

Just Take A Hard Left at Daeseong-  
dong

## Chapter One

“ROCK!?! Can you please answer your damned sat phone? It’s those two goofy characters from the Agency again.” Esme calls to me from the kitchen.

“Yes, dear”, I reply wearily. I set down my cigar and drink. I really don’t want to talk with anyone right now.

It’s been an absolute clusterfuck around these parts with that Cheap Mexican Beer Virus.

Plus the alarm, panic, and the general lack of anything that could be considered scientific acumen by the locals, eastern ex-pats, or the majority of the western ex-pats. Airports shut down. Cab service not available. Stores victims of panic shopping.

Asswipe is totally unavailable. Asswipes abound though. Curious.

Hell, I want this kind of crap, I’ll move back to Houston during hurricane season.

Then there’s the ‘Ministry-of-medicine-we-learned-from-Dr. Nick Riviera’.

“Social distancing.” What a jolly joke.

Queueing here is more like piglets vying for a teat.

Viruses can’t survive over a meter in the open air?

Pshaw.

“Depending on the material and the conditions, human coronaviruses can remain infectious from 2 hours to 9 days: “Human coronaviruses can remain infectious on inanimate surfaces at room temperature for up to 9 days. At a temperature of 30°C [86°F] or more, the duration of persistence is shorter.” [Epidemiology and Infectious Medicine Quarterly, Q1, 2020].”

Also, the airborne spread has not been reported for HCoV-19 (SARS-2) and it is not believed to be a major driver of transmission based on available evidence.

That mask you're wearing does bupkiss for preventing COVID-19. It's not transmitted via aerosol.

“Social distancing?”

My dimpled ass.

Unless you institute total quarantine, complete bubblewrapification, it's going to get around.

Wash your grubby fucking mitts, don't GAK on others, stop sucking your fingers, and carry on. No need to shut society down. Maybe just a little injection of common sense?

Everyone's wearing medical masks. Everyone's wearing latex gloves. Everyone's duct-taping their clothing closed at the wrists and ankles.

Well, almost everyone. Esme and I are not.

You see, Esme and I have actively functioning brains and immune systems.

Sure. We had the Middle Eastern Annual Upper Respiratory Crud; plus we're 'high risk' being both diabetic and cardiac patients.

Shit. According to the local ill-informed medicos, we should be looking into what plots in which we'd like to eternally nap.

It's an annual bonus living here in the scheisse bowl that is the Middle East. There are more nationalities coming and going here in one spring or fall season than what is seen for an entire year at most stateside international airports.

With the madding, unwashed crowds comes a Robert Bakker-esque batch of foreign germs, viruses, crud, filth, and novel microorganisms.

It's actually a biannual thing, when people leave on holiday and when they return. They bring back all their home-boy bugs and share them with everyone else. It's actually a well-documented phenomenon.

So, I'm not going to get into the idiocy that is the geopolitical ridiculousness of trying to legislate contagion control through hand washing, staying home, and hand wringing over some Yanni-come-lately bug.

Truth be told, yes, of course, it is sadly responsible for killing a number of people, and its genesis as a probable zoonotic virus makes it an interesting study.

However, this fucking bug will burn itself out as do all other infectious contagions and be relegated to the "Hey. Do you remember back to that 2020 idiocy where global governments were trying to teach its citizens how to wash their fucking hands?"

OK, so maybe you think I'm wrong. I'm a scientific curmudgeon, so, yeah, that's a common reaction.

Think "bell curve".

World population (2020): 7,775,446,040 (est.)

Corona cases worldwide: 1,118,603

Global deaths: 59,226 (Very much an estimate. Deaths due to complications of existing conditions? Unknown.)

Percentage of world population dead from COVID-19: 0.00076%. Seventy-six one hundred thousandths of a percent.

Percentage of COVID-19 infections which are lethal: 0.5-1.0%.

You have a greater chance of dying from a shark attack during a thunderstorm while being hit by lightning while falling off a cliff.

Now, as a little comparative Gedankenexperiment: remember the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918?

How long was spent in your Social Studies or History class on this little viral foofaraw?

The number of deaths were estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States. Yet, I'll wager a tall frosty can of my best cold beer that in public school it was hardly mentioned.

It was noted that it was 'bad'. It was noted that it came right after WWI. And teaching continued immediately with the Roaring 20s.

Cheap Mexican Beer Virus and all its evils will be responsible for many deaths. That is disheartening and very unfortunate. So is ignorance, greed, and idolatry. Let's legislate against those and see how well that works...

Sorry about the rant. This global idiocy is costing me some serious contracts.

Anyways, back to reality.

“Что?” I bark into the phone.

“Good day, Doctor.” Agent Rack replies, “Glad to see you're in a good mood today.”

“Ох, черт возьми, ведра.” [“Oh, fuckbuckets...”] I groan, “Hello, Agents Rack and Ruin. How are you doing today with all this Dos Equis Virus business?”

“We are fine, Doctor”, Agent Rack replies, “We're government agents. We already had our inoculations.”

“Well, that’s a fine fucking how do you do!”, I thundered, “You get jabs to ward off the crud and all we get a fucking phone call. “

“Doctor”, Agent Rack relates, “These are experimental vaccinations. However, I’m certain if you and your lovely wife would like to take part in the program, we could...”

“OK, gotcha.”, I noted, “Nah, not this time. We’ll just let our white blood cells work out on their own. So, what can I do for you?”

“Ah, Doctor”, Agent Rack relates “This is why we so like calling and talking with you. Right through the bullshit and right down to business.”

“Indeed”, I snort back, “So, what’s it this time?”

“Doctor”, Agent Rack hesitates, “There has been talk at high levels regarding the current oil crisis and what Russia and Saudi Arabia are doing to the global oil industry.”

“Yeah, they’re fucking it up for everyone”, I reply, “Cutting off their noses to spite their faces. In the meantime, millions if not billions, suffer. Cheaper gas! For a bit, but that won’t last if either one manages to fucker the other. This is but the tip of the iceberg that preparing to descend upon us. No one knows what’s going to happen, even me. But, I can guarantee you, it’s not going to be pretty or fun. It’s going to be a global bloodbath before it’s all over. And if you think your Ecoweenie electrics are going to make any difference, where are you going to get the diesel fuel to power the heavy equipment needed to mine the lead, lithium and other metals for your batteries?”

“Rant over, Doctor?” Agent Rack snickers.

“Rant over?” I ask, incredulously, “I have yet to begin to rant. Thinks that’s fun? Just wait until all the virus-whackos crawl out of their bubble wrap and Purcell sleeping bags. The viral world is going to have a fucking field day on all those billions of compromised immune systems...”

“Let me pause you right there, Doctor.”, Agent Ruin cuts in, “We have a proposition for you. Would you care to listen?”

“Ah. Agent Ruin. Good day”, I say, “OK, OK, I’ll make nice. What do you have for me now?”

“You have done exploratory work in the Orient, is that not correct?” Agent Ruin asks.

“OK, Ruin; now you’re just being dramatic. You have my full dossier. You know full well I’ve worked in Japan, China, Mongolia, Korea...” I say.

“Ah. Precisely.” Agent Ruin stops me. “Which Korea?”

“Oh, bother.” I exhale loudly, “South Korea. Where else? North Korea...oh, no. You’re not...”

“Yes”, Agent Ruin relates, “We would like you to venture to the ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’ as part of a scientific team investigating the possibility of oil and gas reserves there.”

“Best Korea?”, I ask, “OK, I’ll bite. Who? What? And why?”

“Who’ is the United Nations and their ‘Oil for Development Program’. Also the IUPGS. They were the ones instrumental in all this. ‘What’ is to review the geology of the northern half of the Korean peninsula. It seems that their own geoscientists there are coming up short, being so scientifically and socially insulated for all these years. Since they have seen no direct evidence of oil nor gas, they’ve concluded that such does not exist there.” Agent Ruin explicates.

“I’ve seen this syndrome before.” I nod in agreement, not recalling that I’m not on a videophone, “In Russia in the early days. In China. In Mongolia. They were so inward-looking, they had no other examples to even consider as potential analogies. OK, that makes perfect sense. Now for the biggie: why? More precisely, why me?”

“Well, Doctor”, Agent Rack is back on the line, “Let us just say that you are preceded by your reputation. You were mentioned directly by name by several ministers of oil and gas ministries of several countries. In fact, your longtime friendship with the head of SNIGGIMS (the Siberian Institute of Geology, Mining, and Mineral Resources) in Novosibirsk was the one that rather cemented the call.”

“Remind me to do something nasty for Yevgeny next time I see him”, I snicker.

“Yes. Anyways”, Agent Rack continues, “We have obtained for you a worker’s, touring scientist, and exempted individual’s visa for this country. In fact, they have been obtained for all team members. It was not easy, especially for you, considering your past history; that is, your extreme global travels. These people are very, very nationalistic and xenophobic. They are extremely wary of outsiders; to the point of obsession. An outsider like yourself, I’ll wager, once you arrive, will give them apoplectic fits of paranoia. Therefore, with your education, experience, and innate ability to drive people fucking crazy as well; we thought you’d be perfect for the task.”

As I’m snickering over the left-handed compliment, I have to agree, it is most enticing.

“And who will be the others making up the team you mentioned?” I asked.

“There are several from around the globe. I will send you a list once we have your assurance that you’ll be attending this little function.” Agent Rack reminds me. “You have academic and industry seniority, though, I would expect you to be seen as the team leader.”

“Fuckin’ A, Bubba”, I smile into the phone. “Price of poker’s just gone up.”

“Yes, quite.”, Agent Rack replies.



“OK, I’m interested,” I say, Now, before I sign on the dotted line, two things: JD [job description] and compensation, not necessarily in that order.”

“Of course,” Agent Rack replies, “Check your Email for both. Call us soon when you decide. Good day, Doctor.”

“Yeah, adios comrade-ski”, I say, hang up the phone and wander upstairs to my workstation.

As I wander towards the stairs. I poke my head into the kitchen where Esme is busy pickling stuff for later. Homemade sauerkraut, giant Kosher garlic dills, and icky, in my opinion, Bread-n-Butter pickles.

Plus, pizza dough. Make it, freeze it. Thaw when needed, let rise and top, cook in a wood-fired stove.

Lovely.

After admiring her handiwork, I pipe up and ask: “Hey, dear. Wanna go to Best Korea with me?” I ask.

Without a moment’s hesitation, “Nope. I figured it’d be someplace fun when R&R (her pet name for our favorite agents) called.” She said.

“Can I go and play with the funny Commies?” I asked.

“How long and when?” she asks.

“Dunno.” I reply, “Soon. Rack and Ruin sent me the JD and compensation package. Hell, anything to get out of here for a while. Sure you don’t want to go to Tokyo and visit Yuguchi? Or Ulaanbaatar and visit Bayarmaa? Beats the hell out of rattling around here by your own self alone.”

“And miss the chance to sleep in late? Watch what I want on the box? Not have to cook something fresh and exciting thrice daily?” She smirks.

“Hey, be nice”, I note, “I do a lot of the cooking and all of the shopping.”

“Oh, I know.”, Es sighs, “Just being stuck here and missing the girls. Maybe I could get on a plane to the states?”

“Sure, why not?” I reply, “I’ll make that part of my package. Biz class for you to what, Chi-town? Brew City? You name it. I’ll make it happen.”

“Oh, Rock!”, Esme gushes, as she hugs me and now I smell like a New York deli, “That would make me very happy to see my mother and the girls.”

“Consider it done,” I respond. “Courtesy of my Red Passport and connections with the Agency.”

We embrace a bit more, kiss and Es goes back to smashing garlic. I repair upstairs to see what the new job entails.

I power up my workstation, all 28 terabytes of deep scientific data and generic stuff.

I whack thrice upon the secret key.

“Good morning, Rock”, my computer greets me. “How can I help you?”

“ Morning, Sindy. Pull up my Gmail, please.” I ask nicely.

Yeah. I know. Call me an old sentimentalist.

My Email pops up and there it is, an encrypted and hefty email from my agency buddies.

I go through the flips and twists necessary to decrypt their communiques. After a few minutes, I’m puffing a new cigar, sipping a new Greenland Coffee, and goggling over what the hell I’m supposed to be doing for the next few weeks.

“Holy shit”, I snicker, “This could be some fun...”

I’m off on the road to Best Korea.

I certainly do get around...

The main upshot is that there hasn’t been any serious geological reconnaissance of Best Korea since before the 1950s. In fact, the northern part of the Korean peninsula was sort of ignored as the geological expeditions pre-“Korean Conflict” centered on what was to become South Korea, China and to a smaller extent, southern Russia.

As usual, “Best Korea” was odd man out.

OK, before I continue, there’s going to be a lot of background I have to relate before any of this makes any sense. There’s going to be some historical geology, historical exploratory history, which is historically most historic. Plus some chronological historical background how I, a fully-fledged American, somehow finagled a way both into and out of the worker’s paradise known as the ‘Democratic People's Republic of Korea’.

Right. With that being sorted, we need to look to the past and what had transpired in Best Korea after the shooting stopped, Hawkeye and BJ sobered up, and everyone was hunkered down behind their particular chunk of the 38th parallel.

The first known organized effort to explore for oil and gas reserves in North Korea occurred during 1965, when North Korea established a “bureau for the management of geological survey for fuel resources” and, with Chinese assistance, conducted initial geophysical surveys and exploratory drilling in the western (Sukchon-gun) and northeastern (Kilchu-gun and Myongchon-gun) sections of the country. In 1967, North Korea conducted a joint geological study with Soviet geologists in the Tumen estuary area using drilling equipment acquired from Romania. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

In 1976, a group of North Korean specialists traveled to the Soviet Union to examine an oil platform in the Caspian Sea, learn the basics of offshore drilling operations and acquire associated technology and equipment. Attending this, North Korea established two oil and gas exploration organizations: the Taedong-gang Survey Group (for offshore exploration) and the Tumen-gang Survey Group (for onshore exploration). Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

Nationwide Exploration began in earnest in the 1980s. These efforts were enlarged during 1981 when the Geophysical Company of Norway (GECO A/S) was signed to a four-year contract to conduct a joint seismic survey of several exploratory blocks. While this initial four-year effort showed grievously inconsistent results, the Tumengang Survey Group did identify oil shows at a drilling site in Sukchon-gun. The small size of this reserve and its characteristics made it uneconomical to pursue but provided cold comfort. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

During the mid- to later 1980s, North Korea purchased a clapped-out 14,000-ton drilling platform from a Singaporean company and used it to drill additional exploratory wells in the Korea Bay. Additional offshore exploration took place in the Donghae (East Sea) Basin off the east coast port of Wonsan. On land, exploratory wells were drilled in the Paektu-san, Kilchu-gun and Myongchon-gun areas. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

In 1986, North Korea and the Soviet Union signed a treaty delineating their economic sea zones and borders, and the nations agreed to the joint development of the nearshore and continental shelves. While indications of oil deposits were identified off Hungnam, real progress was never achieved. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

Australia's Meridian Oil NL made calculated, though in retrospect, stupid, decisions to acquire an exploration license in the Sohae Basin (West Sea or Korea Bay Basin) during 1987. These drilling rights were reportedly the first to be granted to a foreign company by North Korea. Accompanying this move, Great Britain's Leeward Petroleum Ltd. was awarded a contract

to undertake additional survey work to supplement that done earlier by GECO. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

By the end of the 1980s, North Korea had drilled about 15 wells on both sides of the peninsula (located both onshore and offshore), conducted preliminary geophysical surveys of a number of likely oil and gas producing basins, and drill exploratory wells in the Sohae Basin. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

North Korea entered the 1990s determined to aggressively pursue foreign investment and assistance for oil and gas exploration and the country was in famine and disintegrating. However, they were concerned over North Korean laws, uncertain of the profitability of such efforts and apprehensive of negative reactions from the international community. North Korea sought to counteract some of these concerns by issuing statements and publishing data to indicate that foreign oil companies with technical assistance from Romania and China had identified vast oil reserves both in the waters off Sinuiju on the west coast and Wonsan on the east coast. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

Complementing these west coast efforts, North Korea also sought to secure investment and partners to continue oil and gas exploration off the east coast in the Tonghae Basin and on land in the Kilchu-Myongchon Basin. In an effort to calm foreign investor's concerns over developing disputes with China, North Korea noted that "...although we are in a dispute with China over oilfields, it is over now." While these assertions were inaccurate, it indicated the importance North Korea had placed upon attracting foreign investment. Building upon this to more easily attract foreign investment, the General Department of Oil Exploration was upgraded to the Ministry of Petroleum Industry in 1993. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

During early 1996, the political atmosphere within Russia was right for the country to sign a protocol with North Korea that, among other things, provided for Russian assistance in exploring North Korean oil reserves. This arrangement reportedly constituted the first significant economic and

scientific aid provided to North Korea since the collapse and implosion of the Soviet Union. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

Later in 1998, the Hyundai Group discussed numerous economic development projects, including the exploration for oil in the Korea Bay and East Sea. While a number of the projects discussed would ultimately see some small fruition and some low degree of success, efforts at oil exploration failed to produce tangible results. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

Desperate to prove the viability of its oil reserves and attract foreign investment, North Korea's own Korea Oil Exploration Company (KOEC) signed an agreement with Global Geo-Services during 2003 to conduct a large seismic survey, known as "Korean Dragon," to cover the entire offshore of the country. Results of that survey had Chinese sources in 2005 sign an agreement with North Korea to jointly explore and develop oil fields in the Korea Bay. Repeated efforts towards this objective have been delayed in the past due to disagreements over sea boundary disputes between the two nations. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

During early 2010, Aminex and Singapore-based Chosun Energy formed a Company, Korex Ltd., to reprocess existing seismic data and explore for gas and oil in North Korea. Subsequently, during May, Korex Ltd. succeeded in signing a production sharing contract for a 50,000 km squared block in the Tonghae Basin. Two years later, in 2012, Aminex announced that it had decided to withdraw from exploration in North Korea due to the volatile and unpredictable politics of the area. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

In June 2013, Mongolia's HBOil JSC purchased a 20 percent stake in North Korea's Sungri Chemical Complex for \$10 million and signed an agreement to explore inland crude oil deposits and gas fields in the Rajin-Sonbong area on the northeast coast in cooperation with KOEC. Neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

As of 2020, North Korea is continuing to work with several small foreign firms to acquire seismic data and to ascertain whether it is sitting on top of economically viable oil and gas reserves. Thus far, neither of these efforts achieved meaningful results.

Well, that's the history, in a nutshell, of the North Korean efforts of exploring for and producing their own oil and gas. Basically, they really didn't have a clue as to what the hell they were doing, didn't know how to proceed with geological exploration in wildcat regions, nor how to entice and retain foreign investment when you have nothing more than a faint flatus of gas and a slight skim of oil to sell.

Yep. Someone was hip to this scene and actually called in the "Motherfucking Pro from Dover" as the fixer.

I was selected to be among a number of world-class oil and gas types, geologists, reservoir engineers, geophysicists, and even a barmy petrophysicist to go into Best Korea. I was to be the team leader to gather every bleedin' bit of geological-geophysical-petrophysical-geochemical-geomechanical-and geotechnical data that existed.

"Stomp on some toes", I was told in the JD [Job Description]. "But try not to mess up the shine". They said. "This is not a job for the meek. You need to go in and diplomatically show these people how it's done. You have as much authority as you desire. But, you are responsible for wielding this authority in a Communist, paranoid, and xenophobic country."

"Damn, Billy Bob", or whoever wrote this prospectus, "Trying to make me feel homesick"?

"But remember,", the JD continued, "You are a scientific ambassador. You will be expected to comport yourself as such."

"Oh, come the fuck on!", I snorted in my Greenland coffee. "They know me after all these years and programs and still this bullshit appears in the JD?"

I laughed loud and long about that. They want my expertise, education, and experience?

Sure.

Then they get the whole package; warts, keloids, scars, and all.

Hell, the more I read about the job description, the more I think that this is going to be a real fucking hoot with potential for high hilarity to actually ensue.

OK. In a nutshell, Clancy:

I'm leading an international team of petroleum scientists, seniors all, to Best Korea to:

- Gather and document every bit of petroleum exploratory geological-geophysical data that exists.
- Catalog this data; as to type, vintage and extent.
- Appraise this data as to efficacy or value.
- Evaluate the surficial geology of the country to see if it adds anything to the petroleum exploration picture.
- Decipher the geopolitical makeup of the country's oil and gas ministries. Who, what, where, etc.
- Make contacts/friends/acquaintances of the geoscientists, ministers, and anyone with a key to the pub or a cigar store.
- Appraise the current data, and make suggestions as to needed infill data.
- Make an evaluation as to the possibility of economic deposits of oil and gas in the northern half of the Korean Peninsula.



- Perform Risk Analysis and Economic Evaluations if economic of oil and gas do in reality exist in the northern half of the Korean Peninsula.
- Sif successful, suggest companies, project scope and financial particulars of projects concerning these economic deposits of oil and gas if they exist.
- Create/delineate dossiers on any local I meet.
- Try to keep myself and my team out of jail or the noose.

It sounds like a stroll in the park. Travel. Sightseeing. Danger. Thrills. Visiting hitherto forbidden lands. Wielding hammers in the wilds of one of the last overtly Communist places on Earth. With exciting overtones of skullduggery, personal endangerment, imprisonment, mayhem, explosives, destruction, and the opportunity to tour a closed-to-the-west distillery and brewery.

How could I, in good conscience, say no?

OK, Agents Rack and Ruin, I'm in.

But first, my contract.

“Yes, Herr Comrade Agent, it's the usual. Yep. Take or pay. Yep. Door to door. Total conveyance, with medical Evac back-up. Nope. Non-negotiable. Full insurance against any untoward events. Total pre-payment for visas, tourist cards, tours, conveyance, cigars, room, and board. Full bonding and indemnifier against Force Majeure. Be it insurrection, war, flood, or bad dates, I get paid triple; job completed or not. Right? Great. Oh, you like that? Wonderfulness. You'll love this: full access to the Swedish Embassy while in-country, as the US doesn't have one there? De facto, and ad hoc Swedish citizenship while traveling? OK, so far, so good. Business-class flights or better? Of course. My day rate?”

I had to hold the phone away from my ear.

I already suffer from tinnitus, I didn't need Agent Rack's exclamations to add to that malady. Still, I can't believe I slid my cigars through on the contract unscathed.

