastic, aside from the sheer number of animals, is that they all date from the end of the Pleistocene."

Clearly the timing was significant, but my ignorance must have registered on my face, for she quickly explained: "That's 9,000 BC, Mike. Soon after that, the mammoths went extinct. Well, some tusks from Wrangel Island seem to be younger, but *Mammuthus primigenius* was extinct by then over virtually the whole of its historical range--"

I gave her a quizzical look and reached for a handful of tortilla chips.

"Sorry. Woolly mammoth. The significant thing is, wherever woolly mammoths coexisted with humans, be it Siberia or North America, we find kill sites with lots of mammoth carcasses. The evidence that they *are* kill sites includes flint tools and mammoth bones with cut-marks. The animals were butchered. But we don't know what effect hunting had on the population dynamics. What I'm hoping to find is evidence of increased or more effective hunting at the end of the Pleistocene. Or not. Either way, we'll learn more about the mammoth extinction.

"But enough about me. How was your day? Catch any smugglers?"

Salima is one of the few people who know how I make my living. Most of my friends and acquaintances think that Michael Crow is basically just a bum who hangs around Hollywood Road because he's got nothing better to do with his time. To some extent that's true ... but what they don't know--and I hope never find out--is that I have a part-time contract with SCITES. That's the Second Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna, you'll recall. It's mostly a bureaucratic nightmare, but it has an Enforcement Agency, which monitors trade in endangered species and bangs up anyone who breaks the rules or is complicit in breaking the rules. Nowadays it's mostly the demand for "traditional medicines" that causes SCITES headaches in these parts; nobody would dare to try to sell a tiger-skin rug anymore, but ground tiger bones and powdered tigers' testicles as a cure for everything from warts to brain tumors are a different matter entirely. Of course no one advertises such products, but a few winks and nudges are enough to convey the message to a prospective customer. It doesn't make things any easier for the Agency that most what's sold is fake--the bones are often from the cat *family*, but small ones that go "miaow" rather than enormous ones with stripes. It's not illegal to sell ground cat bones, and no one ever claimed they were from tigers, now, did they?

What really bug me are idiots who try to buy rhino horn. They can get Ciagris over their wristbands, and that mostly *works*--unlike suggestively shaped bits of dead rhino--so what's the point?

I'm kind of leery about anyone knowing what I really do, because most of the trade in endangered species is run by the triads. In conjunction with their Chechen, Kazakh, Tajikistani, and for all I know Tasmanian equivalents. I have no ambition to end my days as part of the next bit of reclaimed Kowloonside harbor. So mostly I keep tabs on what's going down, buy occasional samples from medicine shops and tourist traps, pass them on to SCITES to be tested, and maintain a low profile.

You can see how much I trusted Salima. I'd been trying to get her to move in with me for the last two years, and we had few secrets from each other now.

She was wavering, I knew it.

My mind kept coming back to what the old guy had said. *Hunting* mammoths? More likely a solid case of Alzheimer's, I thought. But, it kept bugging me. What on Earth was he gabbling about? Was there some nasty truth behind it--elephant poaching, for instance? Raids on zoos? Or was it just senile rambling?

Shit, who cared?

To my surprise, I realized that *I* did.

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I looked for the old man the next time I passed by Hollywood Road, but for once he wasn't there. The steps of the butcher's shop were empty except for black plastic bags of whatever bits of animal even the Chinese considered inedible. Several wet-looking lumps and stringy things had spilled out of the bags, but

for all I could tell, they might have been the burial remains of an alien from Fomalhaut.

That was a thought. Had the old man been abducted by aliens, and hunted mammoths that had themselves been abducted anything up to 150,000 years earlier?

I decided it wasn't a very *good* thought.

Wang saw me staring at the butcher's shop steps. "He's dead, Mike. Feng told me." Feng was one of the butcher's employees. "Apparently the old guy was some kind of distant relative of Feng's. When he didn't show this morning, Feng called his home, got through to one of the paramedics from the ambulance instead."

I gave this some thought. "Does Feng know his address as well as his phone number?" I thought some more. "Dammit, Wang--can he tell me the old man's *name*?"

* * * *

He could. It was Tsong: good solid Chinese name. Except that he was Tsong Kapa, and that was rare outside the Xizang autonomous region. Formerly known as Tibet.

Tsong's apartment was on the thirty-ninth floor of a dilapidated high-rise on a reclaimed section of harbor near Tai Kok Tsui. I had a valid search warrant in my pocket, obtained through the Agency's contacts at Police HQ, and after lengthy scrutiny and a wristband call to senior management it entitled me to an entry card from what was laughingly called the concierge desk.

I slid the card into the lock and pushed the door open. There was a faintly musty smell, no doubt because the windows were closed but the air-conditioning was switched off. The apartment was hot, humid, and small. Westerners would have called it cramped, but in Hong Kong terms it was, if not palatial, ample for a single person. Often an entire family, plus Filipino maid, would have occupied a smaller space.

I pulled on rubber gloves and searched the whole apartment. It didn't take long.