After he simmers down and accepts my terms, I ask for the key to unlock the file of my team members.

Things are kicking into high gear. I am to vet the list of individuals slated to be my team members and make a preliminary itinerary for the trip to Best Korea.

"OK," I tell Agent Rack, "How will we get there? I know we're going to fly but to where? Beijing? Seoul? Tokyo?"

"Seoul? OK. Then overland to some 50 kilometers to Daeseong-dong and the DMZ." I reply.

"OK, then what?" I ask.

"WHAT? WALK?" I gasp, "Surely you jest."

"No, I don't, and I'm not going to make that old joke", Agent Rack replies, "Because of reasons, you and your entourage are not allowed to arrive to Pyongyang by train; besides it's a 24-hour trip. You will arrive in Daeseong-dong and with your gear, walk across the DMZ to be greeted by your 'handlers' from the geology ministry of the DPRK."

"OK, forget trains. 24 hours on a Chinese train sound like less fun than one could handle, and I've done the 13-day Trans-Siberian Moscow-Beijing trip." I reply, "But I've got a shitload of scientific gear that I'm taking. How about we just all meet in Seoul or Beijing and fly into Pyongyang?"

## Chapter Two

“Perhaps that might actually work better.” Agent Rack agrees, after all, he’s been looking at the list of team members and their departure points. I’m the only one from the Middle East, the rest are from Russia, Europe, or places way up north.

“Rack, let me look at the grouping of team members”, I say, “There’s got to be something better than your fly and schlep scheme.”

‘Fine, Doctor. It is, after all, your project.’ Agent Rack relates, “Email me with your updated ideas and itinerary.” He says and hangs up.

“Damn”, I snipe, “I knew I should have asked for more than 3x my day rate. No trip is worth this much all fired ready aggravation...”

I get a new cigar, refresh my Greenland coffee, and get to the list of folks I’ll be working with for the next few weeks.

“Sindy?”, I ask my computer, “Open ‘Agent Rack mail #2’ please”.

There’s a grinding of hard drives, satellites are linking up in outer space, computer banks at NASA are lighting off. There’s a teletype in Virginia annoyed at being awoken at this ungodly early hour.

A few minutes later, I am reading over my list. Quite the collection.

Two geologists: A Russian, Dr. Morskoy Utes, and a Brit, Dr. Clifford Swandon.

Two geophysicists: A Russian, Dr. Volna Sglazhivaniye, and one Swede, Dr. Aktiv Vågformme.

Two Reservoir Engineers: An Dutch, Dr. Vijver Monteur, and Portuguese, Dr. Graciano Guimarães.

One geomechanic: A Bulgarian, Dr. Iskren Dragomirov Dinev .

Two geochemists: A Canadian, 'eh, Dr. Erlen Meyer, and a Russian, Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik.

One Petroleum Technologist: A Finn, Dr. Joonatan Vedenalaiset

And one Petrophysicist: A Canadian, Dr. Dax Acheron

And yours truly, Dr. Rocknocker, The Motherfucking Pro from Dover, makes for 12.

Such a nice, round, woody number.

OK, let's see, before we get to particulars.

Countries of origin: Russia, England, Sweden, USA by way of the Middle East, Finland, Bulgaria, and Canada.

All northern hemispherical types; for the most part.

Great. We can all meet in London and fly British Airways directly to Beijing. Then, it's Air China to Pyongyang. Besides, I'll still get my frequent flyer miles and I don't want to fly Aeroflot if I can avoid it.

I send Agent Rack an Email defining my ideas. He writes back within an hour OK'ing the plan. He will make plans for all of us to meet in London, spend a night at the airport Hilton Garden Inn, then off to Beijing. Then, after a quick layover, on to Pyongyang, Best Korea.

To history. And beyond!

However, there are a few logistical problems that need to be overcome.

With this Cheap-Ass Mexican Beer virus crisis, there's no flights out of my present home country.

How will Esme make it back to the states and I to London, where there, at least, they're a bit less ridiculously paranoid, and I can catch a commercial flight out to China?

Calling Agent Rack and Ruin...

With a bit of Agency of intervention, Esme and I are to be transported via one of the military's flying war machines. It will deposit Esme in Abu Dhabi where she will catch a direct flight to the Windy City.

They say they may slow down before they kick me out in Dubai to catch the BA flight to London. They already know me from previous adventures.

There. All done and dusted. I love flying first class, as it were.

Now, logistics.

<sigh>

Esme is packed and ready to go in less than an hour. Most of her luggage is stuffed with gifts and other sorts of Middle Eastern tat for the folks back home. We haven't been back to the states in quite some time; there will be much rejoicing.

However, I will have to hear of it second hand. I'm going to Best Korea and have no idea what the climate's like other than its Oriental Continental. Most of North Korea is classified as being of a humid continental climate within the Köppen climate classification scheme, with warm summers and cold, dry winters.

Currently in the upper teens centigrade, winds light and variable 10 to 130 kilometers per hour, it'll be a nice day if the tornadoes stay away.

Well now, that's like mail from home. Equable weather in an unequable land.

Hawaiian shirts? The most garish. Exploration vest? Of course. Field boots? But of course. Ah, hell, the usual travel wardrobe. Into the silver aluminum travel cases go the Scottish high-calf woolen socks, Stetson, cargo shorts, one pair of long chinos, the usual undergarments, spare lighters, cigar-cutters, emergency flasks, flint and steel (just in case), generic Northern European Armed-Services knife with built-in cigar cutter, a couple of fueled Zippos, a couple of different sized Cow-Hide Men tools, a handful of cheap-o butane lighters, bags of beef and camel jerky...just the absolute necessities.

In my day pack, which never leaves my side, are my cigars, cigarettes for gifts, some emergency rations; like a spare pint of bourbon, one of vodka, and some Dammitol in case of headaches. Plus, field notebooks, pens, pencils, hand lens, various geological-geophysical cheat sheets, tickets, visas, tourist passes, and all that other world-traveling guff.

Looks like we're both ready to travel. I get on the horn with one or the other of my favorite agency denizens and tell them we're ready to go.

Agent Ruin notes positive and tells us he'll dispatch our transport to the airport forthwith.

I'm out in front of our villa and the whole city is a god damned ghost town. Virtually no road traffic and absolutely no air traffic. It's eerily quiet. The whole city's taking a siesta. Or in a coma...hard to tell which.

I'm scanning the roads looking for our taxi to the airport when the still silence of the scene is split by the sonorous resonant THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP of a heavy helicopter.

Not just any "Oh, look, Mummy. Up in the sky", helicopter.

This is a huge black US military transport helicopter and it's FUCKING LANDING IN THE EMPTY LOT ACROSS THE STREET.

Remind me to be slightly nice to the collective agents next time we meet.

Once the sand, grime, and assorted desert dust settles down, I'm locking the villa as two Airmen are storing our luggage aboard the large black ominous-looking black transport black helicopter.

They escort Esme and me to the passenger compartment. They could see me being crestfallen when they refused to let me ride up front. I mean, I am a fully licensed helicopter pilot.

“Oh, insurance rules and stuff. Right”.

We don our new 3M™ Peltor™ Hummingbird™ Headsets and are asked, very nicely, to strap in as in mere moments, we will be taking off for the local airport.

I smile at Esme and beam: “I told ya’. Stick with me and you’ll go places.”

The way she smiled back at me sustained me throughout my trip above the 38th parallel. I resolved to do my damndest to bring her back something very nice.

With a smooth, graceful leap due up, we're airborne. The few neighbors that came out to see us off waved briefly and rapidly became as ants as we tilted forward, opened the taps, and hauled ass to the local International airport.

No “International or Business” this time. We landed way the holy earthenware fuck over on the north side of the airport. That clandestine place where all the strange and secretive military aircraft were parked and surreptitiously maintained.

We flared in and, light as an anvil landed. We waited the proscribed few minutes while the airship spooled down and we were allowed egress.

Out of the chopper, across 150 meters of tarmac and into the waiting abdomen of a Lockheed C-130 Hercules. Our luggage was already being stowed in the belly the beast, and we were ushered into the cavernous interior of the plane.

This plane, as I was told, could carry up to 90 passengers, 72 troops, or 65 paratroops.

Today, it would carry Esme, me, and a skeleton crew to Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

We'd be landing first at Abu Dhabi to get Esme sorted out, then wheels up for approximately 5 air-minutes, then back to feet dry at Dubai International Airport. There I would be unceremoniously tossed off the plane and left to my own devices.

The flight crew were fully briefed and truth be told, I'd met several of them in varying circumstances over the years. They knew I was mostly harmless, but somewhat of an eccentric VIP, hence the flight, and they gave me no end of shit about it.

For that, I really appreciated and liked these guys and gals.

I walked Esme to the local international airline's flight desk in Abu Dhabi, business, of course, and deposited her luggage.

“Guess this is it, hon. Have a great time in the States and don't let the Covids bite. Be sure to give the girls my love.”

“When will you be back, so I can plan my return trip?” Es asks.

“No earthly idea. It could be a month, could be three. I'll get word to your mother, you guys will be checking in with her all the time anyways. Let's



play it loose and have some fun with all this. Now, off to the Lounge with you; get a massage, and relax. You've got 8 hours to burn before you even load up." I said.

We embrace, kiss smoochily, even though we could get put away for PDA (Public Display of Affection) which is still a misdemeanor here in the lovely, cosmopolitan Middle East; an electric courtesy cart arrives to take Es to the combined Emirates First and Business Class lounge.

"See you soonest", I say as the cart whisks her away. She waves and tries to camouflage her wiping her eyes. She's always emotional before I travel to strange places around the globe.

I saunter out the door and back across the tarmac to my transport ship. I'm getting this Captain Kirk vibe being the only one being transported on the flight, and decide to christen the Herkybird "The Enterprise".

Now, do I go all Bill Shatner or Patrick Stewart?

I arrive at the loading platform and there are a couple of airmen lolling around smoking cigarettes. They're well away from the aircraft and legal, although I thought the military would have kittens if they knew of this.

I have some 5 hours to kill before my flight to London. I wander over to chat with the airmen and fire up a cigar. Since we're probably not going to be leaving for a few hours, I offer them tots from one of my emergency flasks.

But, with the Modelo Virus about, one airman begs off and returns moments later with some small, disposable paper Dixie cups.

Necessity, the mother of invention.

We chatted, swapped stories, and they were amazed that I was actually looking forward to going to Best Korea.

They basically informed me that was a post no one wanted. It was a place where one went to watch their military career die.

It was tedious, yet tense.

Important, yet mundane.

Above all, it was massively boring.

Nothing of any substance even happened there and one hoped for that to continue. Yet, some long stripers would relate that even a small thermonuclear exchange would be welcomed to break up the tedium.

I parted with a couple of cigars as we felt and heard the engines of the Hercules being rekindled back into life.

We all scurried onto the plane and after some preliminary warnings, we were wheels up and headed to Dubai International Airport.

And then we were taxiing to the VIP arrivals terminal some 8 minutes later.

Fuck, I hate these long flights. Sure, I could have cabbied it from Abu Dhabi to Dubai, but they were headed this way anyways, so...

Into the arrivals area with all my baggage and a very nice US female airman accompanying me to the British Airways desk. She was wheeling my gear. I felt like such a cad, but I rapidly got over it.

We were at check-in, she made certain I had my passport, visas, tourist and landing cards, and everything else necessary for the trip.

“Yes, thank you, Sr. Airman Mother”, I joked.

She actually blushed a bit. I could have been her grandfather.

Gad. I hated writing that sentence.

She made certain everything was A-OK and a go. We shook hands, and she departed back to the waiting Hercules and back to their local home here in the maddening Middle East.

The airport was dead. Really dead. In fact, I've never seen it deader. Call in the bulldozers. Turn this place into a parking lot...

Dubai International is usually a fucking madhouse. It has always been nuts - a shopping mall trying to be an airport. Today, one could have held RC plane flight races around every concourse.

No weird-ass disenfranchised form god-knows-where bums out bothering and panhandling you. No madding crowds trying to sweep you against your will to a far and distant, not to mention, unusable, terminal. Duty-Free shops. Some closed, but the cigar and booze kiosks are open.

Whew. That's a relief.

I'm checked in flight-wise and the nice BA gate person has to ask me why I'm going where my baggage says I am.

"I'm an agent of the United States, on a super-secret mission to find oil and gas in the best Korea on the planet."

Her look and raised eyebrow said "Oh, pooh.", although she smiled and said "Ah. That's nice."

Hey. I was telling the truth...

Well, I had some time in an almost deserted airport with a load of pre-flight cash, a hungry look in my eye, and a cheeseburger in my pocket; but that latter story will have to wait for a later time.

My bags were ostensibly ticketed to Pyongyang, but also Beijing. I'd have to check and see if they got transferred to Air China once we arrived. No

worries, we should have plenty of layover time in China.

So, off to a leisurely stroll through Duty-Free.

“Oh, this looks nice. Oh. And this. Hmmm...Wild Turkey 101 Rye. That’s a two’fer. Ah, here’s the Duty-Free humidor. Camachos? By the Great Horn Spoon! They have triple maduros. 4 boxes of these go in the cart.” I giggled like a giddy old aunt.

A few bundles of cheap-ass cigars to use as gifts and bribes. Oh, yes. They love to smoke cigarettes in Best Korea. I load up three cartons of Sobranie pastel-colored Cocktail cigarettes.

At least, this way I’d know in an instant who I’ve already graced with my munificence.

Thus sated, I pay for my prizes, and decide to wander off to the Business Class lounge. I have hours left and well, boredom was settling in.

Or, I could go, as I have for years, to the Irish Pub, have a pint of nitrogen-charged Guinness, a bowl of ‘authentic’ Irish Stew and a nice smoke afterwards. I think it’s one of the few places left on the planet where you can actually sit at a bar, have a drink, and smoke without everyone going all C. Everett Koop on your hapless ass.

Oh, sure. In Business class everything’s free. At the Irish Pub, I’d have to pay.

Fuck it. I made a beeline to the Irish Pub.

It’s damn near-deserted. So much so, in fact, I’m seated immediately.

This is odd. It’s never happened before. This place is usually SRO.

Of course, I order a nitrogen-charged pounder of Guinness, a bowl of Irish Stew, a side of their famous real onion rings and a couple of shots of

genuine rye whiskey just because.

Sated to the gills, I was feeling fine as I watch the abbreviated sports review on the telly. I dug deep into my recent purchases and drag out a triple maduro Camacho cigar.

No, I'm not shilling for Camacho cigars, they're just one of my favorite go-to brands. However, if there's anyone out there that's affiliated with Camacho cigars, or Wild Turkey Rye and Bourbon, I'd certainly listen to any ideas you might have for sponsorship of this little forum.

Anyways, I was talking with the Sri Lankan bartender, Tharushi. I was, of course, regaling him with one of my endless supply of rude and ribald jokes when I hear a voice say:

“Why don't you save that rapier-like wit for the cheeseheads back home, Rock?”

“Tharushi, did I ever tell you of the frustrated petrophysicist Dr. Dax Aceron who's legendary prowess with a fishing rod is such that he couldn't catch a cold buck-naked, sitting in a freezer with his feet in a bucket of Moscow river water?”

“Dr. Dax? How the hell are you?” I spin to see my old petrophysical buddy from many long best-forgotten global campaigns.

“Dr. Rock. I am doing fine. Better than fine. I'm going to Best Korea and I know personally the team leader. How the hell are you, you old troublemaker?”

“Dax. What are you doing here? I thought we'd meet up in London.”

“Yeah, that was the plan”, he explained, “I let them think I was still in Calgary. I was actually over here in Dubai doing a little side work. Totally under the table. Completely off the books. You know, the usual. Now give me a cigar and buy me a drink. I do believe it's your round.”

“So, Dax”, I say, “Flying BA to London in”, as I look at my watch, “three and a half hours?”

“Yeah.” He halfheartedly replies.

“Problem? “I ask.

“Yeah”, he snorts, “Going baggage class. Can’t afford Business. Work’s been kinda thin on the chin lately.”

“Pish and tiddle”, I reply, “Tharushi, please call the BA front desk for me, if you would”, as I slide a US\$20 across the bar.

“Yes sir, Doctor Rock, sir!” he rapidly replies.

<RINGRINGRING> “BA front desk”.

“Yes, hello. This is Dr. Rocknocker. I’m sending over one Dr. Dax Aceron with my BA Rhodium Thunder Frequent Flyers card. Please upgrade him to Business on BA Flight 106 to London departing in some 3.5 hours. My security code is <mumblemumblemumble>. Got that? Great. Thank you.”

“Here Dax”, as I hand him my frequent flyer's card, “Go to the BA desk and get yourself upgraded. I’ll sit here and keep the bar from running away. Now, begone with thee.”

Dr. Dax is all smiles as he lights off for the BA desk.

Oh, I could have gone and handled it all, but there was this one crucial problem.

I didn’t want to.

I order another Guinness and light up my cigar anew. This already had the earmarks of an epic adventure.

After a beer or eight and associated shots, I pour Dr. Dax into the courtesy cart and we're whisked off to our departure gate. Normally, this would take full portions of an hour, the crowds would be so thick. Today, we're at the most distal of the departure gates and we made it there from the Irish Pub in less than 7 minutes.

The plane was mostly empty. The ground crew did a desultory check of our passport and visas and told us basically to 'sit wherever you want'.

"We're already business class." I replied.

"I hope someone else was buying your tickets." Was the response.

Dax and I got to our Business Class seats and get comfortable.

We looked around and First Class was full, Business Class had one or two open seats and coach? Well, pretty much empty except for those souls who wanted a whole row to themselves to rack out on the upcoming 7.5-hour journey.

I asked if could get my Dr. Dax Business Class upgrade miles back.

The flight attendant said that 'she'll see'. It was more of a rhetorical question, based on the absurdity of international flights these days of scary infectious diseases and global idiocy.

The plane was probably 1/5th full. If we played our cards right and Dr. Dax and I could have our own private airline cabin attendant.

With a minimum of fuss and puling, after the obligatory "Please. Just sit back, enjoy our flight and don't do anything stupid" lectures, in English, Arabic, and Dutch for some reason, we pushed back, rolled out and were heading off to our take-off position.

It's Zombie Apocalypse time out here; without the drooling creatures lusting for brains; which is odd, even for Dubai. The airport's dead, few ground vehicles scurrying around, and very, very few planes doing much of anything. We rolled into takeoff position, sat for less than a full minute, and suddenly went 110% throttle.

"Adios, Dubai. See you on the flip side." I said to no one in particular, saluting the city one digit at a time.

We were wheels up so fast, I didn't even get the obligatory "Welcome aboard, Dr. Rock, here's your complimentary pre-takeoff drink".

I sought to alleviate that sordid situation straightaway.

We leveled out and were headed generally north-northwestward when I waylaid the unsuspecting cabin-crew worker.

"Hello. How are we today? Good. Good. Might I trouble you for a drink?" I asked, sweeter than 1.23 kilos of jaggery.

"You'll get a drink when I'm good and ready to get you a drink", she barked back like an Alligator Snapping turtle with tertiary clap and barbed-wire undies.

"Now, now. See here, Miss. There's no reason for all this. All I'd like is..." I tried to continue.

"Yeah. We know. 'Vodka. Ice. Sliced limes. Bitter Lemon', right? We'll you'll get that when I get around to it. Not before." She snarled back.

"Evidently my reputation does precede me," I said, somewhat perplexed and a bit miffed. I never am nasty to those who serve my alcohol, so I was genuinely perplexed at this turn of affairs.

"Yeah", I hear a familiar voice from the back of the plane, "Everyone in existence knows of the one and only Dr. Rocknocker."



What the actual fuck?

I swivel around and standing there with a shit-eating grin some representational three kilometers wide is Toivo.

“Toivo? What the actual flying fuck? What the hell are you doing in Dubai?” I asked.

“Paying the cabin crew real money to give you a hard time.” He laughs, as the red-faced cabin attendant hands both me and Toivo a drink.

Toivo is sputtering along in delighted laughter.

Dr. Dax is out like a light, snuffling his way westward.

“That still doesn’t answer my question, Toiv: what the blinkered hell are you doing in Dubai?” asked again.

“Well, you know I own an oilfield service company. Most everyone is in a global lockdown, but I can afford to fly where I want when I want. Only ‘essential’ employees are at the office. What better time to drop by some oil companies Middle Eastern HQs, make an impression, and try to drum up some business? If nothing else, they’ll remember me when the need comes for oil field servicing.” He laughs.

“Well, I can’t argue with the logic, but I might with the execution. Why not move up here into Business and we’ll catch up?” I ask.

“Nah, Rock. I’m bushwhacked. I got a nice, little row of four seats all laid out as my own, private Idaho. I’ve got in-flight entertainment, a patented ‘Dr. Rocknocker’ never-emptying glass and a desire to count high-velocity aerial sheep. Give me a few hours kip and I’ll come back and we can catch up. Deal?” he asks.

“Sure. No problem. Just don’t ask what I’m up to because it’s super-secret, really dangerous, and ridiculously ‘Eyes-only’ confidential. Have a nice nap.” I smile and turn back to my drink.

Toivo slowly rises and head back to his nest, shaking his head over what I was on about this time.

“Fuck with my beverage service? OK. I fuck with your head”, I smile quietly to myself.

“Why, yes, I’d love another. Could you make it a double?” I ask the flight attendant, who has now recovered her previous bit of Toivo-induced embarrassment She was well on her way to redeeming herself mightily in the eyes of this grizzled world traveler.

I spent the flight time writing up my field notes. I devised a brand-new form of encryption that no one would be able to break; except for me, of course. I planted primers through the coded entries to remind me how simple this code was, but how unbreakable the code would be if the people trying to decode it weren’t, well, me. There were little asides and personal accounts linked to the decryption key that would be impossible, I fervently hoped, for anyone without certain key pieces of history, to unravel.

I’m going to a primitive and paranoid place, and I’m the one sweating the encryption of my hand written notes.

Weird.

I built up a file system on my really cheap ass-looking Toshiba laptop that would prove to be impenetrable to anyone short of a batch of NSF Crays with nothing to do for the next geological epoch. It was an old, beat-up looking, field notebook computer, circa 1999.

However, looks can be deceiving.

I had it juiced with all the latest computer gizmos and gimcracks that brought its guts right up to 2020 or possibly beyond. It had 6 TB Samsung 860 PRO, 2.5" SSD, with all the attendant bells and whistles according high-juice operating systems today. It runs on Win 7 because I hate Win 10 but it also runs on Windows XP. I had my computer guru do whatever it's called so I could run both systems simultaneously so I could show it doing XP things to a concerned TSA agent when it really was running Win 7 covertly in the background.

This thing could, in a pinch, process raw seismic data.

The logic? Well, I show customs and that crowd, and it's an old, beat-up geologist's field electronic notebook. In the hotel room, I can activate it's alter ego and have access to all the goodies I need that frankly are equivalent or better than my workstation back home

Truth be told, it's an old ploy that Rack and Ruin suggested. There are even some packages of ones and zeros that had originated from some shady place in the hills of the East Coast of the US swimming around the guts of the thing. This makes for the ideal situation to keep prying eyes where they belong and yet still allow me to have the access to all my latest geological, geophysical, and petrophysical software; as well as communication and snooping programs.

We secured permission to bring in one laptop or iPad per person on this trip; so I decided with the paucity of the internet in the place I was headed, I'd bring along my satellite lash up and the necessary computer to drive it. No one, unless they're really tech-savvy, which I'm not, would realize I have a fully functional satellite Internet machine in that old beat up Toshiba notebook facade and those couple of bags of adapters, wall warts, and patch cords.

That all done, I ordered another drink, pick a bit at the Full English Breakfast I thought sounded good until it arrived, and read some of the latest newspapers.

COVID-19! ALARM! RUN IN CIRCLES! SCREAM AND SHOUT!

Oh, bother.

Toivo finally arrives back from his little trip to the land of Nod and sits down in the unoccupied seat next to mine. We have some time and need every minute to catch up. I must say, thus far, it was the most agreeable part of the trip. It was good to see an old face from back home.

Toivo's staying in London for a few days, trying to drum up some North Sea business, then he's back to Houston via Mexico City and overland to Matamoros. The things as citizens that we're forced to do under the guise of security.

We're readying for landing when Dr. Dax finally wakes up. He just has time for his morning ablutions before we land in sunny ol' England.

I had printed out the list of attendees and first thing, after we deplaned, went through all the passport and customs folderol, got to the hotel, checked in and had a couple of drinks. Then I'd requisition a conference room in the hotel for all of us to meet before our flight out to China the next day.

That's why I get the big money. I can plan logistically like a motherfucker.

Dax and I get through all the entrance formalities and I arrange for our baggage to be sent to the hotel, which is connected to the airport Terminal 4. It was a near thing, though, as we were some of the last guests who were allowed to stay at the hotel before it closed due to the whole Bad Mexican Beer virus absurdity.

However, our rooms wouldn't be available for a couple of hours, but they'd keep our bags for us until we decide to show up. So, with time in an airport to kill, where else do we go?

Off to the nearest bar.

It was a long walk to our hotel, and since we didn't care to walk after being locked in an aluminum tube for the last 8+ hours, we found the first pub right after we sorted out our bags with BA. It overlooked the international arrivals area, and had a ringside seat to the comings, but not goings, of international adventurers.

So we were sitting in the Pogo Lounge of the London International Airport...in the patio section, of course, drinking Singapore Slings with mescal on the side.

Dax and I ordered several drinks as I wanted something different for a change. We sat back, got comfortable, and wanted to fire up cigars, but here in the Northern Hemisphere of late, that would probably be an executable offense.

“Y’know, Dax”, I said between sips of a really fine cocktail, “We’ll probably be seeing all our compatriots walk right on by us here. We should let them know that we’re here.”

As another aside, all the team members of this little excursion spoke English. I didn't mention that until right now because I didn't think it important, but I suppose it is. With the translations to the native language, to and fro, of where we're going; additional languages would have just fuckered our timetable, which was long enough as it stood.

Dax agreed, procured some crayons, literally, and a paper placemat and ginned up a fairly credible International Union of Petroleum Geological Sciences (IUPGS) logo and our names for all to see.

So much for anonymity, inconspicuousness, and clandestineness.

Ha! With this bunch? Hardly...

Dax and I ordered another round which arrived expediently, as we pretty much had the lounge to ourselves.

It was weird hanging around a place that I've never before seen without bustling, hustling, thronging mobs of people. There were a few fellow travelers, but it was like after a great conflagration, a reverse decimation, where instead of only 10% of the population being laid waste, it was 90% and we were part of the lucky 10% of survivors.

“Yes, thank you. ”, I said to the smiling barkeep. I didn't know you could double a Singapore Sling. The more you know...

Dax and I sat there enjoying our libations. Well, I was. Dax was having the damnedest of times keeping up; not that I asked him to or challenged him in any way. I was itchily lusting for a good smoke; those Dubai Camachos were taunting me just a foot or two away in my field pack.

## Chapter Three

“No Smoking,” all the lounge signs said.

Even those over ashtrays, inexplicably.

Suddenly, I smelled of smoke. Sweet, sweet smoke.

I swiveled back and forth and spy some sort of dread-locked Millennial-Gen X-er or Y-er firing up some form of a combustible smokeable product.

No one in the entire lounge, but for me, even deigned so much as to give the smoker a glance.

“Well, fuck this, that, and everything else!” I said in a modestly amusing triumphant falsetto that seem to fit the situation as it stood at that very moment. I had to say it like that, as the moment was structured that way.

I grabbed my field pack and liberated 2 fresh, black, unctuous cigars. I offered one to Dax but given his current anti-Caucasian olive tinge, I figured a cigar for him at this point would have elicited a reverse protein spill event.

“Dax? “ I said, pantomiming me lighting up. “OK?”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever.”, he replied, “How do you do it? I’m ready to pack it in for the day. No sleep that I could see. You’re fresh as a daisy and actually looking forward to a triple-maduro cigar. You’re simply not human...”

“Afraid you’re correct there, old sod.”, I said, puffing the stogie to life, shaking out the sulfuric Lucifer cigar-match I was using in its only office.

“I’m a member of a very secret league of specialist sentient species: an ethanol-fueled carbon-based lifeform. We’re very, very uncommon.

However, now that you know my little secret, I regrettably have to kill you. Nothing personal.”, I say, “Just business”.

I make the high sign to the bartender.

“Yes, my good sir. Another round. Make them doubles.” I smirked.

Dax let out with a gasp.

“You’re fucking not human.” He sighed.

“I’ll order you some Irn Bru and aspirin.” I said, “You’ll be right as the mail in mere minutes.”

“But what of the two drinks?” Dax asked.

“Well, I do have two hands...” I snorted.

Dax worked on his Irn Bru, as he was obviously heavily dehydrated, and I worked on Singapore Slings, mescal on the side, and the occasional draught Tanglefoot Ale pint.

Hey, I needed to remain hydrated as well.

A flight just got in from Moscow and I was wondering if it might contain one or more of our Russian colleagues. I reviewed the flight information Agents Rack and Ruin had provided and sure enough, there should be our three Russian colleagues any minute now.

Dr. Morskoy Utes, Dr. Volna Sglazhivaniye, and Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik were due in on this flight. I wrote their names on the reverse of a placemat and posted it where everyone exiting the terminal could view it.

Sure, enough, I heard the dulcet tones of Russian waffing down the hallway. I held up my makeshift sign and waited for them to arrive.



Arrive they did. They were traveling together and knew each other from the interminable wait for interior flights to Sheremetyevo and the flight to London.

“Greetings!” I said in my best Russian, “I am Dr. Rocknocker, this is Dr. Dax. We’re with the IUPGS trip to the east. We’ve arranged for our hotel over by Terminal 4. You are most welcome to join us until the others arrive and we can all go to the hotel via courtesy cart, or you can walk over now.”

“Does cart have drinks?” Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik severely asks.

“I don’t believe so,” I replied, half chuckling.

“Then. We will wait.” He smiled.

We all moved to a bigger table, but one with just a good view of the arrivals terminal.

Once introductions were done, I called Jerry, our de facto bartender over to regale you weary travelers with drink.

Oh, and something to chew on, if they were so inclined. They were Russian.

“Doctors”, I said, “I will probably cover this several times over the course of the project, but I’m the hookin’ bull on this little program. Not my first choice, but the powers that be decided it that way. With that, I’m declaring an open bar until everyone gets here, which should be by 1600 hours, then we will transport to the hotel. Afterward, we will have a bit of downtime to collect one’s thoughts and whatever else needs collection. Then we will have a short meeting before dinner, a good night’s sleep, then we depart for Beijing. Any questions?”

None officially, but I could see my Russian comrades sizing me up. I take it they’ve heard of me before and were wondering if I was the same character.

I could tell that they were thinking where they last crossed paths with me.

I ordered a round of drinks as Dr. Dax begged off.

“I can’t keep up with Dr. Rock. There’s no way I’ll keep up with him and a trio of Russian geoscientists. I’m off to the hotel. See you all there later.” He said as he snagged a passing courtesy cart.

"Он канадец. Что еще я могу сказать?" "He's Canadian. What else can I say?" I said with a smile and snicker.

The three Russian looked at me, pointed, and smiled.

“You ARE the Doctor Rock? Your Russian is St. Petersburg dialect. You always wear gloves indoors?” I was asked in rapid-fire Russian.

“Yes. Thanks, I try”, I remove my left glove, “Yep. I’m the genuine article.” I give them the obligatory Shaka-wave.

They gasp at the void of my left hand, now extra nasty as I’m negotiating a working relationship with permeable tantalum implants now securely burrowed into the keloids, extra scar tissue, and into the bone of my heavily harassed hand.

I quickly replace my glove, which has foam-rubber fillers standing in for my severed digits. It’ll pass casual muster and keep children from running away from me, screaming.

“You were instrumental in the discovery of Yurubchen Field?” I was asked.

“Yeah. Although that was years and years ago.” I replied.

The scene quickly deteriorates. Two geologists, a geophysicist, and a geochemist, in a bar, swapping old war stories. The carnage of carriers of alcoholic beverages was legendary.

Dead soldiers everywhere.

Over time, more of our cadre wandered by. Feeling emboldened by meeting up with our Russian comrades, I saw our geomechanic wandering down the aisle, looking confused.

“Dr. Iskren Dragomirov Dinev!”, I lightly shouted.

“Dr. Rock. Is good that I am seeing you. I fear I was lost.” He replied.

Lost from the plane, down the straight, unbendy terminal passageway?

Oh, this is going to be some fun.

Soon after, our Swedish geophysicist, our Brit geologist, Dutch and Portuguese Reservoir Engineers, our other geochemist, another Canadian, ‘eh, and our Finnish Petroleum Technologist were all present and accounted for.

After everyone had at least a couple of rounds at the bar, I called for the check and a couple of courtesy carts.

“Gentlemen”, I said, “The bill has been sorted. Please find yourself a seat on the arriving courtesy carts and we’ll be off to the hotel.”

And just like people with normal IQs, we all did so and found ourselves deposited quickly at the front desk of the hotel.

“OK, gentlemen. Please get yourselves checked-in. It is now 1630. I plan to have a quick orientation meeting in”, I ask the clerk for the conference room number.

“Conference Room 1.”

Well, that was easy.

“I will see you all there for a quick meeting in precisely two hours. In case anyone is confused by daylight-savings time or how time zones work; we’re currently at GMT and 1634 hours. See you in slightly less than 2 hours. Cheers.”

I went up to my room, suite actually, which was totally unnecessary, but rank does have its privilege at times. I attacked the mini-bar and within five minutes I was on the phone, calling the States, smoking a new cigar, and sipping a lovely potato juice and citrus concoction.

Esme wasn’t at daughter #2’s place, nor Daughter #1’s. Therefore, by the process of deduction, she was either curling on Venus or visiting her mother.

Oddly enough, it proved to be the latter.

I spent some serious dollars on that phone call as I had a lot of information to relate to my dear wife and besides that, I was missing her already. I had no idea how long this little get-together would be lasting, and I just hate loose ends. I was given my marching orders, a note to call Agents Rack and Ruin once I arrived in China and Esme’s shopping list. Heavily skewed towards jewelry and silk, this wouldn’t prove to be a problem where I was headed.

After a sloppy series of Auf Wiedersehens, I hung up the phone, re-sparked my cigar, refreshed my drink and went to launch myself headfirst into the enormous in-room Jacuzzi.

But first things first. I needed to get my notes ready for the meeting in, oh holy fuck, just over an hour.

The Jacuzzi will have to wait. But I needed a quick shower.

I pulled out my previously prepared notes, ran over them briefly, saw that they were good, and returned to the glassy cubicle that was the “Nature’s Way” waterfall shower.

First, I ordered some sandwiches and cocktails for the meeting in less than, oh, fuck, 45 minutes.

Gad. I hate meetings. Especially if I'm the one running them.

I allowed myself only one in-shower cocktail as I needed to get a move on.

Freshly showered and unshorn, as I still sported a full grey Grizzly Adams beard, but combed and neatified; I dressed in my best field outfit, locked up everything I deemed necessary to be locked up, grabbed a box of cigars, and headed to Conference Room #1.

I arrived 10 minutes early and already nearly 80% of the team members had already landed.

I walked over to the "No Smoking" sign; as I had already cleared it with the hotel when I paid for the room, ripped down the signage, and propped open a box of my cigars.

I asked the arriving hotel employees wheeling in the portable bar and carts of snacks to find us a shitload of ashtrays.

There were the obligatory 'Howdy's and 'Howzitgoin's? but we'd save the official introductions for after the beginning of the meeting.

I wandered up to the lectern they had provided, spread out my notes, freshened up my drink at the open bar the hotel had just wheeled in and fired up a new cigar. I noticed by dint of a quick headcount, everyone was in attendance.

"It's showtime!" I said to no one in particular.

The sooner we begin this thing, the faster it'll be over.

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” dings the glass as I rap it on the side with my Bushmills cigar lighter.

No one is listening and the chatting continues.

“Gentlemen! Please! Take your seats and let us begin.” I say in my outside voice.

No response.

I give a quick blast of the small air-horn I carry with me for just such occasions.

“SHADDUP and SITDOWN!” in full Subsurface Manager voice.

That got their attention.

“Right! OK, I can see we’re going to need to get a few things straight right from the get-go. Everyone sit down, and give me your undivided attention. If you please.”

Low murmuring and slower response.

“NOW, GENTLEMEN!” I roar.

They get it through their heads that I’m not fucking around nor one to be fucked with.

“Right. Eyes front. Thank you. From the beginning. I am Dr. Rocknocker, late of the Middle East and the de facto leader of this special education group. I am the hookin’ bull. And in case any of you are unfamiliar with the term, that means I’m the boss. The chief. The head cheese. Number one. Top dog. Et cetera. I’m the one running this show, and what I say goes. Period. End of sentence. Full stop. Anyone unhappy with that, the exit door is over there.”

I wait for a beat, point doorward, and have a sip of my drink.

“OK, you’re all in it now up to your necks and for the duration. Welcome to the Rocknocker Corps. <pause for some very nervous laughter>. OK. Here’s the deal, guys. We’re all educators, well experienced, and respected in our fields of study. That puts us all on even ground. Except for one minor detail. That being, I was chosen by the characters running and financing this little soiree as the boss, as I have stated previously. We all agreed to that by the fact that you’re still here and partaking of my cigars and the open bar.”

Slight pause for the murmurs of appreciation to die down.

“Now that’s out of the way, I need to do what I know everyone here hates with the passion of an exploding supernova. We get to introduce ourselves to the others in the project. I know it’s a parochial thing to do, but we’re going to be living and working together for who-knows-how-long in a very bizarre country and set of circumstances. So, let’s start on this side of the room, moving anticlockwise, please, your name, country, what you preferred to be called and brief intro. I know it’s a pain in the balls, but it’s a necessary pain. I’ll start off, then Dax can continue. Agreed?”

There was a low murmur of agreement.

“Gentlemen. I’m American and as such, used to loud noises. When I ask a question, I expect at least an audible reply.”

“Yes, sir!” came the response I required.

“Very funny.”, I said, taking a deep quaff of my drink. “I’m, as I said, Dr. Rocknocker, late of the Middle East but American as apple pie and napalm. Please, call me ‘Rock’. I’m a hired-gun petroleum geologist, master blaster, and solver of problems; especially where explosives can be involved. I’ve 39 years' tenure in the Oil Patch and over 44 countries under my belt. Even with all that, I was chosen to shepherd this project through to completion. Dax?”

“Hello. I’m the token Canadian and petrophysicist, Dr. Dax Aceron. Call me Dax. Like our dear leader here, I’m a hired gun consultant with over 30 years in the Oil Patch. I’ve been around the globe as well, but haven’t taken a count lately as to the exact number of countries. My specialty is petrophysical, not surprisingly, primarily decoding and investigating vintage as well as foreign well logs and their interpretation. Next?”

“Hello. Ah, umm...I...am Dr. Iskren Dragomirov Dinev; call me Iskren, please. I am Bulgarian geomechanic. My specialty is drilling wells and borehole problems as related to lithology and completion problems due to borehole geomechanics. My main area of work is Eastern Europe and Russia. I am just pleased as pie to be here. Thank you. Next?”

“Good day, all. I am Dr. Clifford Swandon. Please, call me Cliff. Drop over sometime <waiting for small groans and chuckles>. I am a British geologist, primarily focused on offshore geological and geophysical problems, as I’ve worked in the North Sea for the last 25 years; and it’s bloody cold and wet work <wait for inevitable groans>. That’s about all, just your standard garden variety North Sea geologist. Next?”

“Greetings. I am Dr. Vijver Monteur, a reservoir engineer from the Netherlands. Please call me Viv. My specialty is reserves estimation and producability factors of oil and gas reservoirs. 35 years in the industry, primarily in Europe, China and South-east Asia. I also prefer Dutch dry-cured cigars”, as he smiles and points my direction with a lit Camacho. “Next?”

“Hello, peoples. I am Portuguese, Dr. Graciano Guimarães, reservoir engineer. Call me Grako, if you like. I work on reservoirs risk and upside their potentials. Mostly Europe, Central Asia, and Middle East. Dr...um, Rock and I have actually worked together back in Qatar years ago, don’t know if he remembers...”

“I was wondering if you remembered, Grako.” I said in return, waving a high-five.



Grako laughs, “If this anything like our time in Qatar, call your family; you are going to be late!” he chuckled and pointed to the next in line.

“Privet. I am Dr. Volna Sglazhivaniye, and you will call me Volna. I am Russian geophysicist from Krasnoyarsk region and work in Sniggims, the Siberian All-State Geological Survey of Russia. I oversee the geology and production of all of Eastern Siberia. I too know Rock well, <waves>, and agree with Grako. We are all doomed!”, he laughs. “Oh, next?”

“Hello, all. I am the other token Canadian, ‘eh, Dr. Erlen Meyer, call me Erlen or Earl, either works. I am a geochemist of 35 years of Oil Patch experience, mostly with heavy and other nasty crude oils. Most of my time was spent in Canada’s northlands as well as the Arctic around the planet. Looking forward to this trip into the unknown. Next?”

“Greetings, I am Dr. Joonatan Vedenalaiset, please call me Joon. I am from Finland where we have best scenery and small furry animals. Maybe try pony trekking? <wait for small, knowing laughs>. I am a petroleum technologist and I tell you what to put down the well to get out oil and gas. 28 years in oil industry around the globe, mostly in South America, Indonesia, and Africa. Next?”

“Privetstviya. I am other Russian geologist, Dr. Morskoy Utes, be calling me Morse. I know Rock very well from our time in Western Siberia. I work there and southern Eastern Siberia for many companies as, how he said? ‘Hired gun’? Yes. I agree, with Rock leading this will be a time long remembered for all. Let us finish up soon and have drinks and cigars, shall we? Next?”

“Hälsningar! I am Swedish geophysicist, Dr. Aktiv Vågformme. I am known as Ack. Or Aktiv, either. I am computer expert studying waveforms, AVOs, seismic attributes and how they relate to oil and gas. I have worked in many, many places, mostly in Western Africa, Australia, Indonesia, and Eastern China. Really looking forward to this expedition. Next?”

Last, but certainly not least, was a rather gruff looking specimen from Russia, Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik. He sat there stone-faced throughout the entire introduction phase and looked somewhere between bored silly and annoyed to death.

When it fell to his turn at-bat, he sat there, unsmiling, with one of my cigars smoldering in the ashtray in front of him.

“And you, good Doctor?” I asked.

“Harrumph.” He harrumphed, “I wonder, do I make mistake? Do I want to be part of this ‘цирк’ [circus]?”

“Well, you had our chance there Ivan.”, I said, using the collective term for Russians and not his forename, “It was you who elected to stay behind, have drinks, and purloin my cigars.”

<Groaning> “Very well.” He said. Standing to address the crowd, as no one else had done, he bellowed in a very stentorian tone, “I am Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik. You may call me Dr. Khimik, or Dr. Academician Khimik. I am the geochemist designated for this project.”, much to the chagrin of Dr. Meyer, our redoubtable Canadian.

“I undoubtedly have more education, expertise and experience than any of you, have worked in every FSU country and published many books and articles on petroleum geochemistry. I am an expert in aqueous and non-aqueous geochemistry and expect the respect so deserved of one adorned with such accomplishments.”

The room fell silent.

“Oh, Ivan”, I said, “Get over yourself. Why don’t you tell the assembled team how you’re a classical bullshitter and prank master? Biogenic gas, anyone?”

The room began to titter.

“Rock! So you finally recognize Ivan! Ha! Ha! Ha! I had all of you so worked up. You should have seen look on your faces!” Dr. Academician Khimik laughed.

The room echoed with genuine laughter.

“Yes, assembled esteemed Doctors,” I said, This is Dr. Ivan ‘never miss a chance for a prank’ Khimik. Keep an eye on your drinks, daughters, wives, and wallets when he’s around.”

The room let loose a collective sigh of relief as Ivan, the mighty Russian academician, faked a massive fart as he sat back down.

“Now, that’s a fine crew to invade a hitherto closed country!” I said.  
“Welcome one and all. The drinking light’s lit, as is the smoking light. Get yourselves fresh drinks and I’d like to do a little Q&A before we have a once over the itinerary and depart for the evening.”

As a man, the room arose and made a beeline to the bar. The open look of horror on the bartenders was palpable. I just re-fired my cigar and poured a healthy tot from one of my emergency flasks secreted into one of the many pockets in my field vest.

After 10 minutes or so, everyone was sitting back down and I had their rapt attention.