There were the usual consumer electronics--small, Japanese, stylish. A flatscreen, an mp5 player, an old-style wristband-to-landline socket in the wall, a battered deskcomp with wireless Net connection. I couldn't crack the password--I'd have to leave that for the IT fraud squad, who would be very interested indeed to find out whether there was anything incriminating on it.

There were no books, no photographs. An acrylic painting of a bull elephant silhouetted against a Kenyan sunset hung on one wall, slightly lopsided. In the tiny closet were some drab shirts, a few pairs of worn trousers, and a couple of threadbare jackets.

The furniture was cheap and ordinary, most likely bought second-hand. Tsong Kapa had led a simple life. Except--

Under the single bed, with its thin, hard mattress--how do the Chinese sleep on those things?--was part of a tusk. Looked like elephant, a young bull, sawn off at the thick end, two-thirds the length of the bed. It was wrapped in pink tissue paper.

I lined up my wristband and took some photographs--bed, tusk, clothing, apartment. Painting of elephant. Pink tissue paper.

Then I called the Agency, who would pick up the tusk, dust for prints, and take the apartment to pieces. I was stuck there until they arrived, holding the fort in case someone came and took stuff away before SCITES got there.

I stared at the walls, trying to put myself into Tsong's frame of mind ... If I'd wanted to *hide* something, where ... ?

After a while, my eyes were drawn to the suspended ceiling. One lightweight tile looked dirtier than the others, as if it had been handled, repeatedly.

I dragged a chair across, stood on it, and pushed the tile up into the roof-space above. The space was shallow, and the glow from my wristband's screen showed it to be empty. The dirt was a red herring. But I tried the other tiles in turn, slipping them out past their supports, and taped to the back of one of them was an envelope. Inside the envelope was an old-fashioned metal key. Stamped on the key were the digits 244, in Western characters.

I put the key back in its envelope, slipped both into my pocket, turned the flatscreen to a People's Rep basketball channel, and settled down on the couch for the Agency squad to turn up.

It was a long wait.

* * * *

"Salima--what kind of key do you think this is?"

She was used to me asking this kind of off-the-wall question, just as she was used to me trying to make our relationship more permanent. She took the key between thumb and nail-varnished forefinger, turned it over, held it at an angle to the light, as if it were some paleontological specimen. Perhaps it was.

"You don't see many metal keys these days," she said, her voice muffled by a soft taco.

I nodded. "Encryption is more effective."

"Right. But this is no antique, Mike. Looks fairly new, but well-used."

"What makes you think that?"

She put down the taco and sipped at her drink. She had a sensuous mouth. "Plenty of bright metal, but also plenty of scratches," she said.

I thought about that. "Locker?"

"Yes. Could be a garage, but most likely a locker. Most of those still have metal keys. Too expensive to change to cryplocks, and not much point anyway."

"That's what I think, too. A locker is a good place to keep something you don't want in your own home. Drugs, pornography, whatever. Not an airport locker or a bus station one--those are checked regularly by the authorities. A garage key would be unlikely; he wasn't rich enough to own a car. Though it could be someone *else's* garage."

Salima stared at the key, as if willing it to give up its secrets. It did. I saw the smirk spread across her face.

"Come on, girl. Give."

"Buy me another margarita."

"Deal." I beckoned the waitress over. Salima liked hers frozen, no salt. On the rocks for me, with salt--bad for your heart, I've heard. I'll risk it.

"A gym," said Salima, once her drink had safely reached our table. "Very likely a university one. You see this bit where it's been scraped?"

"Yes. So?"

"They put a strap on it so you can Velcro it round your wrist. The tag runs through a metal ring. Someone took the ring off, scraped the metal."

I stared at her. "You can tell all that from a few scrapes and scratches, Ms. Holmes?"

"Not exactly. I've used a key just like this myself. At the gym on Pok Fu Lam road."

"Do 70-year-olds train in gyms, Salima?"

"My grandad ran marathons, Michael."

The key didn't fit locker 244 in the men's changing room at the gym on Pok Fu Lam Road, but I got the janitor to open it anyway. It contained one sweaty sock and a packet of condoms, only two left out of a dozen. Still in their foil wrappers, which was a mercy.

I wondered about the women's changing-rooms, but that would have made it difficult for Tsong to gain access. Ruling that possibility out for now, I asked the attendant whether there were any other university gyms. He told me there were two more. One was in Happy Valley; the other, in Sha Tin, was closed for renovation. An hour being shuttled from official to official secured me master keys to both buildings. On a hunch, I started with the one being renovated.

The key fit--no need to try the other possibilities, then. Locker 244 contained a tin box. I picked the lock, and inside was a media card from an outmoded digital camera--either a Ricoh or, more likely, a cheap Shanghainese copy. Not drugs, then; those had never been more than an outside chance anyway. Something much more interesting.

My heart was thumping fit to burst--and I didn't think the salt on my margarita was to blame.