“OK, Show-and-tell, umm, err, Q&A time. Any questions from the peanut gallery?”

“Yeah. Rock. What’s with the get-up?” The Brit geologist Cliff asks.

“What?”, I act all insulted, “Such a question from a fellow geologist? For shame. This is my field outfit. It’s also my travel outfit. My meet-country-dignitaries outfit. And my damn-I-like-to-be comfortable outfit.”

“Well, it is a bit much, don’t you think?” Cliff continues.

“Actually, quite the contrary, me old mucker.”, I reply, “This functional and comfortable outfit tells people at a glance that I’m more concerned with the science than with fashion sense. It tells them I’m not cowed or concerned by titles, designations, or hierarchy. It tells people to stuff your haughty pretenses and deal with me and my team as equals. It’s also useful as fuck and comfy as a bitch.” As I pull out an emergency flask and have a quick snort.

There was a bit of a buzz when I dropped the F-bomb.

“Oh, yes”, I continued, “As I noted way long ago, I’m not an Ugly American, as I’m overqualified. We tend not to call a spade a spade, but a fucking shovel. We are all educated people here, and I for one am not going to ignore a certain percentage of words of the English language because some might take offense. You’re offended? Tough shit. Don’t listen. Get the fuck out of the way and let the adults get on with the project at hand.”

There was a buzz of agreement and some snickers as well.

“Besides,”, I continued, “We are all polyglots. What better chance to learn some new and useful colorful metaphors in new and offensive languages?”

“OK, Rock”, Cliff continues, “But that Hawaiian shirt is just plain offensive in any language.”

“No arguments there”, I agreed. “Wait until you see the ones from my ‘special collection’.”

“The ‘Reunite Gondwanaland’ T-shirt and field vest speak for themselves, then again could probably use a good wash. But cargo shorts, Scottish tasseled knee socks, and field boots?”

“Ready for anything at a moment’s notice. It just screams ‘We come prepared. Where’s the science?’”. I chuckle.

“The hat?” Cliff chuckles, “Oh, right. You’re Texan.”

“Nope. Only a naturalized citizen. I’m originally from Baja Canada.” I said. “You’ll be laughing out of the other side of your face when you’re out on an outcrop of mica schist in the noonday sun.”

Cliff puzzled a bit over that but carried on.

“But the black gloves? Really? This a black glove affair?” he asked, chucklingly.

The few in the room who knew why I wore black gloves at all times gave a collective inhale.

“OK, ya’ got me.”, I said as I waved with my left hand, unbuckled the glove and stripped it off for all to see.

The room grew deathly silent.

“Now you all know why I wear black gloves at all times”, I said, “It’s not a fashion statement, it’s to keep little kids from having nightmares and adults from running away screaming into the night.”

“Rock”, Cliff stammered, “Holy shit. I’m sorry, Doctor...”

“Belay that”, I growled, “How could you know? It’s the result of a Russian rig accident years ago. It’s now even more colorful and festive because I’m testing new implants for the attachment of a bespoke powered titanium prosthesis. ‘Eh, it’s a thing. Whaddya gonna do?’”

“Oh, I do apologize, Rock”, Cliff continued.

“OK, then buy me a drink and get over it.” I smiled back and returned my glove to its rightful position.

“Any other questions? Preferably concerning our little project?” I said.

There were a few logistical questions and I mentioned that if customs in China or the other place gave anyone any shit to come and get me. I have the diplomatic passport and as team leader, should be able to bulldoze any pernicious problems or officious officials.

Just like that, all questions were answered, we agreed to meet in the lobby with our luggage and fully checked out at 1400 hours tomorrow. I had arranged for intra-airport transport and we’d be shuttled off, literally, to our airline’s desk and departure gate.

Of course, now that the meeting was over, the conversations really began. I milled around the bar for an hour or so, rekindled old acquaintances, and made some new ones. I made it clear that I had to leave to take care of the mountains of paperwork and make some calls.

I reminded the folks that noon comes real early around these parts and the next couple of days would be probably vexing as well as taxing. Best to get some kip when you had the chance.

They all agreed and Dr. Dax and I toddled off to the elevator and our rooms.

It was about 2030 and too early to knock off for the night, but too late to do any real heavy-duty paperwork. I did freshen up all my notes and made even more notes with questions I needed to answer on this trip, but that only took about an hour or so.

I seemed to be forgetting something...think, think, think.

Jacuzzi! How could I forget?

The damned thing was huge, easily big enough for 6 people.

Or one really weary water buffalo geologist.

After closing the drapes, placing a wakeup call request for 0800 the next day; I ran the tub for a full 25 minutes until I at least covered all the jets. I got me a brace of cigars, fixin's for a couple of right powerful drinks, the latest issues of Science, AAPG Explorer, and a British version of Playboy; I settled into the huge hot tub and fired off the air jets.

“Holy hell!” as water sprayed everywhere. Leave it to me to not check the direction the bubbler jets were last pointed.

Someone, somewhere, perhaps a disgruntled maid, was having an anonymous chuckle at my expense.

That sorted, I grew accustomed to being bashed and battered as the air jets were on some sort of circuit that not only rotated them but swapped them around from time to time.

I shut the thing off and decided, just this once, I'd read the fucking instructions.

That now sorted, I had it set itself into a repeating replay of Program 5. Up one side and down the other; it was most agreeable and tended not to strip layers of epidermis as did the one I had set unknowingly previously.

Three hours later, I literally fell into bed. Good thing I requested the wakeup call. I slept the sleep of the dead.

Dax called early the next morning and told me he was headed down for breakfast. He asked if I was going as well.

We met in the lobby and found a good number of our team already partaking of the egg station, omelet bar, and other breakfast locations.

I required coffee in heroic amounts to break me out of my still somewhat not 100% from the great night's sleep. So I found an unoccupied table and was instantly served a cup of surprisingly good English coffee.

Dax joined me at the table, as the room was fairly crowded.

His plate was heaped with eggs, sausage, hash browns, toast, haggis, and fried black puddings. How he continued to weigh-in at less than 100 kilos was a medical mystery.

I was going to get up and see if Dax left anything for breakfast when a waiter informs me I have a call at the front desk.

Dax looks up from his feed and asks if he should get me anything while I'm gone.

"Smoke me a kipper, I'll be back for breakfast", I replied and headed out to the front desk.

"Yeah. Dr. Rock here", I said into the telecommunications device.

"Ah, Doctor. How are you doing this morning?" the familiar voice of Agent Rack asks.

"Just peachy, Rack", I replied, "I was going to call you from Beijing. Is there a problem?"

"No", he said, "Not as such. But with this virus madness running loose, things over here are being negatively affected. I had a spare few moments so I thought I'd call for an update before things got any busier."

"No worries, " I replied, "We're at breakfast here in London, and will be leaving for Beijing in just 6 hours' time. This time tomorrow, if the accident will, we'll be in-country. Want me to still call you from Beijing or wait until we get settled at our primary destination?"

"Tomorrow's fine", he replied, "Call from the primary destination. Until then, remember, you're the ambassador of..."

Damn transatlantic connections. We were cut off.



Back to breakfast.

In the breakfast lounge my table, across from Dax, there's my coffee, knife, fork, plate and a rather suspicious-looking black fish draped across it.

"Well", Dax smiled, "You asked."

With some hot sauce, scrambles, and a couple of fine English sausages, it made for a weird, though hearty breakfast. Not something I'd order again, probably, but good to know those finny things with the staring eyes are actually edible.

I signed for everyone breakfast and decided that as long as I was down here, I'd sign for everyone's room. That would save some time and bother as we could just assemble, get on the transport and head to the flight desk.

I signed open-ended for everyone's rooms. Probably not the most clever things I've ever done, but if there were phone calls or mini-bar raids; what, mini-bar raids with a bunch of earth scientists?

Anyways, it's all be handled by the folks running the show. I sincerely doubt the hotel would try and stick us with anything we didn't actually use or order.

That done, back in the room I worked on my notes and expenses until there was a ring at the door.

Holy hell! Already 1345! I answer the door and tell them those cases there were ready to go. I just needed to clear my work desk, shove it all into my day pack, and we could be on our way.

That done, I meet with the rest of our entourage in the hotel lobby. All present and accounted for, the electric carts appear, we're loaded, I do a quick check with the front desk and see all bills are paid and closed. I toss my gear on the last cart and pile aboard.

We were at the Air China desk in less than 10 minutes. It took about an hour to get us all checked in, our baggage tagged and noted as “VIP”. Like that was going to stop any nosy airport official.

We were all left with our visas, tickets, entry cards, and day packs; be they briefcases, rucksacks or haversacks.

Most everyone had taken my advice and were wearing their most comfortable flying, meetin’-and-greetin’ apparel. Dr. Ivan, of course, was decked out in his best shiny, wide-lapel, Russian 3-piece suit.

Our departure gate was an easy 10-minute walk and look at this. Directly across from a pub.

“Gentlemen”, I announced, “We are headed for a primitive and paranoid country. We are the international ambassadors of science and goodwill. And if you will excuse me, I have no intention of facing this solemn duty sober.”

With that, I headed to the bar.

I was immediately followed by 11 other geoscientists.

After I order the first round, we’re served mostly simple drinks, beers and a couple of mixed drinks, as we’re going to be flying soon via flight CA 938. It’ll be a late-night flight, leaving at 2035 or so and arriving Beijing around 11 hours later at 1100 the next day.

It’s going to be plenty of time to sober these guys up, so there’s a bit of party atmosphere. I am a tad concerned about the flight equipment, as it’s still not been announced. They are futzing with the flight information over at the departure desk so I wander over and find, much to my delight, that we’re flying a new Boeing 777-300ER.

I chat a bit with the folks handling the gate and tell them were the IUPGS group headed further east once we hit Beijing. They all smile and say that

we've completely stoked-out Business Class. We've got that entire section of the plane reserved.

Because this is a very ominous assignment – with overtones of extreme personal danger, I felt it my duty to inform the ground crew that in just a couple of hours, they'd be lifting off with a Business Class section stuffed to the rafters with geoscientists.

“Thank you for that.” The ground clerk said, thinking, obviously, that I was off my rocker.

“Well, I tried.”, I murmured as I walked back to the pub.

“Good news, everyone!” I said, “It's a Boeing, so we're going!”

All I got were several odd looks and a fresh drink shoved into my hand.

“Oh, my.” I thought, “This is going to be a long, strange trip...”

Before we go any further, I should note that along with their epic capabilities for advancing science, challenging the established norm, and knocking back huge quantities of alcohol, geoscientists, much like the ones in this group, are usually large members of the species.

Except for one whisper-thin Canadian, all the rest of the crowd assembled today are close to or exceeding 1.86 meters in height, well in excess of 100 kilograms in mass, some 150 kg, and without exception, heavily bewhiskered.

We looked like the world's least threatening biker group.

Why note this now? Because we're headed to the kingdom of the small, the petite, and the diminutive.

We're a dozen huge furry Godzillas arriving en masse into a country where currently the average height for adult males is 167.1 cm and the average

height for adult females is 155.8 cm. The average weights are 66.2 kg for males and 57.3 kg for females.

We're going to turn some heads, I'd wager. We're going to cause a bit of gawping and gawking if any of my last five trips to the Orient are any indication of for what we're going to in. Just a heads up.

I close the bar tab, write a healthy tip, and herd the group across the aisle to the freshly opened departures desk.

They have a desultory look through our electronics, day packs, backpacks, briefcases, and haversacks. They have already been warned by several federal and international agencies that we'd probably be carrying rock hammers, chisels, sample bags, 20% muriatic acid bottles, and other tools of the geological trade.

They politely asked if we'd tag all these extraneous bits of geological accouterments with our names and they'd be lovingly stowed in the cargo hold during our flight. Never know what havoc a loaded geochemist could wreak in-flight with an Estwing chisel-tip rock hammer.

Also, they relieved every one of us of our pocket knives, a 12 for 12 exercise. It's like asking a cop to turn over his handcuffs. However, we complied.

They didn't even bother with our phones, laptops and other forms of electronic doodads. They figured that since everyone's name in Business Class this trip began with 'Dr.', we could be trusted with computers, gravimeters, GPS units, and the like.

We filed into the plane and everyone was sorted in mere minutes. It's a pleasure to travel with people rather than a madding, bustling crowd.

We did stow out completely the Business Class section but Air China was prepared for us: they assigned 3 flight attendants specifically for Business

on this trip; which, truth be told, was practically the only section of the plane with any population of travelers. It was a mostly empty flight.

One round of pre-flight drinks later, and we're wheels up headed to the Orient. I immediately set upon updating my field notes and the rest busied themselves with things geological, geophysical, petrophysical, and related to international brewing and distilling arts.

## Chapter Four

Mealtime was a very nice selection of either British or Oriental food, I enjoyed the lasagna especially.

The empties pile was growing at a prodigious rate as it's a thirsty business flying around the world, defending science, and pushing back the boundaries of knowledge and scholarship.

Besides, it was free.

The lightweights of the crowd, the wiggle-pickers, and the log readers flaked early and were snoring their way to the Orient. The stalwart Russians, the Bulgarian, the Swede, and the Finn were keeping the cabin attendants in shape with their beverage requests. Not to worry, I plan to tip each stoutly upon our arrival.

I thought ahead and 'smuggled' a bottle of duty-free vodka aboard. Truth be told, my emergency flasks probably tote up about a liter combined. I kept myself busy with my notes, logistics, field notebooks, and expenses; so I only had to ask for ice, limes, and Bitter Lemon a couple of times during the long flight.

The flight continued on through the night and into the next day. I flaked out myself somewhere over Lake Baikal by my reckoning. The next thing I know, I was being offered a hot towel, tea, and breakfast menu by a stunningly cute and ridiculously attentive diminutive cabin attendant.

The light coming through the cabin windows was intensely bright, as is its wont at 35,000 feet elevation. I wish I could have asked for someone to turn it down a couple of notches.

"Cliff. Could you pull down the window shade? I'm getting zorched over here."

After abbreviated morning ablutions, I'm sipping some genuinely wonderful loose-leaf black morning tea.

It was augmented by a quick splash of wuliangye, a delightful Chinese liqueur made from sorghum, rice, glutinous rice, more rice, sticky rice, unsticky rice, rice crispies, wheat, and corn which rings in at 52 percent alcohol.

104 proof breakfast juice.

My kind of morning wake-up tea.

Once breakfast was served, I took the time to remind everyone of our mission.

Remember where we're going. Remember what we're doing. And remember, these folks probably don't care much for practical jokes; as I looked directly at Dr. Ivan who made an obligatory fake flatus sound.

Ph.D. Doctor. Academician. And a 12-year old's comportment. He makes it out of this alive and it'll be a genuine miracle.

The plane makes a couple of sudden swings. I've been through this before, we're getting ready to land at Beijing Capital International Airport.

"DING!" dings the in-cabin dinger that ding-alerts us that, yes, we're preparing to land.

Stash that extra beer in your daypack, shove all those extra mini-bottles into your rucksack; we're getting ready to touch down.

We land, taxi to the appropriate arrivals gate and in merest minutes are headed off the plane into the belly of the airport. I'm last off, to ensure everyone else makes it and to disburse some well-deserved tips to the cabin attendants.

They tried, wanly, to protest, “Oh, no. We cannot...oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.”

One flight attendant hands me a couple of mini-bottles of vodka and a can of Bitter Lemon.

“It is very dusty walk to customs”, she smiles at me.

I do so love to visit the Orient. Furry Godzillas get some mad respect over here.

We needn't worry. We were all met at the debouchment of the jetway by a pair of electric convenience carts. We were sort of, kind of, more or less, VIPs, so we're getting the royal service.

I could grow to like this.

We are taken to an off-axis terminal room behind an unmarked door and told to wait.

Of course, the cigarettes are broken out and I am offered a small Dutch dry-cured cigar from Dr. Viv.

“Here, Rock. Try one of mine.” He smiled.

“Thanks, Viv.” I said and joined the combustible crowd. Nice flavor, burns a tad hot though for my taste.

I take the time to check in back home. Not with Es, but with the Agents. I inform them via answering machine that we're in China, being treated well, on schedule and will be departing to the final destination in a couple of hours.

“Rock, what's the bloody score?” Cliff asks me.



“Not sure”, I replied, “Nothing from any agency folks. Perhaps they are taken to quarantine geologists now in light of the global Cheap Mexican Beer Virus craziness.”

An official arrives at the door, coughs, and informs us that our luggage is outside. We will surrender our passports and the needful will be done. They will be returned, and we will be taken to our departure gate.

I spoke up.

“Excuse me, but I’m Dr. Rocknocker, the titular head of this special education class. I think I speak for the crowd when I say that we’re not terribly keen on ‘surrendering’, as you say, our passports. We’re world travelers and that right there is no-no number one on the world wanderer hit parade.” I said.

“Yes, Dr. Rocknocker. This was anticipated.” He replied, without stating his name, rank or even serial number, “Therefore, if you wish, one of your party will accompany us to the customs area and oversee the procedure. It is for your convenience.”

“I understand that and we do appreciate that, but some of us are from countries that have undergone some severe global turmoil in the last few decades. Old habits die hard. Can you give us a minute, please?” I asked.

“Certainly, Doctor.” The official replied. And silently shut himself off.

Or so it seemed, he was very methodical and mechanical.

“OK, guys, here’s the deal. Pony up your passports. Give them to Dax, whom I’ve just elected as official IUPGS ambassador to China.”

Dax does a quick double-take. “What?”

“No worries Dax. It’s a cinch. Just go with Three Ceepio over here and watch over our passports. We’ll hold down the fort on this side.” I said.

“Why me? Why don’t you, as ‘titular head of this special education class’, tend to such duties?” Dax asks.

“Ah, you heard that...” I snickered, “That’s the precise reason. I’ve got to stay and figure out the logistics while you handle some of the ancillary activities. I mean, that’s what second in command duties entail.”

“OK, OK”, Dax exhales in defeat, “Give me your passports, sign a sheet as a receipt to show them we’re not going to be snookered”, as evidently, Western passports, even vague copies, go for major dinero over here on the black market; which we’re not implying is what’s happening here at all.

No. Not in the least.

Dax continues, “Paper trail. Let’s make a real path back from wherever we go. So, hand over your passports and sign the paper. We’ll have Three Ceepio sign it as well once we get him rebooted. Then I go take care of business while Dr. Rock does the needful here.”

Even with the grumbles and snark, we collected a total of a dozen passports, a dozen signatures and once reawakened, Three Ceepio actually signed the sheet of paper we were using to track our documents.

It’s not that we’re paranoid. It’s not that we’re suspicious. It’s not that we’re distrustful. It’s just that we’re very, very careful, cynical, and pragmatic. It’s a survival instinct.

Dax and the Chinese official vacate the room and I wander outside the door to check on our luggage. I had copies of everyone’s bag tags and saw immediately that mine had made it more or less unscathed. It was a real pain in the lumbar region stooping over and checking all those numbers, so I dragooned Viv and Ivan into helping me.

I’d call off the name, and then the last 4 digits of the ridiculously long 18-25 digit tracking number. Viv or Ivan would find the bag and we’d check

another off the list. It would have taken me alone a good hour to accomplish this. With Viv and Ivan's help, 10 minutes later, we're back in the austere waiting room, smoking cigars and taking sips from purloined British Airways liquor miniatures.

All our baggage made it this far. At least, the bag showed up. No idea who or what had been through the interior of the bags, but they all looked intact.

That, in and of itself, was good enough for a couple of toasts.

Dax returned with all our properly stamped, photocopied, re-stamped, visa-ed, and appropriately checked for entrance to our next destination. There were certain countries where if their customs stamps appear in your passport it could cause you to be denied entry. These were all covered with hardly-obvious yellow sticky notes and low-grade sticky tape.

Such subterfuge.

There was a knock at the door and Joon answered. It was an Air China hostess pushing a huge cart loaded with food and drink.

"Hello. Is this IUPGS?" she asked.

"Why, yes; it is," I replied. "At least, were representatives of that group."

She pushes open the doors wide as it would go and enters with the cart.

"Courtesy of Air China." She declared, did a neat little bow and exited before we could say a word.

"Very much like traveling with Dr. Rock", Volna declares, "We must do this some more often" as he heads to the cart and grabs a very cold can of local beer.

I look at the cart, and at my team members.

“Bon appetite, guys”, I say, shrugging my shoulders and raising my hands in defeat.

Like hungry lampreys on a wobbly Sockeye Salmon, that cart actually shuddered under the onslaught.

Once the food and drink were sorted, Dax continued with his tale.

“Yeah, they were very thorough. Actually had some joker from the place we’re going giving each and every passport the once over. Checking for untoward stamps, problematic visas, and the like Everything was going fine until some knucklehead’s red Diplomatic Passport came up.” Dax chuckled.

“Yes? Hello?” I said, looking up from a very tasty Oriental chicken-wrap sandwich.

“Oh, yeah. ‘Why an American has a Russian Diplomatic Passport’? I didn’t know so I just dummied up. I let them figure it out. A few phone calls later, they hurriedly stamped that passport and shoved it back into the pile like it was made of pure plutonium. Your reputation does precede you, Rock.” Dax laughs.

“They probably called the emergency number inside the front cover.” I chuckled along, “When the Langley operator answered, they probably wet themselves in unison.”

“That”, Ivan pointed out, “Raises even more questions. But I’d rather have another drink than examine that issue here and now.”

“Smart move”, I smiled back to Ivan. He fake-farted back at me.

“Oh, Geez Louise. This is going to be a long trip...” I shook my head in disbelief.

Just a short time later, Three Ceepio arrived back at our waiting area, briefly goggled at the drinks cart that now resembled the post-lunch feeding rig

used for the velociraptors in the original Jurassic Park. He announced that we needed to gather our belongings and meet outside for transport to our departure gate.

We gathered up our gear and with cries of “pack out your trash”, we policed the area and left it cleaner than when we arrived. There were 4 electric carts idling along outside, spewing all that noxious angry pixie effluvia into the ether. Our baggage was already gone, explained by one of the drivers that it had already been taken to the plane; and if we’d please be seated, we’d be next.

We zoomed through the surprisingly empty airport terminal towards our departure gate.

A couple of the cart drivers, at the behest of the occupants, were vying to see who could get to our departure gate first; as there was a pile of rubles, yuan, euros, krona, lev, yen, and a few dollars at stake.

It was a near thing, but I wasn’t about to declare a winner. As far as I was concerned we made it there alive and that should have been sufficient to split up the prize four ways. I let the other conspirators handle this little occasion.

Up to the departure desk, and it was a very cursory look at our passports, a taking of tickets, and ushering us onto the plane.

“Sheesh.” I heard someone grouse, “What a puddle jumper. Damn thing’s a tin can and we’re the sardines.”

It was a vintage Boeing 737. Not tiny, but by comparison to what we’re been flying, it looked very small indeed.

We didn’t need to worry, the plane was empty. We were the only passengers on this flight; CA121 Beijing to Pyongyang. Departing 1:25 PM Arriving 4:20 PM.

It's good to have connections.

Since the airport was so quiet and we were the only passengers on this flight, we were seated, asked our drink orders and sitting back relaxing for only 15 minutes before we heard the doors clatter shut and the jet lurching backward as we push off.

We were asked to drink up so the glasses could be gathered and stored in the galley during takeoff. We taxied a bit, drove left, drove right, and before we even had a chance for some pithy quips, we were airborne headed to our destination.

“Damn”, I said to the vapors, “That was quick.”

We had just leveled out on our ~2-hour flight when the cabin attendants came around with duty-free.

“Last chance to buy!”, they smiled.

We bought them out of booze and cigarettes. They didn't have any cigars.

Damn.

Then it was snacks and drinks. I was going to say something about watching their intake of EtOh, but, fuck that. They're adults. Supposedly. They know their limits. I hoped.

The flight pattered along very smoothly. Too high up to see any scenery, plus it was quite foggy with a low lying scud of gray clouds below us. The in-flight movies were execrable and the in-flight magazine indecipherable.

“Yes, I'd love another cocktail. A double, if you would, Thanks. What? Oh, whatever that last one was...”

And so the flight progressed.

A short while later, the annunciator dinged and let us know that we were beginning our descent to that place north of the 38th parallel.

“Gentlemen”, I said, “We are finally arriving at our primary destination. Please, remember decorum. We are international scientific ambassadors, so let’s keep the bilabial fricatives to a minimum.”

I was greeted by a volley of fake-farts, Bronx cheers, and staccato belches that would put any university’s zoo fraternity to shame. Geologists are a weird bunch.

“Yeah. My team. Yeah. Karma hates me...” I sighed and sat back down in my seat for landing.

We touch down as light as lotus blossom on silent golden pond.

We taxied and taxied until our taxi-er was sore, but we finally arrived at the proper gate; one of the two that existed. It’s not that the airport was that big or busy, it was just things tend to move a bit slower here.

Then it sort of hits. We’re finally at Pyongyang International Airport. We are a group of hand-picked global geoscientists on a mission to try and help out a self-insulated, insular, xenophobic, totalitarian, dictatorial, repressive regime crawl out of the intellectual and technological cesspool they’ve created for themselves by providing the insights into the latest exploration, operations, and production petroleum geology to help bolster their own economy, raise the standard of living for all its citizens, and perhaps start them down the path to a slightly more robust energy self-sufficiency where they won’t have to worry over sanctions, global prohibitions of trade, or the vicissitudes and illegalities of black market oil and bring the quality of their geological and associated sciences out of the late 19th century and gloriously into the 21st!

Me? Fuck it. I’m an unrepentant mercenary. I’m in it for the money.

We taxi over to Terminal 2, the arrivals terminal for all international flights. I note, rather bemusedly, that the airport boasts only one runway. I've landed at grass-swamp airports on the taiga in Eastern Siberia that have three or four runways, and those are carved out annually.

I'm not terribly impressed.

We arrive at the jetway and wait for the plane to spool down. There are all sorts of bowing and handshaking with our flight crew, as they were marvelous. Unobtrusive, available, and not terribly chatty. Plus, they poured the drinks like they themselves didn't own it. Hearty cash tips disappeared into pants and tunic pockets.

We gather up our gear and wait for the door to open. It does, after a few minutes, and we bravely sally forth, a scientific cadre ostensibly on a mercy mission.

One to bolster the economy of this particular country and the bank accounts of 12 international geoscientists.

Off the plane, down the jetway. Once we reach the arrivals terminal, we see this huge sign in Korean, English, Russian and Chinese:

“Travel alert March 2020: North Korean authorities have restricted travel to and from China. If entering North Korea from China or Russia, you will be quarantined for one month.”

“Well.”, I thought out loud, “Now there's an auspicious beginning...they might have said something back in Beijing...”

I wait for the others to read the good news and expect the grumbles, groans, and gritting teeth of a trip thus ambushed.

What I hear, instead, is:



“Whoo-hoo! Triple pay! Force majeure, baby! Tax-free paid holiday! Rock, you’re a genius. Thanks for sending your contract over...”. Dax exults.

The rest of the crowd also received excerpts from my standard piracy form, errr, contract.

They didn’t get it from me, so I’m making a note to Rack and Ruin. They had to be the leak in the reactor that spawned this seepage. Seems everyone had added that codicil to their personal service contracts; almost as if someone knew about this beforehand...

Suddenly the demeanor of the crowd became much lighter.

We all assemble in the arrivals area and see a couple of nationals holding IUPGS signs.

We stood our ground. They stood theirs.

We were the only ones on the plane. We are the people they’re looking for. We’re the only people, other than cleaners, custodians, and clandestine constabularies, in this part of the airport.

“Aww, fuck”, I growl. I’m the head of this special education group. I suppose I’ll go over and break the ice, so to speak.

“Dax?” I say, “I’m going in. You stay here with the rest of the group. Keep them out of the pub; for now.”

“Gotcha, Rock”, Dax replies, as the rest of the group look for someplace to sit and wait until something happens.

I wander over to one of the placard holders and extract one of my business cards. It’s in English on one side and Russian on the other. I hope this character speaks one or the other.

“Good day”, I say, proffering my business card, which he takes. “I am Dr. Rocknocker, and this is the team from the IUPGS. We’ve just arrived and are looking forward to working in your fine country.”

“I am Tongbang Yong-Sun”, the placard carrier said, “You will follow me.”

“Well.”, I thought, “So much for introductions.”

“Dax? Guys? Follow me.” I said to the team.

They all got up, grabbed their gear, and sauntered over to where Toebang or whatever the hell his name was, and I were standing.

“Hello. Welcome to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. You are guests of the illustrious Kim Jong-un. We welcome you as guests but remind you, you are guests here and are expected to comport yourself as guests.”

Ivan gives Grako an elbow to the ribs: “Hey. Did he say we were guests?”

Grako cracks up, “Several times.”

“Oh, yeah. This is going to be some fun...” I muse.

“As spokesman and leader of the team, we say thank you for this opportunity as it is a unique experience. But, I must remind you, we are not a tour group. We are a specially selected global group of industrial scientists who have volunteered our time and education to come to offer our expertise to the benefit of your country. So, we’d appreciate it if you would comport yourself and your team as such as well.” I said.

Toebang looked as if he just struck a thick vein of lemon-juice.

“Your attitude has been noted, Doctor,” Toebang said.

“Good. I’d hate to think you weren’t listening.” I replied in kind. “I despise repeating myself.”

Don’t try your little man ‘I’m a big shit’ here, buckwheat. I’ve gone toe-to-toe with the best of them around the world and my record stands undefeated; I mused.

With that, we sauntered down the long hallway to passport control and customs.

If arrivals were anything to crow about, this is going to be the longest entrance into a country in years.

Down the hall, we’re all lead to a non-descript room off the main throughway. There are easily a dozen chairs there and we are asked to have a seat. The passport agent will be here soon.

I gather up all the passports and figure this must be the North Korean version of VIP passport handling that we experienced in Beijing.

Nope.

One agent arrives and takes his fucking sweet time setting up his tea, stamp pad, rubber stamps, and other articles of officious-dom.

He motions to me and I walk over, depositing a dozen passports gently in front of him.

He looks at me, looks at the pile of passports, at me again and I swear, I see steam issuing from his ears.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“Why you have so many passports?” he asks.

“One from each of my team plus mine equals 12 passports,” I replied.

“ONE AT A TIME!” he screams.

The room fell silent. Bets were probably being laid as to how I’d react.

“Sorry?” I said, “I didn’t catch that.”

The customs guy was starting to go red.

“See”, I continued, “I am deaf to disrespect, much less screaming by some minor functionary. Care to try again?”

“Each brings up own passport.”, he says, seething but slightly less self-important.

“Most certainly”, I reply in saccharine dripping tones, “Here’s mine.” And I offer him my blood-red passport.

He goes to grab it, but seeing Toebang behind me, he cools out and accepts it gracelessly.

He opens it, looks at it, looks at me, looks at it, at me, at it, at me.

“Christ.” I think, “Korean ping pong.”

“You are American?” he asks.

“Yes, by birth” I reply.

“Why Russian passport?” he asks.

“Long story. But please check. It is all legal and above board.” I reply nicely.

He gives me the hairy eyeball, scrunches up his face like he’s just been the recipient of a high-velocity dog-yummy to the scrotum, and viciously

stamps my passport. Gleefully over stamping such visas and stamps like the ones from Bali, Seychelles, Bermuda, and Turks and Caicos. Places he might have heard of but would never in a million years visit.

He hands me back my passport and I thought that was it.

Nope. Now it's time for backpack inspection.

“Now, the fun begins”, I mused.

They literally dump my daypack out on the stainless steel inspection counter. I ask them to take it easy, as I have some seriously delicate scientific equipment there and wouldn't want it fuckered before we got the chance to use it in your fine country.

Toebang and Shitheels, the passport pecker, looked at me and just ‘Harrumph’-ed.

“What is this?”

“Oh, goody. Show and tell. Gather ‘round gents, after I'm done, you're all next.” I said to the team.

“That is my field notebook computer. An ancient and trusty device I use in the field for mapping, taking field notes, and making calculations.”

“Open it and turn it on.”

“Certainly.” I did and made sure it booted up under XP and not Win 7.

“You need this?” Shitheels asked.

“Yes. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dragged it halfway around the world.” I replied truthfully if not a bit snarkily.

“OK.” He grabs my satellite phone. “What is this?”

“Field communication device”, I said truthfully. “For communications via line of sight with others in the field during field excursions.” Which was more or less accurate.

“You need this?” Shitheels asked.

“Yes, just as before,” I replied.

We played this little game with my gravimeter, Brunton Compass, Mohs Hardness Testing Kit, UV lamp set (long and short wave...for mineral identification), map case, clipboard, myriad pens, and colored pencils, and GPS, which was built into a range finder; which I demonstrate the range finding capabilities, but not the GPS capabilities.

He grabbed my cameras and was fumbling around with the two Canon EOS-1D X Mark III bodies I was carrying and the four lenses, primarily close-up macro-photography when I asked him to please be careful.

“They’re new for the trip. I’d hate for them to be damaged before we can find some oil and gas for you all.” I said.

As all lenses were less than 250mm, he just grunted and shoved them back to me.

He didn’t know about the 900 lens I was carrying or the shitload of memory cards still zipped into the lining of my day pack.

“Is everything OK?” I ask?

“Yes. No. Wait. What’s this?” he asks as he grabs my hand lens off the stainless steel table.

“Ah. That, my good sir, is my Scanning Electron Hand Lens.” I said with overweening pride.

“What is it? What is it for? Why?” he fumbled with the three objectives.

“Oh, please, careful with that. It’s a high energy tool!” I said in mock alarm.

He almost dropped it like a live grenade.

The term ‘high energy’ cut through the discourse like a 5 megawatt laser firing for the first time.

I grabbed the hand lens and showed him how it worked on the back of my hand.

“Lens 1. 5x magnification. Lens 2. 10x magnification. Lens 3. 20x magnification. Push this button and you get UV shortwave radiation for mineral identification. Push this button and you get longwave UV radiation for mineral identification. Push both once and you get a low power red laser, push both twice and get a high-power green laser for scanning specimens. That’s for EDAX: Energy Dispersive Analysis of X-rays. Very high tech. I hope to make a gift of it to the university if and when we ever get through passport control.”

It was all a load of cobblers, and my team was snickering, but not too loud. Yes, it was a hand lens with three Coddington precision ground lenses, and a red- and green low power UV sources for illumination and checking fluorescent minerals. But all that LASER crapola?

Jolly joke.

It worked though. He cleared all my gear, confiscating the titty magazine I bought in London so they’d have something to show at the end of the day, shook hands, and motioned to Dax.

The rest of the team went through quite quickly. He already saw what a Brunton Compass was, what was a map case, gravimeter, hand lens, and other forms of geological esoterica.

We were all stamped, carded and assigned our 'handlers' for the remainder of our stay.

Since we were most emphatically not a tour group, they assigned four locals to be our "aides"; not handlers.

Sure, they were employed by the Korean International Travel Company, but they were not tour agents nor any other kind of agent. They wanted us to be assured of that fact.

They were, however, all young and named Yuk Seong-Ho, No Young-Gi, Man Suk-Chul, and Kong Chong-Yol.

Got that?

'Yuk'. 'No'. 'Man'. And 'Kong'.

Well, like we were much better.

'Dax'. 'Rock'. 'Grako.' 'Viv'. And 'Earl'.

What a bunch.

We were lead out of the passport office after we passed muster there and down to baggage claim. All our baggage was waiting for us, including an Air China bag of rock hammers, acid bottles, and other implements of geological destruction.

We were told to tell which were our personal bags. We pointed them out and they were marked with wide black Sharpies® and Post-it™ notes.

One after another was called over to a series of stainless steel tables and asked if this was our baggage if we packed it and if we were carrying any contraband.

The last question struck me as disingenuous.



One at a time, one after another, we have vetted through customs once again, check out our clothes, personal items, and secret stashes of booze and cigars.

They were a rather affable group, these customs folks, and actually quite pleasant.

Kong pulled me over to one corner and told me “They are being nice, looking for gifts or bribes. Cigarettes are much appreciated.”

I was called last and elected to take out the Air China bag as well. I plopped my three Halliburton aluminum traveling cases on the table, whirled the locks, and popped them open for inspection.

They immediately noticed my emergency stash of vodka and bourbon.

“For medicinal purposes”, I chuckled, and absent-mindedly set 5 or 6 airline miniatures of booze on the table. They disappeared with an audible whoosh.

They looked at my boxes of cigars with covetous eyes.

“I suppose I better part with a few rather than piss them off and have them confiscate the lot. “ I thought. I offered them one Camacho each. I explained they were very, very strong and that one should last them a very long time indeed.

“It’s a gift, from us to you.” I said, “We do hope you will enjoy.”

SWOOSH. They disappeared just as quickly as the booze minis.

Then they saw the Sobranje cocktail cigarettes.

My plan was coming together.

I quickly open a carton and offered each a full pack of 20 of the festively-colored little coffin-nails.

They accepted them just as quickly, and now we were all friends. Hell, at this point, I could have smuggled through a fully armed ICBM, these guys were so blissed out at their good fortune.

They did a half-ass paw through my gear and told me to close each. Then they got to the last one and opened my real medicine bag. Here I kept the expensive silver-iodide ointment I was using in conjunction with the tantalum implants. Also, there were travel necessities, like antibiotics, pain medication, muscle relaxants, and some prescription sleep-inducing medications like Halcion and Ambien.

I flashed quickly to Dubai customs where they gave me a ration of shit about the sleep meds, and instantly tried to steer the discussion towards something less likely to be seen as smuggling or illegal.

“Oh? That?” I asked, grabbing the vial of silver-iodide ointment. “That’s for my hand. You see, I’m trying out some new implants before I get a new custom prosthesis...”

I may as well have been discussing Hyper-spatial Calculus with an Atlantic-trench blowfish at that point.

“What? What do you mean? Why do you need this?” the customs agent asked.

“Remember. You asked.”, I said and stripped off my left glove.

I held up my mangled left paw for them all to see.

The female customs agent just plain ran out screaming.

“Yeah, I have that effect on some women”, I mused.

Of the remaining two male agents, one was trying hard not to yarp and the other was calling for a policeman.

Suddenly, I'm flanked by two of North Korea's finest boys in blue. It's obvious they don't speak English and I don't speak any Korean.

"KONG! I need you", I said, somewhat loudly.

The cops were talking a blue streak between them, evidently thinking that I should be handcuffed, but neither wanted to even look at my mangled mitt much less wrangle it.

"Kong, please tell these fine policemen that there's no problem. I am sorry but I seem to have shocked the fine customs agents when they wanted to know why I need this jar of prescription salve. I just showed the..." as I waved my left hand right under their noses.

"Put it away! Put it away!" Kong shuddered. There was much discussion in Korean and I heard my name and IUPGS come up once or twice.

I put my glove back on and suddenly, all was right with the world once again.

"I'm going to have to remember that little trick. Walk into a bank, rip off the glove, and start filling my rucksack.." I laughed internally.

There were apologies, contrition, and deep bowing all around.

We came to an understanding. I wouldn't be trotted off to the hoosegow if I vowed never to take that glove off again.

"Deal", I said and thrust out my right hand for a good, solid, manly handshake.

It was like shaking hands with a pantyhose full of yogurt.

At that point, they just wanted us out of there.

"Screw the Air China bag. Take it and go to your hotel."

So we did. Laughing all the way.

## Chapter Five

“Hey, Viv!”, I say, as we’re all being shuttled onto the bus which will take us to our hotel, “Toss me one of those miniatures, if you please. Yeah. Of course, Vodka’ll do. It’s bloody dusty round these parts.”

Viv chuckles and asks if anyone else wants anything. He’s a consummate scrounger and somehow sweet-talked a demure and pulchritudinous female Air China cabin attendant out of her phone number, Email address, and a case of 100 airline liquor miniatures.

That he looks like a marginally graying version of Robert Mitchum in his heyday and speaks fluent Dutch, French, and Italian might explain his success. I mean, a guy with four ex-wives can’t be all wrong, right?

He’s a definite outlier in this crowd. We could be characterized as a batch of aging natural geoscientists who collectively, sans Viv, add up to an approximate eight on the “Looker” scale. Besides the years, the mileage, the climatic, and industrial ravages, it’s a good thing we all have expansive personalities, as most of us are dreadful enough to make a buzzard barf.

But, save for Viv, no one presently here is on the make. Oh, sure; we’ll all sweet talk some fair nubile into a free drink or a double when we really ordered a regular drink, but we’re all married, most terminally, that is, over 35 years and counting. The odd thing is that save and except for Viv, none of us married folk had ever been divorced.

That is strange, considering that the global divorce rate hovers around 50%, and we are often called to be apart from kith and kin for prolonged periods. However, we are always faithful and committed to our marital units and those vows we spoke all those many long decades ago.

But, hey, we’re all seriously male and not anywhere near dead; and there’s no penalty for just looking, right?

Continuing.

We’re all loaded on a pre-war, not certain which war, by the way, bus which stank of fish, kimchee, and diesel fuel. We really don’t care even a tiny, iotic amount. It’s free transport, we’re tired of traveling, and not keen on walking any further than we absolutely have to.

Viv has been passing out boozy little liquor miniatures, and I've been handing out cigars since I bought a metric shitload back in Dubai Duty-Free and somehow got them all through customs.

We didn't light up, as there was neither a driver nor handler present. So, we figured we'd all just wait on the cigars, and concentrate on having a little ground-level "Welcome to Best Korea" party until the powers that be got their collective shit together and provided drivers, herders, and handlers.

We sat there for 15 long minutes. Being the international ambassadors of amity and insobriety, we started making noises like "Hey! Where's our fucking driver?" and "I am Doctor Academician! Of All State Russian Geological Survey! How dare you make me wait? <loud fake flatus echo>"

Suddenly, a couple of characters in ill-fitting gray suits and fake Rays Bans are outside the bus having a collective meltdown. Somehow, someone fucked up and put us on a 'regular' bus and not the 'VIP' bus. In other words, we got to see what the locals really got to ride around Pyongyang on instead of our supposed to be impressed by the bus that wasn't there; but was now just arriving.

A spanking new purple-and-chrome Mercedes long-haul bus shows up. It even has our group name emblazoned above the placard that normally tells where the bus is headed or who it is for: " ' [Gugje Seog-yu Jijil Gwahag Yeonhab] or 'International Union of Petroleum Geological Sciences'".

We are brusquely ordered off our present bus and into the opulent, obviously bespoke, bright yellow faux-leather interior Mercedes-Benz Turismo RH M. It's so new and so obviously a ploy to get us to think that all things here are so new and opulent, it even smells of that new car, ah, bus, aroma.

"Well, we'll take care of that soon enough", I muse, as the bus is equipped with ashtrays and we're going on the scenic route to our hotel, which is only 25 or so kilometers from the airport. However, it was announced that it'll take us about 2 hours to get to our hotel since we need to see the city in its best light and get a feeling for the town if we should ever find ourselves lost and alone.

We all know what's going on. They're getting our rooms 'ready' for our arrival and need some extra time to make sure everything's all wired in and

transmitting properly.

“Guys”, I muse to our new handlers, “I’ve been to the Soviet Union, pre-wall fall. I stayed in places where I was definitely among the first westerners ever to grace their porticos. We’re a busload of natural scientists, of eight different nationalities, covering the economic spectrum from staunch capitalism to sociable socialism to hard-core communism. You even think for a second we’re going to spill any beans about anything you’d find interesting or useful? Think again.”

In fact, it would become a running joke between us all to see what sort of fake bombshells we could drop into the normal conversation what would give the listener’s the greatest case of the jibblies.

But for now, our bags were all loaded into the cargo compartment of this very, very nice, I must admit, mode of conveyance. Our handlers: ‘Yuk’, ‘No’, ‘Man’, and ‘Kong’, are all seated upfront and please with their latest tally of bodies. We have a couple of shady fellow travelers with the knock-off Ray-Bans and shiny gray suits that just appeared out of the woodwork in the back, seated by the loo, watching over all of us, and we’re going on a fucking city tour, whether we like it or not.

We’re all present and accounted for. Let’s keep our camera in our bags for the time being as the drinking and smoking lights had just been lit as the bus fired up its new German-engineered and machined precision diesel engine.

The bus rumbled to life and after a moment or two of checking that all dials, gauges, and indicators were where they were supposed to be; without so much as a cursory glance, we pulled out into traffic.

Except there was none.

Not another bus, pushbike, tap-tap, scooter, car, truck, hover-board, or motorcycle in sight.

Nothing.