The card went straight into my pocket, sealed inside a static-free envelope. This was what Tsong had taken so much trouble to conceal. I wondered what was on it. I couldn't understand why, having hidden something as small as a media card, he had taken such a risk with a tusk. I totted up possible reasons. One: a tusk wouldn't have fit into a gym locker. Two: he was 70, when logic is not at its peak. Three ... if it was a mammoth tusk, not elephant, there was no risk involved. Perfectly legal, environmental friendship fossil. Who would ever believe otherwise?

If it was a scam, it was a beauty.

Was the tusk really mammoth? I had no idea.

Why hide a smart card from an antique digital camera? I could think of lots of plausible reasons, but the best way forward was to find out what was *on* the thing.

At home I have a special card-reader attachment for my wristband, which recognizes obsolete formats and translates them into iPEG. So I went home, downloaded the files from Tsong's card, and brought them up in FotoSwap, my mouth dry, my pulse racing.

The quality was excellent, the lighting strangely dull, the skies smeared with clouds in multiple shades of gray.

There were individuals, standing, sitting, lying on the ground.

There were groups. Young and old together.

Not pornography. The authorities on the mainland are hot on that, but Hong Kong is fairly relaxed except for kiddie-porn, which this thankfully wasn't. The individuals and groups looked like woolly elephants. Either they *were* woolly elephants, or they were genuine *Mammuthus primigenius*.

Some were living. Most were dead. The dead ones were all bulls, and most of them had gaping wounds where their tusks should be.

Several of the men in the photos were carrying guns. I recognized the brand immediately: AK-83 assault rifles. The originals were Russian, but these had most likely been manufactured in backstreet machine shops in Kabul.

Some frames showed piles of tusks roped to battered Toyota trucks, no registration plates. A few showed tusks being hacked from their owners using chainsaws. And in three of the photos, the man holding the chainsaw looked a bit like Tsong. Younger, I'd guess early forties, but the face and hands were familiar.

Sweat broke out all over my body. The old man *had* hunted mammoths. Somewhere.

What had I gotten myself into?

* * * *

Lies.

Shaggy mammoth story.

Senile old goat.

Other ways to go nuts .

Hypnotism.

Cloned mammoths.

Genetically modified elephants--ivory looks like mammoth.

Aliens who abduct(ed) mammoths.

Aliens who abduct(ed) cloned genetically modified elephants.

Chemical process that makes elephant ivory look like mammoth.

Synthetic ivory.

Drugs inducing the illusion of hunting mammoths.

Virtual reality mammoths.

Resurrected mammoths.

Alien creatures resembling mammoths, hunted on Earth.

Alien creatures resembling mammoths, hunted off Earth.

Robot mammoths. Cybermammoths. Mammdroids.

The brainstorm file on my wristband went on for several pages. I looked at the list for the hundredth time, sighed, and closed the file. I had plenty of wild theories, very few facts, and nothing made any sense whatsoever. The first few theories had been the most likely until my search turned up the tusk, but now I'd deleted them, leaving the remnants in case something caused me to reinstate any of them.

Everything about this business smelt of organized crime--a mainland tong, a Hong Kong triad. I was treading on dangerous turf. Not for the first time.

I was having the tusk tested, through SCITES, to find out what animal it was from. Privately, I was betting on "elephant." The test wouldn't tell me whether the elephant had been the proud possessor of a woolly coat, but the photos were enough evidence of that.

Some theories I could rule out by making other tests on the tusk, as I intended to once I'd gotten the results of the first test. For instance, if the tusk had been made by a chemical process that makes modern elephant ivory look like fossil mammoth ivory, the result almost certainly wouldn't be perfect. The fine detail of the ivory's structure, under a microscope, would be a dead giveaway. There might even be traces of the chemicals used.

Other theories were more problematic. For instance, if someone had managed to clone mammoths using preserved DNA from the Siberian tundra burials, would it be illegal to slaughter them for their ivory? SCITES had made that illegal for *bona fide* elephants, but I didn't need to read the treaty to know that it did not mention live mammoths.

Could we argue in court that a living mammoth was really an elephant? Could that argument succeed? I'd seen sillier unorthodox interpretations stand up in a court of law. I'd seen more sensible ones thrown out.

Suppose Tsong had unknowingly hunted robot mammoths, as part of some elaborate scheme to make him think he was hunting the real things. Fake mammoth ivory, chemically transformed from real elephant ivory, would have been implanted in the robot's tusk, so that he *thought*...

Crazy. *Why would anyone bother?* Why would it matter if Tsong thought he was hunting mammoths? Anyway, the old guy was dead and the chances of tracing the triad behind this scam were zero, let alone pinning it on them in court. I'd gone too long without sleep, I was losing my mind. Every explanation was either incredible or stupid. What did I really have? An offhand remark made by an elderly expat Tibetan who was probably suffering from dementia, some images that any nine-year-old could pull off the Net and fake up with FotoSwap, and a tusk that would probably turn out to be made of plastic, carefully wrapped in pink party paper. The puzzle that I was allowing to consume me was thinner tissue than the pink paper. Mist, dreams, delusions--

Then my wristband flagged a call. It was a woman's voice, American, east coast. Marcia White, head of SCITES' Analytical Branch.

"We have a positive ID for your tusk," she said. "It's mammoth." So I'd lost my private bet.