Seems we were a big deal. They shut down the main drag so we wouldn’t be encumbered by such proletariat things like traffic jams or people-things cluttering the roadway, clambering for a look at the Western scientific cadre.

So, away we whizzed, *sans* traffic and into the very belly of the beast, and onward; eventually, towards our hotel.

Our handlers were very kind to point out passing scenes of interest.

“Look, look! There’s the Potong River. Notice all the lovely birds, ‘eh what? See the Norwegian Blue? Beautiful plumage!”

“See here, look. Here’s the Taedong River. Many forms of fish in the river. Maybe we’ll see some fishermen. If you like, we can stop, and ask them about today’s catch.”

We all declined, as we were certain that the fish the ‘random fisherman’ we’d talk to was flown in fresh from elsewhere earlier in the day.

Besides, we were comfortable. We had our drinks, our cigars, and we were leaving the driving to someone else.

After being driven around the city and seeing all the wonderful monuments, like the *faux* Arch of Triumph, which looks exactly unlike its namesake Arc de Triomphe de l’Étoile in Paris.

The Arch of Reunification, a monument to the goal of a reunified Korea, which, by necessity, is unfinished. Then there’s the Tomb of King Tongmyŏng, where people are lining up, just dying’ to get in.

Finally, we all called for our hotel, the Yanggakdo, after yet another mausoleum, the Kumsusan Memorial Palace of the Sun.

Arches or tombs. Such a stunning array of monuments and places of less than moderate interest.

We were interested in Mirae Scientists street (Future Scientists street). It is a street in a newly developed area in Pyongyang to house scientific institutions of the Kim Chaek University of Technology and its employees. But we were told that it was too late, there was not much there to see, we needed to express written permission to visit, and we’d be going there tomorrow or next week.

We wheel into the parking lot of the Yanggakdo Hotel and are immediately unimpressed by the pseudo-Baroque concrete fiasco that appears to stand, wobbly, before us. It’s a page right out of the Soviet Construction-For-The-Masses Handbook. A cold, gray concrete edifice with multitudes of



seemingly little, tiny windows. A perfect metaphor for our travels thus far; look at the expansiveness of Best Korean wonders, through this pinhole.

However, we judged too soon. We were told to go inside and check-in, whilst our luggage would be de-bussed for us and handled by the expertly efficient hotel staff. The lobby was opulent, tastefully laid out in earth tones of facades of veneers of marble, granite, some garnet-mica schist, if my hand lens doesn't lie, some Precambrian anatectic migmatite, displaying intricate and intense plication, xenoliths, and graphic delineation of minerals by segregation through melting points. There was a gigantic well-appointed and well kept up aquarium, complete with snuffling sharks and nuclear-submarine sized groupers.

Very handsome indeed. Impressions increasing slightly.

Then we see that there's a bloody casino on the bottom floor of the hotel, several bars interspersed throughout the hotel, and karaoke, of which I'm not terribly fond, but some of my European counterparts almost swooned at the prospect. There are a large pool and weight rooms/gymnasia, saunas and places to relax outside of one's room, but still under the watchful eye of the thousands of ill-concealed video cameras at every turn.

"Covert surveillance" may be a thing in Best Korea, but it's a practice still leaves a lot to be desired. The Eastern Siberian Russians back before the wall fell were more covert with their obvious button audio microphones woven into the fabric covering the headboard of your Intourist bed than the Best Koreans here. Their cameras were 'disguised' as flower arrangements, overhead lights, and speakers inexplicably placed into things like standing ashtrays, refuse bins, and randomly placed holes in the wall.

The floors were all covered with exquisite what looked to be hand-woven rugs of most vibrant crimson and gold; the usual Communistic colors. Always with some sort of floral pattern or pattern that's supposed to be reflective of nature, as I was told. Evidently, for workers to remember what nature was as they don't get out much with 14 to 16 hours workdays here in the Worker's Paradise.

Enough of the travelogue; we all wander up to the front desk, and each with their own passport in hand, request our reserved rooms. We supposed that we would all have rooms on different floors as the reservations were made,

expired, re-made, juggled, rebooked, allowed to expire, re-jiggered, and finally formalized a scant week before we left the UK.

Nope. No such luck. We were all on the 39th floor. The place boasts 47 floors, of which, the top floor is a revolving restaurant. Evidently, food tastes better when you're rotating.

However, it won't spin unless you first buy a drink.

We had that thing whirling like a NASA centrifuge after its discovery the second night.

Yeah, all 12 of us are bivouacked on the 39th floor. A floor with approximately 30 rooms.

I guess we could have played "Room Roulette" and see who got which room and who's luggage. Or we could switch every day or two to drive our handlers nuts. Or, we could just take our assigned rooms, which were conveniently located one empty room apart.

Meaning, no one had adjoining rooms. Why? Fuck if I know. We didn't spend much time in our rooms, and that time was either sleeping or showering. We'd all meet at the bar, casino, restaurant, karaoke, bowling alley (all three lanes) or actual meeting rooms every once in a while when we thought we should get together and compare notes. It was the most inexplicable situation.

Plus, we spent an inordinate amount of time waiting on the fucking elevators to take us to our room. These elevators, and if you think you're going to get a batch of aging senior scientists to schlep it up 39 floor's worth of stairs, think again; are the slowest elevators in the civilized world. And that was the consensus of scientists representing not only Europe and North America, but Russia as well. 15-25 minutes added to each journey, up or down; stopping on every floor, except 5, on the way down..

Jesus Q. Fuck, dudes. If you can't construct a bleedin' elevator that works better than those at the Sozvezdie Medveditsy Guest House in Lesosibirsk, Eastern Siberia; then I suggest you seriously rethink your plans for world domination and new world order.

Grako and Erwin once, while waiting for the fucking elevator, figured out that we were earning some US\$25 each just to wait for the lift to arrive and take us to our rooms. Every day. Sometimes several times per day.

With that, we all agreed to toss our “waiting time” funds into a kitty and on our last day of captivity here, blow it all in the hotel casino. Whatever became of that would be donated to the Koreans we thought most deserving of our largesse.

Would it be our handlers? How about the Korean Scientists we’d be meeting? The affable and most accommodating concierge? Or that plucky little Korean charwoman who was always on our floor and kept everything spotless, right down to our freshly laundered and pressed field clothes and newly polished field boots; done without our requesting or knowledge?

Only time would tell.

It could be a fortune or it could be bupkiss. Just like our expectations of the Heavenly Kingdom where we were currently sequestered.

As it was, with our official protestations, they kept only photocopies of our passports as we roundly refused and threatened a full-scale karaoke battle right here in the lobby if they didn’t relinquish our passports immediately. I had broken out my nastiest cigar and was primed to offend.

With that, we all had our keys and trooped over to the elevators for our first, of many, inexplicable waits. We made many uncharitable and potentially nasty remarks about the Anti-Western posters that made up some of the wall décor. Once we finally made it to our floor, we all fanned out to find our rooms. Viv found his first and was quite pleased to report to the rest of us that there was a “Welcome” basket in his room.

We all hoped that we would be receiving one a well.

I was in room 3914; which I considered a close call, but later only wondered as there was no 3913. Upon entering, I saw it was 1980s Hotel 6 opulent, but with an excellent over-city view. True it was late, dark, and the city was only somewhat lit up; I was looking forward to the view of the town in full daylight.

The room had a ‘king’ bed; that is if the king in question was Tutankhamen, the stubby, Egyptian boy king. The bed had no mattress pad and no box spring but it was hard enough for my liking. Many of my compatriots didn’t agree and complained bitterly. They eventually received thin mattress pads for all their kvetching.

There was an ancient Japanese color television, which only had 2 English language channels - Al Jazeera and the BBC, which was on a dated news loop. Watching the local channel is amusing though; the ads for 'personal enhancements' were hilarious, even without understanding a word of the language.

There were a couple of chairs and a low table, built-in dresser drawers for our clothes, a rusty and probably unusable room safe with corroded batteries, a small table built out of the wall that would serve as my travel office, and would-you-believe, a rotary telephone; how's that for nostalgia?

There was an old-model radio built into the nightstand next to the bed. I was very surprised to find it not only received AM, FM but shortwave as well. I had brought along a pair of Bose headphones and during some rainy down days, spent many fun-filled, and I mean that sincerely, hours DXing from the comfort of my 'enormous' king bed.

Beyond that, the room was very nondescript. Like any other of the millions of rooms in hotels around the world that unlike here, aren't claiming a 5-star rating. I mean, it was clean, if not a little long in the tooth. But didn't smell too terrible, even after I took care of that with my Camacho offerings. It was utilitarian, everything worked, even the water pressure, which surprisingly could strip off layers of one's skin if you weren't careful.

The bathroom, though no Jacuzzi, had a large enough bathtub for the occasional soaking period. Western accouterments in the bathroom were also welcome additions. My knees can't handle the traditional squat-holes any longer.

There were an electric teapot and several brands of tea, but no coffee. A quick "Gee! I sure wish I had some coffee!" to the four walls and damned if 30 minutes later, a porter didn't arrive to replenish my tea and courtesy in-room coffee...

There was a small Japanese brand in-room refrigerator which I thought might house a mini-bar. Oh, no! It was actually a *complimentary* larder stocked with all sorts of Best Korean goodies. Multiple cans of Taedonggang beer. Several bottles of Pyongyang Soju, in various flavors ranging anywhere from 16.8 to 53 percent alcohol by volume. My fridge was skewed towards the right-hand side of the bell curve; the more heavy-duty boozy side.

Evidently, my reputation had preceded me again.

There was a selection of German-style wheat beers from the Taedonggang Brewery and the more familiar ales, steam beers, and lagers. There were some imported beers like Heineken, Bavaria, Pils, a couple of Japanese brands: Asahi and Kirin, and something called 'Hello Beer' from Singapore.

There were also 'sampler' bottles of Apricot Pit wine, and a couple of high-alcohol fruity liquors made from constituents such as apple or pear, and mushrooms. There were also special medicinal liquors like 'Rason's Seal Penis Liquor'.

That is going home with me unopened.

There were a couple of bottles of local sake, called Chonju. Finally, there was a couple 'samplers' of homemade alcohol known as Makkoli. Plus there was something called 'Corn Grotto', which for the life of me, looks and tastes much like a very passable Kentucky Sippin' Bourbon.

I put our concierge on instant danger money the very next day. He's yet to source me more than a fifth of the stuff so far.

I found that there is a popular drink here which mirrors the Yorsch of Mother Russia. Beer and soju can be mixed to create \*somaek'; a foamy, frothy, funky drink of many flavors, depending on the soju chosen.

Is ethnoimbibology at thing? The science of how different cultures drink and the effects of drinking culture on different societies. If not, now I have another Ph.D. to pursue after I endow a chair at some likely Asian university.

Anyways, in everyone's room was a "welcome" basket, just chock full of Best Korean goodies. Postcards, stamps, ads for coin sets, stamp proofs and other goodies that could be purchased at the hotel. There was a field notebook, which I thought was a very nice addition, newspapers, cookies, crackers, biscuits, candies, fruit drinks, and some fresh fruit; although tamarind chewies and durian chips aren't on my list of personal favorites.

There were a couple of tour books, just chock full of staged photos. These were very nice as well, as so far, we haven't had much time for shopping outside of government stores or smaller family-run shops in town or out in the boonies.

A few of us were hungry and decided to see what the hotel had to offer room service-wise.

Bupkiss.

But, they did have a selection of restaurants. There is a Chinese restaurant, a European restaurant, and a Korean restaurant on site but they all serve the same food...a Best Korean attempt at western food. And it was weird being the only ones in the restaurant even though it was fully staffed.

We grazed lightly and decided to do some late-night perambulations around our hotel. Our handlers admonished us to stay within the confines of the hotel, or see them if it was absolutely necessary to go walkabout. In the hotel, we were on our own.

We found that there were tunnels in the hotel's basement. The basement tunnels were a real bonus. There's a bar with pool tables, a karaoke room, bowling, and a massage parlor, where I was beaten and pummeled into submission by tiny, diminutive, little Korean lassies fully 1/5th my size.

It was wonderful.

There was a hairdresser's, who were completely befuddled by my shoulder-length silver-gray locks and full gray Grizzly Adams beard. They did provide a lovely shampoo/cranial massage though for the equivalent of US\$2.

There were a couple of shops selling Chinese goods rather than local stuff, which was sort of disappointing, a cold noodle bar, and another casino. No shops selling Korean Communist propaganda posters, as I wanted to augment my Soviet-era collection. Perhaps I'll find something in-country later on.

We were shocked to find that the casino had WiFi that was uncensored and we were able to access; after a fee of liquor miniatures and a cigar or two. We were supposed to have access to the global internet, not local intranet, from the universities that we would be visiting. However, all of that was under the heavily squinting eyes of handlers and guys in shiny suits wearing fake Ray-Bans.

I still had my secret satellite internet lash-up available, but that was iffy, a pain in the ass to set up, and ridiculously expensive. However, it did work

on the 39th floor and the times I used it instead of wandering down to the tunnels, no one appeared to be the wiser. Thus far.

So typically, we'd just head to the basement casino with our laptops, iPads, and phones. Bam! Robert's your Sister's Husband, we could connect more-or-less free with the outside world; hence how you are reading this now.

Herro! "Yes, I'd sure like another beer. This time a porter, if you please."

The more they overthink the plumbing, the easier it is to stop up the drain. Or the more they put into locks, the easier they are to pick.

Besides, we were told we'd have access to unfettered and free internet. OK, so we just found it for ourselves. Whaddya expect? We're scientists, motherfucker, back off.

Ahem.

Back to reality.

The breakfast buffet the next morning had a wide choice of Asian and Western food, although the choices seemed to be the same every day. The main event was to beat the Chinese tourists to the egg station every morning. Breakfast always included fried eggs, a limited selection of pork, kippered fish, potatoes, rice, fruit, and a very Titanium-dioxide-white white bread

After a while, I took to going to the small market behind the lobby, buying some imported Chinese or Japanese nibbly bits and heading to the tunnels for a few breakfast beers before the long hard day's work. It took almost a week, but I gained the trust of some of the workers in the tunnels and they showed me the on-site microbrewery at the hotel. It produced very passable, and very, very cheap beers of several varieties.

Liquid bread. Beer. Is there nothing it can't do?

After breakfast our first day at the hotel, we were told to meet in the Conference Room "Il-sung" as we were going to have a 'Welcome foreign imperialist scientists' introduction and indoctrination.

Besides our handlers and the shiny-suit squad, there were several Korean folks we didn't recognize. These were students, scientists, and scholars from the Kim Chaek University of Technology, Kim Il-sung University, the

Pyongyang University of Science and Technology; all hailing from Pyongyang, and the University of Geology from North Hwanghae Province.

“Oh, marvelous”, Erlen remarked, “It’s going to be a bloody Chautauqua. We’ll be here all day.”

“Well”, I replied, “It could be worse. We could be on a bus headed off on another unscheduled road trip.”

As we found our seats, our Korean counterparts were busily setting up portable screens, like the ones your grandfather had for showing his 2.1 Googleplex worth of travel slides every Christmas or Thanksgiving get-together. They had a couple of ancient Chinese brand laptops that could have doubled for body armor, they were so thick and heavy.

While they fiddled with running cords for the overhead projectors and 16mm film projector; yes, it was going to be movie time as well, the hotel’s restaurant folks wheeled in carts laden with scones, cupcakes, and other sweet sorts of bakery. Another cart was wheeled in with pump-pots of hot water, tea, and coffee. Usual scientific meeting fare.

There was one final cart that made the day bearable. It held a pony keg of hotel micro-brewed beer on ice, with several dozen frosty mugs available for all who wanted to partake.

There were instantly 12 mugs that were spoken for.

I grabbed a cold beer and wandered around the conference room, sipping beer, chewing on an unlit cigar, and just trying to be pleasant to our hosts and their scientific guests. I was surprised when one North Korean professor, who spoke amazingly British-tinged English, offered me a light for my cigar.

“Is smoking allowed here?” I asked.

“Allowed?” he laughed heartily, “My good man, it’s practically a prerequisite.”

“Here then”, I said, offering him a nice, unctuous Camacho, “Try one of mine.”

Dr. P'ung Kwang-Seon of the North Korean University of Geology became my instant and lifelong friend at that moment.



We had a very nice chat, much to the chagrin of the gray suit cadre, who could hear what we were talking about, but probably didn't understand anything beyond every 8th word.

After a while, we were asked to take our seats, after refreshing our drinks, and introduced to the group of Korean geoscientists we'd be interacting with during our stay here in Best Korea.

I tried to record every name, but between the students, other scholars, and professors from the various universities, I decided I'd ask for a list of participants once the day had worn on. After all, they had all our names, references, and resumes if the thick folio they kept referring to was any indication.

There were a couple of hours of introductions, as every one of the Korean geoscientists there introduced themselves, mostly through translators, told of their personal area of specialty, and their latest work.

Most were what would be considered geoscientists, but oddly enough, not one that you would consider a petroleum geoscientist, however tangentially.

There were geomorphologists, structural geologists, petrologists, mineralogists, marine geologists, engineering geologists, and seismologists. However, there were no stratigraphers, sedimentologists, paleontologists, or geochemists. We were all geoscientists, but apart from the obvious Korean:English disparity, it was as if we spoke different scientific languages as well.

That would be our first hurdle to overcome.

They had no oil industry here; none whatsoever, therefore why one would bother with the geosciences that fed directly into petroleum? That, in and of itself, would make it difficult to explore for oil in the country. Couple that with the fact that they're so insular, think their version of 'science' is the best, at least that's the official line, and think all other's 'science' is capitalistic, substandard, and inferior doesn't bode well for your country discovering anything either oily or gassy.

We were having another conclave around the beer keg, ack, err...a 'coffee break' and I mentioned this fact to my scientific colleagues.

"Guys", I need input here, "We're going to get precisely nowhere if they won't even acknowledge that they have major problems from the start."

Ivan replies, “Very true. I’ve seen this before back home. You get a group so entrenched in their own little corner of science, they can’t even accept or acknowledge that others exist. Not only exist but actually know more about a certain problem than do you.”

Dax joins the fray, “Sure, that’s very true, but who’s going to tell them this unfortunate fact? They could take that as a personal, national, and global insult. Imagine you’re at an international conference and a bunch of foreigners walk in just to tell you you’ve been doing it all wrong for the last 75 years.”

I add, “Remember, though. These characters are scientists as well. I think it’ll be a good measure of seeing what sort of science and scientist we’re dealing with here. If they are truly researchers, they’ll listen to and evaluate what we say as for veracity and accuracy. If they’re just a bunch of Commie goons; no offense, Comrade Academician Ivan, they’ll get all pissed off, kick us out, and we get to go home and enjoy our triple Force Majeure pay.”

Ivan walks over and deliberately steps on the toes of my newly polished field boots.

“In Soviet Russia, field boots walk on YOU.” He laughs in his heavily inflected, and scary, Soviet-era speech...

“Yes, I agree”, Joon adds, “But who is going to address this issue with our hosts? Perhaps one of our Russian comrades, as they are, or were, more politically aligned with our Korean friends and perhaps best understand the issue?”

Ack speaks up, grinning maniacally, “No, I disagree. We should have the one person here who so encapsulates the ideologies and political leanings that they love to hate here so much. You know; the quiet, diminutive, and soft-spoken North American...”

Dax recoils, “Oh, no! I’m not going out in front of this mob of ornery Orientals...”

I smile wanly and tell Dax to cool out.

“Relax, Dax. They’re talking about me.”

“Oh, yes”, a collective group of voices replies, “Yes. Let our fearless Team Leader break the bad news to our Eastern Colleagues. That way we can

gauge their reactions to being bounced around scientifically by a member of the Evil Capitalist Cartel.”

“OK”, I reply, “I’ll do it. But be forewarned, my fine feathered fiends. I get stuck on a topic that’s not precisely my bailiwick, I’m going to throw your ass to the wolves. Remember, we’re all in this together.”

Whoops, and catcalls were reduced to mumbles and ‘Aw, fucks.’.

Chautauqua resumption was called and I asked for the floor.

It was a bit off the agenda, but since they’ve been chewing the air for the last several hours, they understood it would be appropriate for us to at least try and get a word in edgewise.

I downed my beer, and grabbed a fresh one as what I was going to say was going to be harsh, cut-and-dried, and rather pointed. But delivered in a pleasant manner.

I hoped.

This all had to be filtered through a series of translators, one for general conversational Korean and another for the more technical and scientific transliterations. I realized I was going to be up here for a while. So, I brought a cigar.

One way or another, I was going to deliver our pronouncements and hell, I may as well be comfortable while doing it.

<Remember to double the time on this, as it was being bilaterally translated>.

“Greetings and felicitations, my Eastern Colleagues. Let me first say how nice it is to be here in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as part of the ....”

I’m going to fast-forward through all the flowery bullshit and introductory happiness; I’ll going to just cut to the guts of the matter.

“...Now, you do know why there has been virtually no oil, gas nor any other hydrocarbon related deposit discovered here in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea?” I asked by way of a rhetorical question.

I sipped my beer and lit my cigar. In for a *chon* , in for a *won* .

I let the buzzing subside on the side of our eastern counterparts.

“Because, and please do not take this as insulting or derogatory, but as a statement of irrefutable fact, no one with the proper training nor experience has been looking. You’re historically guilty of applying the science incorrectly and letting dogma and politics guide your search, instead of the scientific method and the facts. Geology, like all natural science, is just as truth based on the facts for a capitalist as it is for a communist. Reality is not influenced by your beliefs, be they scientific or political, secular or spiritual, ‘trusted’ rather than ‘thought’; any more than by your wish that it wouldn’t rain today during a raging thunderstorm.”

Little Boy over Hiroshima was dropped with less effect.

Our Democratic People's Republic of Korea colleagues erupted into a chaotic mixture of stuttering, internecine yelling, accusations, and sputtering.

Calling for decorum, I figured that since I was this far gone, I may as well push the plunger all the way to the bottom.

“Gentlemen, I do not denigrate the science of geology as taught and practiced here in Best Korea.” I actually said that, sort of a slip of the tongue. Continuing, “However, one would not fish for Bluefin tuna from a rowboat in a pond with a fly rod. One does not hunt bear in the city with a slingshot. Just as one doesn’t search for oil and gas with mining engineers, geomorphologists, and seismologists.”

I let that sink in and after the translation, they calmed a bit and wanted to hear the rest of what I had to say. I could sense a couple was less than thrilled with what I had to say, but forging onward...

“One fishes for Bluefin tuna in the deep ocean with huge rods, reels and a specialist boat captained by someone with deep experience in hunting the elusive fish. One hunts bear in the proper environment, the taiga or forest, with the proper tools and guided by one with the education, learnedness, and experience to know how to make the hunt come out successful.”

Hit them with some analogies they can relate to and digest. Now, go for the carotid.

“Just like one does not hunt oil and gas without stratigraphers, sedimentologists, geophysicists, petrophysicists, and other oil and gas experts who have the education, experience, and knowledge to know where

to look. Knowing which environment looks most conducive to hide your quarry, if you'll pardon the pun, and how best to find them, the guys who know how to corral and de-risk them once you find them, and the engineers and technologists who know how to bring them to the surface so they can be utilized."

They had stopped being irritated and were listening in rapt attention.

"My colleagues and I have spent the last few days going over, in detail the geology of your country. There is nothing we can see that would preclude the development, entrapment, and preservation of economic quantities of oil and gas. Ture, the geology is quite complex as is the structural history of the entire peninsula. That's one other thing you will have to accept. Geology doesn't give the tiniest shit about political boundaries. One must look at the big picture, and that doesn't stop at some man-made borders. Ignore that fact at your peril, because if you continue to view the geology here as not existing across political boundaries, you are preadapting yourself for failure."

Drs. Ivan, Volna, and Morse make certain that everyone sees the ex-Soviets agreeing with the bushy-bearded, cigar-chomping American capitalist.

"So," I said, hoping to bring this little spit-balling session to a fortuitous close, "If we can have an agreement; scientific agreement, on these points, then I am certain we can find a way forward with not only this discussion but the program we can devise for the best Korean (notice phase shift?) geologists to take the project forward both scientifically soundly and economically successful."

My North Korean counterpart gets up from his seat in the conference room, goes to the keg, taps a couple of beers and walks up to the podium where I was standing.

"Thank you, Dr. Rocknocker, for saying what needed to be said", he spoke in perfect English as he handed me a beer.

I grinned and gratefully accepted the beer.

"Why, Dr. Chang Kwang-Su", I said, as that was his name, "You old fraud. You do speak English; and very well, I must add."

"Yes, almost all of us do", he relayed, "But, as you said, we are most reserved. We were more or less under orders of the 'most illustrious', to

play coy, and act as if we spoke no English.”

“I see.” I said, “I’ve worked in several FSU countries as well as Russia and saw that there as well. I guess old habits die hard.”

“That they do, Doctor.”, he replied, “But, we must now tell you the truth. We knew exactly what you said is true, and we agree. We are not as totally insulated from the outside world as some suspect.”

“Well, I was going on what your superiors related to us. Like the police that had all their toilets stolen, I had nothing else to go on.” I replied.

“Ah, ha! Quite!”, he chuckled, “We had long suspected that we were lacking in certain areas of scholarship. What you said cements that fact as it was an independent conclusion. We can now present that to our superiors with the caveat that unless we bolster work and training in these areas, the hunt of hydrocarbon resources here will be for naught.”

“I am relieved”, I said, truthfully. “I was slightly concerned that some might take umbrage to being told their science is not up to specifications. I tried to be the bearer of that bad news but deliver it gently. Here, I find you need that to use that as a truncheon to smack one’s boss upside the head and tell him that an upgrade is required. And fast.”

“Ah, so”, he replies, “We are in total agreement. Now that is out of the way, we would appreciate it if you’d help in designing a course of study for up and coming local geoscientists. Then, we can go forward with a great plan to search for oil and gas here in...Korea. Correct?”

“Absolutely”, I remarked, “You’ve got over 400 man-years of science and exploration expertise here in this room alone. Let’s shoot for the moon, so to speak. Let’s get you up to speed on scientific journals and articles that are available out there in all of academia and industry. Let’s get you communicating on a global basis. Let’s prove that you can talk science with global scientists and still not have it affect your political or nationalistic aspirations one little bit. Let’s see if we can drag you, figuratively speaking, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century.”

“Doctor”, Dr. Chang remarked, “You are the embodiment of what we were always told what Americans are. Brash, loud, confident, and evil. Except for evil, you are American as we were led to believe.”

“Hey, I take that as a compliment”, I exclaim. “You think that’s bad, I’ve got a bunch of earnest Europeans, raucous Russians, and a couple of cagey Canadians on my side as well. Before we’re finished here, we’ll have you ordering hachee, dining on Caldo Verde, snacking on salmiakki, drinking Russkaya vodka with Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, eating poutine, and rooting for the Packers.”

“Doctor, I don’t know what half of that means, but I hope it comes to pass. It sounds most fascinating.” Dr. Chang chuckles.

The rest of the day was spent with various groups crystallizing and breaking off from the main crowd; then reforming as different groups. This was good, as it showed an interest across not only national borders but across ideologies and scientific specialties.

Most everyone here spoke English with some degree of fluency, so the translators were called in only occasionally.

I made certain they were included in everything that transpired that day. I want everyone to feel ‘part of the team’. How better to show the classlessness of Western science to include everyone in on both sides of every discussion and activity?

## Chapter Six

After the third pony keg of beer was delivered, it was decided that the next few days would be spent in the conference room discussing what we thought was the best way forward.

We wanted dry-erase boards so we could start taking detailed notes, even though I was well ahead of the curve in that regard. We instead ended up with some mobile elementary-school blackboards and a pile of grainy, sooty chalk.

Leave it to Dr. Cliff to go into a discourse on the genesis of chalk and its economic importance.

Bloody carbonate geologists.

Bloody White Cliffs.

We geologists need to punctuate their conversations with pictures, so these would suffice quite well.

At 1700 hours, the official end to the workday was called; we'd meet here again tomorrow. I'm not certain by whom, but it was readily agreed upon. We were more or less on our own until 1000 the next day. I needed to spend some time in my room with my notes and update a number of dossiers, field notebooks, and other items I was using as a running chronicle.

Several folks decided to invade one of the hotel's restaurants for dinner. Some wanted to head to the casino, a couple wanted to get a massage, and others wanted to do what tourists are normally wont to do on the second day of being a foreigner in a foreign land.

I declined invitations to dinner and other activities, as I had a long writing session in front of me. I wanted to get this all in its proper place while the memories and notes were still fresh.

30 minutes later, in my room after a 25-minute wait for the elevator; I'm updating dossiers, creating several new ones, and updating my field notebooks. Suddenly, after an hour's work, I notice something is amiss.

"I don't have a drink or a cigar," I said to the four walls. "This. Will. Not. Do."

I was used to Happy Hour in Russia. Happy hour is slightly different; there are no ice cubes or orange-peel twists in the vodka. Also, it lasts all day.



I remedy that situation by finding and clipping a nice, oily oscuro cigar and digging the bourbon out from under my boxer-briefs in my dresser drawer. I heft the bottle and feel that it's significantly lighter than when I left it last night. I happen to look in the trash can and spy the wrapper for a box of my festively colored Sobranie cigarettes I obtained back in Dubai.

"Hmmm", I think, "It would appear that we have some light-fingered Cho Louies or No Louises around here. I'd best guard my supplies a little more securely."

I move all my smokeables into one of my now emptied aluminum travel cases. They lock with the stoutest of combinations and it will be readily apparent if anyone is fucking with them.

I move some of my best booze into the pretty much worthless in-room safe. With a deft application of duct tape, I seal the safe. It may not be the most secure spot on the planet, but if anyone tries anything troublesome, they'll leave an immediately recognizable record of what they were up to. It's just too obvious; they'd have to be crazy to go in after anything inside there.

My money, keys, and passports are in the safe deposit box down in the lobby that the hotel supplies for visiting dignitaries. Even so, they let me keep my shit in one of them anyway.

That handled, I spend another hour writing like a madman. I suddenly realize I'm tired of all this and need a diversion as well as some food and, of course, drink.

30 minutes later, I'm down in the byzantine basement tunnels of the hotel. It's crowded with hordes of Chinese tourists, and the casino is ground zero for the incredibly loud chatter.

I look in on the bowling alleys all three of them, and they're full. The massage parlor is hopping, although I leave my name and they promise they will call over the PA when a suitable masseuse is available. Evidently, I 'intimidate' some of the more demure ones.

I wander over to the bar, now there's a surprise, and see it's packed to the rafters as well. I decide to wait for a seat to open up on Mahogany Ridge when there's some gargling over the PA and a pair of Chinese nationals leave the bar in great haste.

I grab one of the two newly open seats, much to the chagrin of a couple of Oriental Unidentifiables (OU) who had their eye on them as well.

“Sorry, mate”, I said, “First come, first served. It’s the capitalist way.”

One of the pair grabs a seat and the other just stands there, looking annoyed unspent bullets in my direction. Forget that I’ve literally twice their size and could be an aberration as an angry American. They just order a couple of drinks, and content themselves in giving me dirty looks and probably say nasty things in their own indecipherable language about my national origin and familial heritage.

As if I gave the tiniest of rodental shits.

I fire up a cigar, as literally everyone else in the joint was smoking something more or less tobacco. However, there was a definite barnyard aroma, a regular Dairy Air, in the room. I think some of what was being smoked there was more bovine or equine in origin than botanical in nature.

With numerous hilarious attempts at Korean, pointing at a garishly photographed drinks menu, I was finally served a cold draft house steam porter and 100 milliliters of probably ersatz ‘Russian’ vodka, vintage late last Thursday. This bartender that could at least form some of the phonemes found in American English. A few. A definite few.

Since it all cost the equivalent of US\$0.50, I really didn’t care.

Apparently vodka helps flowers last longer when they're dying. But you can put vodka in anything and it'll make it better.

Being a trained observer, I rather enjoy just sitting in any old bar, smoking my cigar, drinking my Yorshch, and watching people. I try and not be intrusive and I never eavesdrop, but I like to try and think of what strange set of circumstances brought us all here together in this place at this time. It gives me writing ideas, some of which I jot down in a notebook I always carry. It also gives me a good shot of nostalgia when I look back at something I wrote some 40 or so years ago.

Yeah, old habits do die hard.

I take a drag off my cigar and set it in the ashtray in front of me on the bar as I go to correct another egregious misspelling in my notebook. I have to immediately proofread what I wrote, or I’d never recall later what the fuck I was trying to convey; especially if it’s in a noisy, smoky, or murky milieu.

Quicker than a bunny fucks, Unidentifiable Oriental #1 (UO #1) deftly reaches over, snags my cigar, and helps himself to a few mouthy puffs.

I look at him, the empty ashtray directly in front of me, him again, and then UO #2.

Since I speak no real Oriental, much less Korean, language, and my Mandarin at this point is worse than laughable; I just point to the cigar, turn out my hands and shrug my shoulders in the international “What the actual fuck, dude?” gesture.

He just smiles a gappy, toothy, and snaggle-toothed at that, grin at me and makes a point of ensuring that I see him enjoying a few more drags on my own damned cigar.

Not able to contain myself any further, I venture a “What the fuck, chuckles? That’s not your fucking cigar.”

Like gasoline being tossed on a fire-ring full of embers, they both go unconditionally incoherently insane.

Yammering, chattering, jumping up and down, and getting right into my face. They wanted me to unquestionably understand that my few words of English insulted them far more than their filching of my \$20 cigar.

OK, I’m pretty well trained in Hapkido; an oddly, given the present situation, hybrid Korean martial art. I’m at least 6 or 7 inches taller and who knows how many stone/kilos/pounds/Solar masses heavier than these two clowns. I could easily go all Gojira on their hapless asses and mop significant expanses of the floorboards with them.

Instead, I look around for the bartender. I figured since I was keeping him well supplied with Korean won via tips, and he spoke some English as well as perhaps whatever the fuck these characters were chattering; maybe he could get to the bottom of what was happening.

The bartender walks over and I ask him to ask the two unidentifiable twins why they stole my cigar.

He nods in agreement and goes on in whatever the fuck dialect was being used today by the pair.

“They say they wanted it. So they took it.” They ask, “What are you going to do about it?” the bartender relates.

I deftly reach inside my field vest, as everyone concerned ducks and covers.

I extract two fresh cigars; not a .454 Casull Magnum.

I give one cigar to the bartender and one to OU#2.

“With my compliments.” I pleasantly say.

I was well apprised of the fact that in certain places like this, the local authorities often approach foreigners with, for the lack of a better term, ‘ *Agents Provocateur* ’.

Like the Westboro Baptist “Church”, they try to get a rise out of you so you’ll lose your cool and either create a scene or take a poke at the miscreant. Then they have all the pretext they require to drag you to the local hoosegow, shake you down for every penny on your person, as well as any phones, notebooks, wallets, passports, cigars, cigarettes, etc.

Basically, they goad you into a fight, then drop the thousand-pound shit-hammer when you retaliate.

It’s all so parochial. So obviously clear as vodka; this elementary charade only raised a single eyebrow.

I’m not going to even raise my voice over a couple of cheap cigars that neither of them noticed I slipped them instead of the premium ones I was smoking.

Thus defeated, I asked the bartender to ask them if they liked the cigar.

“What do you think?” I asked in cordial English, “Too tightly rolled? Not caged enough? Too green?”

UO #2 slipped and said “It smells very good...” where he realizes he’s blown his cover.

“Yeah, I like it too.”, I replied, “So much so, I buy my own. What are your badge numbers, boys? I will be reporting this incident to Inspector P’aeng Yeong-Hwan, the head of security for the IUPGS conference to which I was invited as special scientific consultant.”

Of course, they immediately dummy up and feign illiteracy.

I say loudly and very clearly, “You bastards aren’t gonna get away with this. I mean, what is going on in this country when scumsuckers like you can get away with trying to sandbag a Doctor of Geological Sciences?”

I ask the bartender to translate, but alas, it was too late. They vamoosed when I turned to talk with the bartender.

They left so fast, they didn't notice me snapping their pictures with my ancient but trusty Nokia 3310, revised edition, during our little chat. Even with a mere 2-megapixel picture, I have enough to show the North Korean leaders of the project to get an identification and make known my displeasure of being treated like some commoner or buffoon.

They left both my cigar and the one I gave them. The bartender tucked the cigar I gave him into his pocket and stared lustily at the two remaining on the bar.

"Take'em", I said. I sure as fuck don't want them. "Just a clean ashtray and a refill, if you would be so kind," I say, as pleasantly as possible, considering the situation.

Both the unsmoked and my smoldering, as well as well-traveled, cigar disappear as quickly as minks rut. A clean, new ashtray, double beer and 'vodka' suddenly appear.

"No charge, Dr. Rock", the bartender grins, as he shoves my erstwhile high-mileage cigar between his teeth.

"OK, fair enough.", I say, "Spaseebah.", and deposit a raft of won on the bar. The pile won't be touched until after I leave in a few hours' time.

"Stranger in a strange land." I muse over a couple of further beers.

The call from the massage parlor never came, or it did and I couldn't hear it over the clamor of the casino. I went up to the hotel's Korean restaurant; had some salty soup, a sad, sad salad, and some form of funky fish, I think, for dinner. I retired that night in a slightly foul mood.

I called Es then the next morning and caught her before she retired. With a 14 hour difference between us, I was getting up at 0700 and she was getting ready to hit the hay at 2100.

I told her of the events of the day previous, and she was glad she wasn't tagging along. She would have never accused the Korean geologists of being behind the times and would have probably bent the guy's nose that swiped my cigar.

Agreed, that she'd probably be unimpressed with this place. I promised her that we'd go on a holiday when I returned from all this. It would be up to her to find out 'where,' and I'd supply the 'when' when I could.

Everything else was going along smoothly, more or less, on the home front, and I didn't want to give the local listening-in *federales* too much to say grace over, so we said our parting admirations and rang off.

Shower, shower sunrises of real vodka and citrus, a quick brush and comb, and spiff of cargo shorts and new ghastly Hawaiian shirt; 30 minutes later, back down in the restaurant for the inevitable breakfast buffet.

After what some would consider breakfast and others would consider a vague attempt at nourishment, we reconvened in the conference room precisely at 1012.

Nothing like precision with this group.

We spend the next two days going over, in various groups, what we think would be required to set forth proper the quest for oil and gas in North Korea on track. Everyone got in on the act, and we advocated for that. We needed everyone's input to make this happen. Or to even map a way forward to present to country officials. Those from the West on what was needed and those from the East to tell us what was available, and the combined wetware to make what needed to be done happen with what existed.

It took no small amount of doing, but we secured a set of maps that covered the entire country. We were watched very closely by the shiny suit squad that we did not copy, photograph or otherwise take any extraneous information from these sheets of infamy. All other maps in the country were intentionally skewed, with errors deliberately added in to confuse "interlopers, spies, or other *personas non grata*".

I made a massive stink and told them that if we didn't receive the unfuckered maps, aerial photographs and satellite imagery pronto, we're packing up and leaving that afternoon.

"We don't have time for monks resisting the carnival. We didn't come here to try and guess if the maps are correct or if our remedies will actually work on maps that say one thing and reality says something else entirely."

They hemmed and hawed, but as I made the announcement to all before lunch that if the real maps didn't appear by the time we returned from tiffin, we're gone.

And we take tiffin purty durn early round these parts, buckaroo.

No one was surprised as I when we returned and there were folio after folio of government-uncensored maps, photos, and imagery for our program. I guess they finally reasoned it would be a relatively good idea to begin to take us seriously.

We spent one whole day just going over our field geological apparatus. They had a good idea of how to use a direction-finder compass and Jacob's staff to measure sections. However, they were totally flummoxed by our Brunton Compasses, GPS systems, curiously referred to as 'position finders', notebook mapping applications, and electronic data storage and retrieval systems.

Gad. It was like being back in the 1970s before PCs were a glimmer in IBM's corporate orbs.

We spent the next week working to bring our less fortunate colleagues up to, well, not date, but at least up to the brink of the 21st century. We explained that plate tectonics, continental drift, and the precession of the continents was accepted geoscientific principles, not some arcane Capitalist or Socialist plot to undermine the quality of science in the east.

Yep. It was that mindset we had to first conquer. I think we've made great headway in that direction today.

The next Chautauqua session had us split up into two separate groups. We decided in a fit of Cesarean inquiry to 'divide and conquer'. There are two distinct *milieus* which are able to contain economic deposits of hydrocarbons: onshore and offshore.

Instead of attacking both head-on, we'd focus initially on the offshore domain. Once we had a good handle on what was going on under the East Korean Sea, the Huangai (Yellow) Sea and surreptitiously, the South Sea; we'd collaborate our findings and work to tie them in and extend them onshore.

The singular Phyongnam Basin is the one large depositional, sedimentological, and structural basin in North Korea. It is filled by the

Jeonson and Pyeongan Supergroups of sediments, which are Cambro-Ordovician and Permocarboneferous, respectively. These are good hunting grounds for oil and gas. Could be [elephant-hunting](#) country.

But before we could undertake that, we had to get 'back to basics'. That is, we had to understand and delineate the 'frame' of the Korean Peninsula. In other words, we needed to figure out how and when the peninsula came into existence.

South Korea's geology is much more complex, fortunately than that found in the North. There were nasty side comments that were due to the relative development not of the geology, but of the geologists who studied each country's geology.

It was, perhaps, a mean way of characterizing the situation. But, unfortunately, it was also probably fairly accurate.

The Korean Peninsula is characterized by huge *massifs*, which are sections of a crust that are demarcated by faults or flexures. In the movement of the crust, a massif tends to retain its internal structure while being displaced as a whole. The term also refers to a group of mountains formed by such a structure. It's basically one huge, semi-resilient rock.

The basement rocks of the Korean Peninsula consist of high-grade gneiss and schist, Paleoproterozoic Precambrian massifs, which formed in the early stage of Earth's history. These rocks are unconformably overlain by metasedimentary rocks; schist, quartzite, marble, calcsilicate, and amphibolite, of the Middle to Late Proterozoic. The Korean Peninsula is floored by a collation of about five of these huge Precambrian massifs that acted like 'microplates' during the aggregation of the peninsula. These massifs consist of thick dolostone, metavolcanics, and schist, which were intruded by Paleoproterozoic granites.

These Paleoproterozoic metasedimentary and granitic rocks underwent repeated intracrustal differentiation, followed by the events of cratonization, i.e., regional metamorphism and igneous activity, at 1.9-1.8 Ga. Sediments deposited in the peripheral basins during the Mesoproterozoic and Neoproterozoic lead to stabilization as the basement of the peninsula.

These early depositional basins formed the locus of deposition that continued on from the Proterozoic through the Phanerozoic. There are at least three, perhaps four, depositional basins in the south which are



delimited by structural zones, such as the South Korean Tectonic Line (SKTL), a huge zone of continental transform faults and forms the basis of boundary demarcation between the Okcheon and Taebaeksan basins.

The boundary between the Seochangri Formation of the Okcheon Basin and the Joseon Supergroup of the Taebaeksan Basin in the Bonghwajae area is a thrust (or reverse - slip shear zone). This thrust is presumably a relay structure (i.e. a restraining bend) between two segments of a continental transform fault (the South Korean Tectonic Line or SKTL), along which the Okcheon Basin of the South China Craton was juxtaposed against the Taebaeksan Basin of the North China Craton during the Permian–Triassic suturing of the two cratons.

In the late Proterozoic, sedimentation was initiated in basins of the Korean Peninsula, accompanied by deposition of siliciclastic and volcanoclastic sediments as well as carbonates. The massifs were submerged in the Early Paleozoic during a greenhouse period, forming a shallow marine platform and associated environments.

The Cambrian-Ordovician succession unconformably overlies Precambrian granite gneiss. It consists of mixed carbonate-siliciclastic rocks of sandstone, shale, and shallow-marine carbonates. Sedimentation was initiated in the Early Cambrian with a global rise in sea level on the stable craton of the Sino-Korean Block.

There was a major break in sedimentation during the Silurian and Devonian periods in the entire platform. During the Carboniferous to early Triassic, sedimentation was resumed in coastal plain and swamp environments with progradation of deltas.

Major tectonic events were initiated in the Triassic when the South China Block collided with the Sino-Korean Block. The eastern part of the Sino-Korean Block rotated clockwise and moved southward relative to the South China Block along the SKTL.

In the Middle-Late Jurassic, orthogonal subduction of the paleo-Pacific plate under the Asian continent caused compression and thrust deformation. A number of piggyback basins formed along the thrust faults in the east of the SKTL. At the same time, the entire peninsula was prevailed by granite batholiths, especially along the northeast-southwest-trending tectonic belt.