I flicked through my brainstorm file, and a thought struck me.

This was *definitely* a long shot. "Can you do me a favor, Marcia?"

"Depends what it is."

"Carbon-date the tusk. I'd like to know how old it is."

She hesitated, but didn't ask any questions. "Yes, I suppose that information might help identify the source. I'll let you know when the result comes through."

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Two days later, she called again. SCITES had finished testing the tusk--but their Chief Analyst refused to tell me the results over a public channel. Could I come to her office in person?

I asked why.

She wouldn't discuss *that* over a public channel, either.

I looked at my watch: it was twenty to eleven. I could take a red retro Toyotaxi to the ferry terminal, a ferry across Victoria Harbor--you never had to wait long for a ferry--and another taxi. That would be a lot cheaper than paying to use one of the tunnels under the harbor. A taxi would be quicker than a magbus, and only marginally more expensive.

"I'll be with you around noon," I told her.

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SCITES has a suite of offices between the 45th and 48th floors of the HKBBC Building in Ma Liu Shui, overlooking Tolo Harbor. The picture window in Reception frames a view of the jagged, foliage-covered hills of Sai Kung Country Park, to the right, and Plover Cove Country Park, to the left. As always, both were half-hidden by a haze of pollution wafted in from the mainland industrial zones. I showed my ID, checked in, and within a few minutes I was being offered green tea and some tired looking *dim sum*. I accepted a cup of tea, and Marcia handed me a sheet of paper, a standard lab analysis form. I looked at the brief report.

"Marcia, this makes no sense," I said.

"I know," she replied, no smile, very businesslike. "That's why I didn't want to discuss it with you on your band."

"Oh. I thought maybe it was something you wanted to keep secret."

"No, I just didn't want to waste my time arguing over a bandlink when we can argue much more efficiently in person. I figured that telling you nothing would push all your curiosity buttons and get you over here double quick."

"Thanks," I said. She *still* wasn't smiling. "That was really thoughtful of you."

She didn't acknowledge the sarcasm. This lady was *focused*. "So, what do you think?" she said.

I tried to conceal the fact that I hadn't got a clue. "It's *modern*?" I asked inanely.

"That's what the report says. Carbon dating puts its age at around 30 years."

"And it's definitely mammoth?"

"No question."

This was crazy. "No chance of any errors?" She shook her head. "Right. Uh--anything from the old guy's deskcomp?"

"Still trying to crack the crypto. It takes time. We'll get there." SCITES had access to a cryptanalytic quantum computer, massively parallel and able--in theory--to beat the Turing limit. In practice, making it

work was something of a black art.

I sighed. "Not a lot to go on, then. If I had to guess, I'd say someone's cloned a mammoth. *Jurassic Park* rides again, but this time it's Pleistocene Park."

She pursed her lips. She looked worried, as well she might. "It's as good a theory as any, Mike. Like you, we really have no idea. It's baffling. Everything we think of is wild."

"If somebody--some organization, probably a triad--*has* cloned a mammoth, Marcia, we've got a problem. We'll be so busy inspecting ivory that turns out to be mammoth that we won't spot elephant ivory being sneaked in as part of the same consignment. We can't test everything."

Marcia stared at me. Maybe I'd finally said something sensible by accident. "Why would anyone clone a mammoth?"

"Because ... because the sweatshops stopped using real elephant ivory for carvings a while back. It fetches a much better price from the cartels that supply traditional medicines to the hole-in-the-wall pharmacies; the price went sky-high a few years ago when someone decided that whatever a rhino horn can do, an elephant tusk can do ten times better." I sighed. "Why do people fall for visual puns? It's like using a melon to cure a headache because it has the same shape as a skull.... Anyway, the upshot was that nowadays, the ivory-carvers can't afford elephant."

She nodded, once. "So elephant ivory is worth a fortune. Whereas fossil mammoth ivory is not believed to have any medicinal value."

"Precisely. Even though it's the same shape. Hell, it doesn't have to make sense, Marcia. If that were a criterion, there wouldn't *be* any traditional medicines. Fossil ivory is relatively cheap; that's why it's used extensively in tourist trinkets."

She grunted. "So why did anyone go to the trouble of bringing *this* tusk into existence?" She poked a finger at the pink tissue paper. "Why not clone elephants instead, and sell *their* ivory to the cartels?"

My mouth got ahead of my brain. "That would ... bring them into conflict with the elephant-ivory smugglers, which is the quickest way to sign your own death warrant that I can think of," I said. "Those people outrank even the triads on the streets. So whoever it is--probably a new start-up, maybe a mainland tong trying to expand its patch--they horned in on the mammoth ivory trade instead, no pun intended, sorry. Cloning fresh mammoths is easier than digging fossil ones out of the permafrost.... They're not so easy to find any more, the Siberians are talking about an export ban--"

She laughed, without humor. "Or none of the above."

* * * *

Salima was always willing to talk about her thesis project. I listened while she told me about the Maori extinguishing eleven species of moa and the theory that widespread burning by Australian aboriginals had changed the continent's micro-climate and wiped out hundreds of indigenous species, mostly insects and birds. Then I guided the conversation towards what really interested me.

"Mammoths? There are dozens of theories, but they come in three main flavors. Climate change, disease, and hunting by humans. We know that the mesolithic inhabitants of what is now northern Asia hunted mammoths--there are even flint spearheads embedded in corpses preserved in the ice. There are massive bone deposits at the foot of cliffs, and evidence that entire herds were driven over the top. But the orthodox view is that hunting alone would not have been sufficient to make mammoths extinct. *Homo sapiens* didn't have that capability at that time."

"I bet it *was* hunting," I said. "How much of that belief is based on evidence, and how much is political correctness, Salima?"

She chuckled. I like it when she does that. "Bit of both. There's a romantic tendency to assume primitive peoples lived in harmony with nature, taking only what they needed, respecting their environment--"

"Speaking of romantic tendencies," I broke in, "how about we--"

"Don't interrupt. Ask me later. Uh--where was I? Oh, yes. Sometimes they did--respect their environment, that is. There are island populations with limited resources, continuing almost unchanged for thousands of years. But when resources are abundant--when hunting is easy--humans take everything they can get, whether they need it or not. They'll butcher a moa to get the best meat, throw away the rest."

"How can you tell what bits they ate?"

"Cut marks on the bones--rather, their absence."

"So it could have been hunting that killed off the mammoths?" I persisted.

"It's possible. But the profile doesn't seem to fit. Killing technology was pretty primitive in paleolithic times--it must have been around for so long that over-hunting should have finished off the mammoths around 50,000 BC. But they were still present, in quantity, until about 10,000 years ago. *Ergo*, it wasn't over-hunting."

"It's all a bit circumstantial, Salima."

She gave a wry smile, nodded. "Tell me about it."

"If it wasn't hunting, what was it?"

"Could be disease, but it would be almost impossible to find evidence for that. Could be climate change, that's very plausible. Mammoths flourished during interglacials, and some managed to adapt when the ice came down from the north--hairy coats, that kind of thing. But a lot didn't, in my opinion. There was some migration, but the vegetation wouldn't have been so suitable elsewhere.... The population must have crashed as the feeding grounds became buried in thick layers of snow, then ice ... we do have some evidence from fossils. As the habitat contracted, so did the population." She didn't look convinced.

"Maybe it was both," I suggested. "The cold climate reduced the population below some critical level, and then, over a couple of millennia, hunting finished them off."

"Could be. It's a standard idea; most extinctions are multicausal. Maybe the mesolithic technology improved, too. The end is really rather abrupt. The new graveyard seems to be the result of a mass die-off in very short period of time, paleontologically speaking. Before that discovery we only knew of about fifty frozen corpses, scattered all over the place. Now we've got over a hundred in one spot. Which reminds me, Zhao has arranged to be sent samples from all the specimens. He wants me to do some comparative DNA analysis, see if I can figure out the diversity of the gene pool, estimate the population size. If it works, he'll apply for a grant to do a much larger study."

"I don't suppose any of your samples still have tusks?"

Salima shook her head. "There are no tusks anywhere in the deposits. They seem to have been hacked off. More evidence of butchery. Presumably the ancient hunters used the ivory for carvings, or traded them with people who did."

She leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. "There is one odd feature, though." Whatever it was, she looked unhappy about it. "The grapevine says that aside from the missing tusks, no one's found any other signs of butchery in the graveyard deposits. Those hunters didn't kill for meat." Her face brightened. "Which, now that I think of it, suggests that the motivation for mass hunting changed around that period. Which could be very significant for my thesis."

* * * *

I'd expected Marcia to look a little more relaxed, under the circumstances. Cracking Tsong's crypto ought to have been a big step forward. But she was distinctly edgy.

Together, we stared at the image projected on the screen. It showed a jumbled mass of text, in Chinese characters.

"Notebook file?"

"Diary," she said. "It gives a fragmentary but quite comprehensive account of a mammoth-hunting expedition."

"Aha! So someone *has* been cloning mammoths!"

She shook her head. "That's not clear. In fact, what's in his diary is so unbelievable that absolutely nothing is clear." She turned her chair to face me. "And even if it were clear, there's no way we'd ever get a conviction out of it."

"Why ever not?"

She swiveled back to face the screen. "Let me show you."

* * * *

18 September 2021. The winds howl stronger than in Gyangxe Valley, but the air is thick. There are mountains, in the distance, but they are not the mountains of Qomolangma. This place is not my homeland. Yet it is no more than half an hour's drive from my home in Rongpu Si. The windows of the truck were blacked out, so I could not see where we drove. I am frightened. This place should not exist.

I must ignore my fear. Tenzin and the children are close to starvation. I need money. So I sit in the cold and oil the Kalashnikov they have given me.

21 September. The guests have been practicing. They must be wealthy men. Mahmud says they have paid fortunes to join the hunt. Firing a rifle from a moving truck, on rough ground, is easy, and so is hitting a target, even a moving one, if the gun is set to rapid fire. But I wonder what it will be like when the target has a will of its own and is capable of charging the truck. Will thirty rounds be enough to stop a stampede?

That is why bodyguards are needed, and one of the reasons why I am here.

23 September. Last night, when I prayed to the Buddha, I asked for the hunt to be successful, as well as praying for the health of my family. If the hunt fails, I will not get paid and my family will die.

Today the helicopter spotted a huge herd, more than a hundred animals strong. It tried to drive them in our direction, but the beasts fled to the east when they panicked.

I hope my prayers are soon answered more fully.

27 September. May Buddha forgive me. I have waded in blood until my clothes stink of it. I lost count of the number of times I had to clean the blood off my chainsaw. The hacked-out tusks are piled high beside the tents.

The guests were supposed to shoot only the bulls, but when the herd stampeded, fear took over our minds and we slaughtered them all--bulls, cows, even calves. I alone killed five bulls and a like number of cows, though I believe that through fortune I spared the little ones. I could claim to have been protecting the rich men, but the truth is, I was protecting myself.

I should be triumphant, for now my family will have food to last the coming winter.

I am not. I am ashamed. Yet, even in my shame, I check my gun for the morrow, making sure that its magazine is full. We shall hunt again.

5 October. Even though the trucks are half-empty, we are burying the tusks in pits. I know not why when everywhere we leave heaps of flesh and bone to paint the snowfields red.

Mahmud is busy with some instrument that I do not recognize. He tells me he is making a map.

At least the killing has stopped ... but the reason is shameful. There are no longer any living mammoths within fifty miles of our camp.

Tomorrow, Mahmud says, we will go home. Our guests will take only memories, but we will take something more tangible. Though not in our trucks. Something to do with the natural ageing process--often I do not understand what Mahmud tells me.

I know I am not permitted to take any of the ivory, but I am unable to resist temptation. I have stolen a tusk, a small one, and hidden it beneath the baggage in one of the trucks. I have bribed the driver to look the other way when I recover it.

I have no fear that he will betray me. Like me, he needs the money.

* * * *

My mind was in turmoil. It really was turning out to be the *damnedest* case. "Virtual reality?" I hazarded.

"It's a possibility," said Marcia. "But it's difficult to see what motive there would be for such a deception. Someone needed Tsong to *act* as a bodyguard, not just think he was one. So the hunt must have been real."

"Which means that the mammoths must have been real, too," I said.

"Yes."

Why did I always say the obvious when talking to Marcia? It made me look like an idiot. "Why did Tsong steal the tusk?" I said. "He must have known it would be dangerous."

"I imagine he was going to sell it, to help feed his family."

"But he *kept* it! Under the bed, wrapped in pink paper!"

"I don't think he planned to. According to some fragmentary records in Lasa, his family died while he was away, in the famine of '21. We don't have any dates for the deaths of his children--record keeping was a bit primitive then. But we know his wife, Tenzin, was the last to go, and she died on the 4th of October. Those facts are on the database."

One day before he came home. "So--he decided to keep it. As a souvenir? Something he could always sell if he was short of cash?"

"As a reminder of his shame, I think."

I found it necessary to break the silence. I was close to tears. I tried to focus. "So ... somebody is cloning mammoths, maybe hidden away in the wilds of one of the minor republics. They drug Tsong and the other hunters so that they think the drive lasts only half an hour, but in reality it may have been days.... They bury the tusks for later reclamation--"

Marcia had raised one eyebrow.

"You're right," I said. "It makes no sense. Why not take the tusks with them in the trucks? And if there was some reason not to, why bother to bury the remaining tusks, when they'd left mammoth corpses piled in heaps? There'd be no point in concealing them, and in the freezing conditions the evidence would hang around for months, maybe years. Anyone finding the bones would soon spot the pits."

"That's one argument against the cloning theory," said Marcia. "There are about fifteen others."

I stared at her. "So--what *do* you think happened?"

"Officially, I have no idea."

"And unofficially?"

"Someone set up an expedition to hunt real mammoths, some place on Earth. They sold places in the hunt to rich men looking for kicks, with a profitable sideline for themselves in ivory. They killed hundreds, buried the ivory. For later collection, obviously. They probably came back for it without their guests, but if so, Tsong's diary doesn't mention it."

"The mammoths have to be clones," I said. "The carbon-dating says the tusks are modern."

"Not exactly," she said. "The carbon dating shows that very little time has passed since the mammoths that owned the tusks were killed."

I tossed this thought to and fro in my mind, puzzled.

"It's the same thing," I said. "Isn't it?"

"Take a look at this."

* * * *

I was just leaving to meet with Salima when a package arrived. Although it was small, I opened it carefully--SCITES investigators, even ones that thought they were operating undercover, have been sent bombs before.

It wasn't a bomb. It was entirely harmless.

It scared the hell out of me.

Salima was waiting at her apartment. We both started to speak at the same moment. We each had something to tell the other, something we were excited about, something that couldn't be discussed in public.

We tossed a coin, and I went first.

I told her about Tsong's diary. Then I told her what Marcia had said, just before kicking me out of her office.

"They'd worked out where the hunt was, you see," I said. "There were mountains in the background of one of the photos, and although everything was covered in snow, the outlines were clear enough to pin the location down to within a few miles."

"So? Where?"

"Siberia," I said. "Some foothills to the northeast of the Khrebet Cherskogo."

"Okay, so there's a mammoth clone farm in Siberia."

I laughed, without humor. "Wrong on all counts, except mammoths and Siberia."

"Huh?"

"They're not clones. It's not a farm. And the present is the wrong tense."

I could see the penny drop. "You mean--"

"There was a glacier visible in one of the photos," I said. "Today, all that remains is a glacial valley. The terminal moraine is still there, and the time when the glacier reached that position can be dated from the rocks."

"And?"

"The photo was taken 11,000 years ago," I said. This was going to be difficult. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. I had very little, and all of it circumstantial.

I could see the scepticism on her face. "But that--"

"Means someone had a time machine," I finished for her. "Or a time-warp, a time-gate. Some way to access the past."

"Oh, come *on*, Mike! That's pretty far-fetched!" She gave me a hopeful look. "You *are* joking, aren't you?"

"Unfortunately not," I said miserably. "Look, it was Marcia's idea, not mine! Yes, it's crazy, but--it's the only thing that fits. I looked up time travel on the Net, and apparently it's possible in principle. But all known methods are hopelessly impractical."

"I'll bet. But you think--"

"I think some bright person found a practical one. Then I think one of the triads got wind of it, stole the gadget or put pressure on its inventor. Being of limited imagination, they decided to use the time machine to advance their latest scam."

"But you said Tsong's tusk dates as modern--oh."

"Precisely. *That fits too*. He brought it back with him through the time-gate. So its carbon-14 atoms only had a few years to decay. In its own time-frame, it *is* modern."

"Whereas by burying the main bulk of the tusks, in a known location--"

"They could leave them to age convincingly, and dig them up in the present day," I said. "No point in burying the rest, it would just need a bigger hole."

"But how could they know where to bury them, to be safe against accidental..."

Her voice trailed off. I looked expectantly at her, giving her time to finish the thought.

"They ... they buried them in the place where they had already dug them up," she finished. "Which they knew would not be disturbed, because it hadn't been. Hell, it's logical, but the logic is crazy."

"That," I said, "is time travel."

"What are you going to do about this?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "No law has been broken, no endangered species has been threatened. They're in the clear, even if we could convince a judge and jury that someone has invented a time machine. It's not actually illegal to invent a time machine. Anyway, what about you?"

"Uh? Oh, the news I was burning to tell you? It's not as exciting as yours. The samples of mammoth arrived, the ones from the new deposits. A bit disappointing, really--just tissue samples. I'd been hoping for something bigger, maybe even a bone or two. Adequate for genetic profiling, but not much else."

"Still, that should give you any family relationships."

"Been there, done that. It looks like a dozen or so separate herds, all very closely related."

I grinned. "Then you've got evidence of more effective hunting."

"I know. But I wasn't expecting the mesolithic techniques to improve that much. Better edges to the flint spearheads, yes ... but not mass slaughter, which is what it looks like."

I took her hand. "It's a puzzle, I can see that."

She gave my hand a quick squeeze. "It gets worse. Why were all the remains in the same place? It's not near a cliff or anything. Still, there may be more information. After the DNA analysis, I decided to try something else. Run some samples through a mass spectrometer, get their composition."

"What for?"

"Could be traces of environmental contaminants, clues to behavior ... Hell, if I knew what I was going to find I wouldn't need to look for it, okay?"

"Sure, sure. So what did you find?"

"Nothing yet, the samples are still being analyzed. In fact"--she glanced at her wristband--"the results ought to be through by now. Give me a moment to call them up."

She went very quiet.

"Something wrong?"

"Uh--no, nothing wrong. Just not what I expected." I waited patiently. "Aside from the organics, there's some iron, plus tiny amounts of vanadium, tungsten, that kind of thing. The big puzzle is the uranium."

"Uranium?"

"Yes. Quite a lot of it. I wonder if there are any local sources of uranium ore?"

It was my turn to go quiet. When I managed to speak, I said "It's not ore, Salima. That's what an AK-83 assault rifle fires. Steel alloy bullets tipped with depleted uranium. It can kill from a mile away, packs a massive punch close up. Just right for killing elephants. Or mammoths."

"You can't mean--"

"Get your lab to do some isotope ratios, Salima. Call up the composition for the AK-83's ammunition--the heavy-duty stuff with uranium tips. I'm betting that if you age the ratios by 11,000 years, they'll be spot on."

"You *do* mean. Are you really--"

I sighed. "Salima, your mammoth graveyard is where Tsong's employers slaughtered mammoths, at the end of the Pleistocene. Not where they buried the tusks--those are long gone. Where they left the corpses. Tsong said it was cold, and he was from Tibet. In those latitudes it was still deep in an Ice Age. The corpses ended up in the permafrost where your Professor Zhao's Russian colleagues could dig them up." I paused. "Where exactly is this mammoth graveyard?"

"Near a small town called Yerekhtenya-Tala. It's in the wilds of Siberia, north of the Arctic Circle."

I brought up some maps on my wristband. "Not far from the Khrebet Cherskogo. That clinches it. You've made an earth-shattering archaeological discovery, Salima. It would be the jewel in the crown of your thesis."

"Except you can't use it. No one would ever believe you."

Her face was a picture. "No ... they wouldn't ... We've both discovered something amazing ... and neither of us can ever breathe a word of it without being hauled away for psychiatric treatment and ideological retraining."

"Not even with those isotope ratios as evidence?"

"They'll say it's coincidence. Or modern contamination. Or bad technique."

"The photos? The diary?"

"Fakes. Fiction. *Anything* to avoid a time machine. You know what scientists are like. Paleontologists are worse. We know so little about the past, you see--" Her face paled. "Mike, what could a criminal gang do with a time machine, other than taking money off rich time-tourists and slaughtering mammoths?"

I'd been so keen to solve the puzzle that I hadn't thought about the implications. "Quite a bit, if they had the imagination," I said thoughtfully.

"They could go back and change the past, Mike."

I laughed. "They could," I said. "But it all happened 30 years ago. If they were going to cause time paradoxes, they'd have done so by now. Maybe the Time Police got onto them and took away their machine. Maybe it's not a machine, just a freak of nature linking modern Siberia to the Pleistocene. A time warp."

"Lots of maybes ... Mike, if they *were* changing the future, right now--whatever that means--how would we know?"

"We wouldn't. It would just be a different 'we.' *This* 'we' is living in whatever world it all led to. Look, there's nothing we can do about it."

Salima still seemed worried. "At any rate," I said, trying to divert her away from deep philosophical questions that no one could possibly answer, "nothing criminal happened 30 years ago. Not technically. All they did was kill a few hundred mammoths, at a time when there must have been millions."

Salima went even paler.

"You okay?" She looked really ill.

"Yeah, sure ... I've just ... Mike, the time-tourists may have killed a few hundred on that occasion. But how many expeditions were there? Or *will there be*?"

We stared at each other, aghast.

"It's the timing, Mike. That photo was taken 11,000 years ago. Don't you see what that means?"

The irony was exquisite. "I was right, then," I said. "It *was* hunting that killed off the mammoths."

She made a face. "You were half right. It wasn't *ancient* humans."

"No, it wasn't. I concede. You realize that you've made one of the biggest paleontological discoveries ever? But ... there's no way you can publish a word of it."

Salima made a visible effort to pull her thoughts together. "Publication be damned, Mike. This calls for action! The mammoths are dead and we can't change that. But we've got to do *something* to expose these people!"

I'd had a feeling this was coming. Salima is a fighter. "I agree. But it's going to be even harder than you think."

"Why?"

"I wasn't going to mention it in case you started worrying, but some kind person sent me a present this morning. An elephant carved from fossil mammoth ivory."

"That's nice. But who--"

"It's a warning," I said. "From the Chinese mafia. They know I'm onto them. They want me to lay off." I took a deep breath. "I'm beginning to think that Tsong didn't die of natural causes." She looked scared. So, I'm sure, did I. "But that's probably just me being paranoid," I added lamely.

She gripped my hand. "So *will* you lay off, Mike?"

I snorted. "Yes. For me, that elephant is the final proof. But no court of law would accept the connection. I'll drop the case."

"Very wise." She paused. Was that a look of disappointment? "That's not like you." She certainly *sounded* disappointed. She let go my hand. The blood pounded in my veins. Faint heart never won fair paleontologist. I took a deep breath.

"You're right, Salima. It's not. I'm going to nail those bastards if it kills me. But I don't intend to commit suicide just yet, so I'll make it *look* as though I've dropped the case. I'll need a lot more information before I can pin anything on them. Which triad, the name of its *shan chu*, what channels they use to sell

the ivory--"

She protested. "But Mike, we've already agreed that no one would ever swallow anything as far-fetched as time travel!"

I nodded. "I'm not going to get them on time travel, Salima. Even if a court would believe me, hunting mammoths in the Pleistocene is perfectly legal." I tossed the package from hand to hand. "No, I'll get them the usual way SCITES deals with organized criminals."

"Which is?"

I sighed. "The oldest trick in the book. Tax evasion. As Al Capone discovered to his cost, you can't run an illegitimate operation and keep your paperwork in order. But it will take a lot of very cautious undercover work to accumulate the necessary evidence, and until then, I'll keep my head down--"

She grabbed my ears and kissed me. "That's more like the Mike I knew! Uh--you still want me to move in?"

"The thought has never left my mind," I said, my voice muffled.

"I'll bet. Give me a month to sort out my rent, and then--no, scrub that, I'll move in tomorrow."

I gave her a quick squeeze, and tossed the package onto the couch. "I'll have to get this tested for fingerprints, but of course there won't be any. Strange to think that the ivory is from what is laughingly considered an approved source."

Through the plastic wrapping, I could see a slip of yellow paper.

I didn't need to look to know what was written on it.

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* * * *

"If fifty million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing."

--Anatole France