In the Cretaceous Period, the paleo-Pacific Plate subducted northward under the Asian continent, forming numerous extensional (left-lateral strike-slip) basins in the southern part of the peninsula and the Yellow Sea. A large back-arc basin was initiated in the southeastern part.

In the Paleogene, both the volcanic arc and the back-arc basin ceased to develop, as volcanic activities shifted eastward, accompanied by a rollback of the subduction of the Pacific plate. In the Miocene, pull-apart (right-lateral) basins formed in the eastern continental margin.

The Korea Plateau experienced continental rifting accompanied by extensive volcanism during the extensional opening of the southern offshore basin. It subsided more than 1000 m below sea level.

So, as South Korea was mis-mastered by a half-a-billion years' worth of structural tectonism, which created several depositional basins quite capable of generating and storing economic quantities of oil and gas, the scene to the north was much more quiescent.

The North was composed, from south to north, of the relict Imjingang Belt, which was an old back-arc basin between the Gyeonggi Massif to the south and the Nagrim Massif to the north. It is a paleo-subduction zone, full of volcanics, volcanoclastics and other non-hydrocarbon bearing rocks. It was mashed and metamorphosed, and basically forms a convenient boundary between the complex geology of the South and the more relaxed geology of the North.

Heading north, we come across the Pyeongnam Basin, the only North Korean basin thus far defined that could contain hydrocarbons. Further north is the huge Nangrim Massif. It's a huge block of igneous and metamorphic rocks that weather very nicely and form some spectacular scenery, but from an oil and gas economic outlook are worthless.

Offshore North Korea, there are two possible petroliferous basins. The offshore West Korea Bay Basin and East Sea Basin, along with five onshore basins could be offering exploration potential. At least ten exploration wells have been drilled in the West Sea, with some showing "good oil shows" along with the identification of a number of potential reservoirs.

The West Sea potentially has oil and has reportedly flowed oil at reasonable rates from at least two exploration wells when they were drilled and tested in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the East Sea has seen Russian exploration efforts

previously including the drilling of two wells, both of which reportedly encountered encouraging shows of oil and gas.

Onshore, there has been little exploration to date, apart from efforts by the Korean Oil Exploration Corporation and also recently by Mongolia's HBOil JSC (HBO). Among five main onshore sedimentary sub-basins, the largest is south of the capital; while unconfirmed reports point to a 1-trillion-cubic-foot (tcf) discovery in 2002.

Historically DPRK was thought to consist of five under-explored geological basins, the

- Pyongyang,
- Zaeryong,
- Anju-Onchon,
- Gilju-Myongchon and
- Sinuiju, Basins.

These basins are all located more or less along the coast, rather than inland. This also points to a certain degree of geological aptitude; as it's much easier to explore along the more populated coast than it is to venture inland. There may be more hiding in the interior of the country, it's just that no one's looked as of yet. That's difficult. Exploring along the coast is much easier.

With 3 basins supposedly proven to have working petroleum systems; 22 wells have been drilled and the majority are said to have encountered hydrocarbons with some wells testing production at 75 barrels of oil per day of light sweet crude oil. This has yet to be documented or confirmed by the Korea Oil Exploration Corp (KOEC), North Korea's state-run oil company. Yeah, our work was definitely cut out for us.

It was decided that a series of excursions offshore in one of the few remaining seaworthy, which was a real judgment call, KOEC seismic boats would be appropriate. The one we received use of was an old, decommissioned Chamsuri-class patrol boat, one Chamsuri-215( 215 -215), PKMR-215 in particular.

It had been basically stripped to the gunwales and completely retrofitted as a seismic acquisition and recording vessel. It had been renamed: “ 215 215 ”

□ □□ □□□ □□ ” or “Glory of Democratic People's Republic of Korea Science”.

In reality, it was an aging rust-bucket piece of shit that might have possibly seen better days but wasn't letting on. All the military nonsense, except the powder magazine, had been removed and a new superstructure consisting of slap-dash hunks of poorly-welded low-carbon, cold-rolled steel were erected to form a pilothouse in the area where the bridge once existed. They also built, extra haphazardly, a shooter's room, galley, cold and wet storage areas, recording room, and storage of tapes and the extra bits and pieces needed for a none-too-extended stay on the sea. It was, being charitable, almost utilitarian.

They could not make their own water, so trip times were limited to about three days in length. Besides, they didn't really have a hot galley, so it was cold, canned Chinese chow for the next 72 hours. They had a couple of fairly sturdy yardarms with heavy winches to handle the towed seismic arrays of geophones, which were of ancient heritage and showed it. These were probably appropriated back in the 80s or perhaps earlier when they first thought about opening their waters for seismic exploration.

They 'borrowed' most of the sensing and recording equipment back then from oilfield service companies and simply forgot to return it once finished. Since they burned that bridge so glowingly, they couldn't get parts nor service when things failed. Being delicate seismic sensing and recording equipment, fail they did.

So, we had to use what was leftover, or what DPRK industries could cobble together, or what could be salvaged from salt-water drenched recording equipment that hadn't been too heavily cared for over the span of the last 50 years.

We weren't terribly optimistic.

So, we load the good ship 'Rorrypop', as Viv christened the thing, and head out to the wilds of the Yellow Sea. It was an abbreviated foreign crew, as there was really nothing other than upchuck and curse me soundly for insisting the non-geophysical scientists came along.

Aboard were the two geophysicists, naturally; Volna and Activ. I was there stick-handling the logistics and hoping to help out with the geophysical signal source explosives.

Morse and Cliff, the two other geologists accompanied us on the trip, and Dax decided to go with me as he figured I'd have access to the best booze no matter where we went.

The remainder of the team, the geochemists, Erlan and Ivan, the geomechanic, Iskren, the PT, Joon, and the two REs, Viv and Grako, remained behind onshore at the hotel. They set forth cataloging what data was available; from what sources, it's vintage, veracity, and usefulness.

Augean tasks, both. Not as fecaliferous as Hercules' jobs, but still, they held their own rations of shit for each sub-team.

Heading seaward, the Yellow Sea extends by about 960 km (600 mi) from north to south and about 700 km (430 mi) from east to west; it has an area of approximately 380,000 km<sup>2</sup> (150,000 mi<sup>2</sup>) and a volume of about 17,000 km<sup>3</sup> (4,100 mi<sup>3</sup>).<sup>[4]</sup> Its depth is only 44 m (144 ft) on average, with a maximum of 152 m (499 ft). The sea is a flooded section of the continental shelf that formed during the Late Pleistocene (some 10,000 years ago) as sea levels rose 120 m (390 ft) to their current levels. The depth gradually increases from north to south. The sea bottom and shores are dominated by sand and silt brought by the rivers through the Bohai Sea and the Yalu River. These deposits, together with sand storms are responsible for the yellowish color of the water referenced in the sea's name.

Being shallow, the Yellow Sea is more perturbed by the frequent seasonal storms of the region. The area has cold, dry winters with strong northerly monsoons blowing from late November to April. I was told that the summers are wet and warm with frequent typhoons between June and October; but now all we had to contend with were swelling seas, spraying saltwater, waggling waves, and a shivering, shimmying ship.

All the navigation, communications and other shiply duties were being handled by both members of the DPRK Coast Guard Auxiliary, mostly older guys who were of great and high humorous jest; and an actual pleasure to be around. They were like their scientific cadre on this cruise, basically a political 'give a shit' attitude, and a desire to get the job done, smoke the American's cigars and drink as much as we could get away with.

The scientific portion of the cruise was being undertaken by students of the various universities and members of the North Korean national oil company. The demeanors of these characters ranged from extremely earnest

and stringently North Korean politically correct in the students and academicians, to a more relaxed ‘yeah, let’s just get the fucking job done so we can have a lot of drinks’ sort of view of the older members of the DPRK scientific team.

It was a fun admixture of cultures, ages, professions, and behaviors.

Oh, forgive me for forgetting to mention our ‘guides’, or handlers. They were also chosen, nay, ordered to come along. Landlubbers all, they were less than thrilled with the assignment and inevitable seasickness; which seemed endemic to those of Oriental extraction on the cruise. However, our guides did enjoy drinking. As we learned that alcohol is a central part of Korean culture, and they encouraged us to socialize with them when the time was appropriate.

Or, not appropriate, as I was being denounced by one of the geophysical students after only a few hours into our very first day. Hell, we weren’t even in the Yellow Sea proper. We started here at Pyongyang, down the Taedong River, over the Giva Dam, through Pushover, across Shmoeland, to the stronghold of Shmoe; into the very belly of the frothing Yellow Sea.

Most everyone, other than the foreign elements on board, were either making the trip in the bowels of the ship; nursing and cursing seasickness; or by rail, doing exactly the same thing.

“Chum it over the side, ya’ blinkered mucker!”, I admonished one bottle-greenish national. “This ain’t the Captain’s mess, Chuckles. *You* have to clean up your own spew!”

I was reveling in getting back out on the water and regaining my sea legs. I *never* get seasick.

Never.

Ever.

Be it a seismic vessel in the heaving Arctic Ocean, a pirogue in the swamps of Louisiana, my cousin’s fishin’ johnboat back in northern Baja Canada, a US nuclear submarine under the permanent pack ice of the North Pole, or VLCC in the Straits of Somaliland; I just don’t get seasick.

Airsick? Nah. Carsick? Nope. Ready to puke in a Hind-20 over the Caspian Sea during a strong local thunderstorm? Close, but no cigar.

So, I'm doing a Titanic scene recreation. Up in the very bow of the craft, standing in stark defiance of the gusting winds and blowing salt spray, smoking a huge cigar, and totting out of one of my emergency flasks while trying to hang on to my Stetson. I am also endeavoring to remain upright, field vest and really, really ghastly Hawaiian shirt billowing in the breeze.

I'm not certain if it was the cigar smoke, the wind-whipped beard, and hair, the give a fuck attitude, or the flapping of the Hawaiian shirt to which the little local geophysicist objected. But he was *pissed*. Olive-green with seasickness, rubber-kneed but still standing a good social-distance away, reading me the riot act in high-pitched Korean.

As I usually do in such delicate situations, I just smile and wave. Show them I'm mostly harmless and they either cool down or get pissed off even more and stomp off in disgust.

Either one was a winning situation for me in my book.

So, I return to doing my ship's figurehead imitation and revel in the wind, spray, and feeling of really being booming. Sure, some might complain of the cold, but not me, the sting of the salt-spray or the windburn; but I eschew what most people enjoy as 'normal weather'. I live for pushing the boundaries. I love rough weather and situations that thrust the edge of the envelope further past normalcy.

Besides, we were still in sight of land. Hell, if everything went south at this very minute, one could practically walk back to shore. I can hardly wait to see what these wigglers will do if a night storm comes up when were 100 or more kilometers from land.

The boat's thrumming heavily from both the thrust of the Soviet-era diesel engines and the craft's bludgeoning its way through the waves. Most hull designs are so the ship will 'cut' through the surface waters. This craft's flattened trihedral hull design didn't so much 'cut', as 'slam' it's way through. The boat would then crash up one side and smash down the other of each large wave we encountered. The boat would shudder whole, adding a new note of resonance along with the monotonous one-note song of the aged Russian diesels.

The spray would fly, the boat would convulse, time would seem to freeze until we bashed into the next wave. The captain of the vessel took his orders very seriously. "Get to coordinates *XXX* and *YYY* by the most expedient

means possible.” If that meant charging, full-throttle into the teeth of the oncoming monsoon-force wind while we were traversing the worst kelp jungle I’ve seen this side of the Sargasso Sea; well, piss on it, full steam ahead.

“Fuck it”, I thought, “Not my pony, not my show. Let’s see how this plays out.” While I light a new cigar and search for Emergency Flask #2.

After I’d been upbraided by the geophysical student for transgressions still unknown, Cliff and Dax wander out to ask me what the hell I was up to.

“Have you gone completely barmy?”, Cliff asked. “It’s a full gale out here and you’re standing in the teeth of it like it was a warm, sunny Sunday in Piccadilly.”

“Nope, not at all”, I replied, “Just reveling in the delights of an angry atmosphere.”

“He’s nuts, I told you”, Dax smirked, “He’d go anywhere and do anything to have a cigar.”

“Not just a cigar, me old mucker”, I smiled and waved my second emergency flask under his nose.

“Figures”, they both respond in unison.

Dax departs and returns mere seconds later with paper Dixie-style cups he liberated from the ship’s one head. We are going to do our very best to extend the lifetime of the onboard water supply for our scientific and military friends. I pour them each a cup full.

“Whoa, Doc”, that’s gotta be 100 milliliters!” Cliff objects.

“As the Siberian saying goes: One hundred versts, roughly a hundred miles, is no distance. A hundred rubles isn't worthwhile money. And a hundred grams of vodka just makes you thirsty. Prosit!” I say in reply.

We retire to the overhang on the fantail of the boat. It’s a sunshade and keeps the worst of the weather out for the lightweights on the cruise. I decided we’d withdraw there to keep these Dominionites out of the worst of the wind and sea spray.

“Rock”, Cliff notes, “You are a complete throwback. You do not belong here in the 21st century. You need to find a way back to the Calabrian and



ride herd on the continental Neanderthals. Give them the gift of distilling and tobacco agriculture, and you'd reframe the world."

Dax agrees, but notes if I do find a way back, he and Cliff would be selected against.

"Good point", Cliff agrees. "Rock, stay here. We need your expertise now more than ever. Plus your ready supply of strong drink and cigars."

"Glad to know that I'm truly appreciated around these parts." I chuckled slightly acridly.

"Ah, Rock. Buck up. You know we're only takin' a piss." Cliff says.

"Aim it starboard. Don't want it blowin' all over the seismic gear", I reply, laughingly.

The trip continued, and I found a not-bolted-to-the-deck chair and moved it outside under the shade back by the boat's fantail. I refreshed my emergency flasks and replenished my cigar supply. I'm not about to sit inside and listen to the wails and gnashing of teeth of the landlubber crowd, the patter and timor of the geophysical throng as they titter and argue about array design, nor the military hut-hutting all over the fucking boat.

A couple of times, one or more of our 'handlers' would venture out as I had the only supply of readily available smokeables and drinkables. Oh, we had food, lots of beer, soju, some knock-off vodka, and some of that *faux* homebrew bourbon for later once the workday was declared over; but for now, I was the one and only dispensary.

We'd have some random chats while they screwed up their courage to ask me for a smoke or a tot of drink. I brought several bundles of really cheap-ass cigars for just such occasions; besides, I figured one of my Camacho triple-maduros would have them chumming for the remainder of the trip. I had also many, many cartons of Sobranie pastel-colored cigarettes, and many more cartons of knock-off Marlboros I bought at the duty-free when we hit town.

It was chucklingly funny to see these harsh, military, no-nonsense characters walking their duty beats smoking pastel green, lavender, and mauve cigarettes.

We got bogged down a couple of times when one or more of the ship's twin screws fouled with kelp as we tried to put some distance between us and the

shore. Each time, one really dejected low-ranking young Coast Guard character would go over the side with a rope around his waist and a knife in his hand to free the props. I was going to object as this was moronically dangerous; but, again, not my pony, not my show. This called for full proper tethering and SCUBA gear.

They had neither aboard.

Welcome to the wonders of a centrally planned economy.

## Chapter Seven

Well, when the props fouled the third time, I suggested we call it a day, as we'd already made some 32 sea-kilometers. We were out on the fringes of the worst of the kelp forest beds, and after a good night's sleep, we'd be ready to deploy bright and early and get some seismic data acquired and recorded.

But, first, there was the first night aboard ship. In a rusty old tin-can with few creature comforts, as the annual winter monsoon winds wane and the seas actually begin to settle slightly.

I took that as both good omens. The bitching and kvetching I heard from the locals about the 'abominable weather they had to endure', even from the Coast Guard types, really struck me as uproariously funny.

I just chalked it up to being sequestered from the rest of the world for so long. Put these characters in the path of a Midwestern tornado, East Indian summer monsoon, or Siberian blizzard, and they'd shit themselves blind. I didn't really think too much of it, although it became somewhat of a game when the imperialistic foreigners tried to one-up each other with horror stories from excursions past.

"No shit", Dax said, "We were snowed in for a full fortnight."

"No!" several of us recoiled in mock horror.

"Oh, yah, hey." Dax continued, "It's just great when blizzards snap the power lines, and all the toilets freeze. The house cat didn't die until we burned up all our wood. Considering we ate her raw, she tasted pretty good..."

Several of our handlers, a few in the Coast Guard and most of the Korean scientists reacted rather badly to Dax's story; especially when it had been gorily translated.

Seeing this, Dax stood up, got the soju bottle, and asked if anyone needed a top-up. I asked while puffing away on a large Jamaican cigar if anyone needed a smoke.

At this point, Dax was winning. He had seven of the assembled crowd run to the rail to relieve themselves of our canned Chinese dinner.

Not ever one to shrink from a challenge, I related my second-hand story of my Brother-in-law, who was in the US Coast Guard for years and years. I waited for the green crowd to re-join us and regain what remained of their composure. I figured the quasi-military national Coast Guardians here would appreciate the tale.

Mine wasn't a gory or shocking tale, just one of the incredible water conditions off the coast of California.

I waited until everyone was settled, drink in hand, and smokin' 'em if you got 'em.

"Well", I said, "It was on board a ship much like the one we're currently on," I said as a rascal wave broke over the railing in counterpoint. "About the same size as this vessel, but with smaller wheels. You know these Coast Guard shallow-water boys", I chuckled. Always meaning to jab one group or another in the place where I know it stings.

Yeah, I'm a real bastard that way sometimes.

The Korean Coast Guardians sneered hardly at me; but not too hard. They liked my cigars, cigarettes, and open disbursement policy too much.

"Yeah, anyways", I continued, "He was offshore California in one of the US Coast Guard cutters. It was a boat about 26 meters or so in length. They were out doing search and rescue after a mega-nasty storm blew in from the west and scuttled a sailing regatta race."

I was drawing them in with my 'just so' story, nice and easy, until...

"Yeah, there were several capsized monohulls, catamarans and trimarans. Damn, these things were fucking yachts. Owned by rich idiots that almost knew how to sail but didn't know enough to get out of the way of a fucking severe storm..."

I really had their attention with 'soaking the rich'.

"Well, the waves grew and grew, but my Brother-in-laws's boat was built to handle severe weather. These patrol and rescue boat has the capability to roll over 360 degrees and self-right within 30 seconds. Like right now, you'd never even notice this degree rock and roll", I said as I demonstrated with my cigar, tracing out tighter and tighter rolls, and higher degrees of rocking and rolling.

“They were approaching a capsized trimaran, but the waves kept growing and growing...” I said, leading by example and having them watch me with unblinking attention.

“The waves grew and grew, and normally you’d take these head-on. But that was impossible, because when afternoon came it was slashin’ rain, in the face of a hurricane west wind. The boat rolled to the left, heeled, almost keeled, a then rolled the other way just as quickly.” I noted.

They followed me as I timed it with the heavings of our own boat, to the left...to the right...

“Then, just as they were about to reach upon the trimaran, a rogue wave! Out of nowhere”, I said, rocking and rolling along with our own little boat, “ **BAM !** Hit amidships! It didn’t roll once, it rolled twice!” I made great and magniloquent gestures of a tiny boat being savaged by a monstrous rogue sea wave.

I stood up, blew a great blue cloud of smoke towards the poop deck, and said, loudly, “Rolled over once. A full 360! Then rolled right over again. A full 720 degrees!” as I demonstrated what happened with my cigar and drink.

The eyes following me rolled and rolled as well. Some straight back into the owner’s head and some to the left, some to the right...it was like ‘Loose Slots’ night in Vegas, they were rolling and rolling.

And then racing for the rails. Topside to deliver the remains of their hearty canned dinners.

“Beat you, Dax!” I smiled as I sat back down, “I got nine with that at one. And two of them were Coasties!”

“Did that really happen?” Ivan asked.

“According to my Brother-in-law. But he’s an engineer if you know what I mean...” I smiled.

We concluded story night as we had drifted free of the kelp forest and the Captain of the boat decided he’d risk an anchorage for the night. The weather was ameliorating, the seas calming themselves down, and the wind dropping a couple of notches on the Beaufort Scale.

“Well, gents”, I said, “I need some air. The aroma down here of Chinese Aplo™ for dinner, those who didn’t make it to the rails, and the solitary head for the entire crew has lost its charm. If you’ll excuse me”, I said as I grabbed a bottle of ersatz vodka, and several cans of Taedonggang beer, “I’ll be on the aft deck; in my comfy chair and contemplating the wonder of it all.”

With that, I ventured up the stairs and out onto the aft deck.

Dax naturally followed and he found his own not-bolted-down deck chair. We had a constant flow of visitors, foreign and nationals alike. It was shaping up to be a fine night for being out under the stars, there was no light pollution at all. We sat in our chairs, drank our drinks, smoked our smokes, and argued the finer points of astronomy as seen from this part of the world.

I had several side chats with the scientists and academicians from the Korean side. They all had one thing on their minds. Well, one thing after cigars and cigarettes. They wanted Western scientific journals. They were actually trying to bribe me to get those copies, any age, any subject; of Science, AAPG Explorer, and SEPM Proceedings, anything of Western science as it is today. I said they were welcome to a couple of copies of Science and SPE journals I had brought with as an afterthought, for free. With 900 won to the dollar, they needed every won they could get. I wasn’t about to take anything for the free dissemination of knowledge.

However, if they saw it fit to buy me a drink or seven, I wouldn’t object.

In reality, I’d buy those as well.

We made secret pacts to meet at the hotel-casino the night before we left, whenever the fuck that would be. We had a lot of work before us as it stands. It won’t be for a few weeks, I reminded them.

They had no problem. If I could ask the other in the team if they’d do likewise, the appreciation would be palpable.

Great. Now I have to go get my field notebooks and make some more new entries.

Dax cratered around 0100. I elected to stay the night and sleep under the stars as the boat slowly rocked one way and rolled the other. It was quiet, dark as a tomb, and brilliantly lit up by the stellar backbone of the night once the clouds fumbled out. Tomorrow looked as if it were to be bright and

sunny if the gentle westerlies had anything to say about the next day's conditions.

The next day dawned early, bright, and ridiculously sunny as it usually does when the monsoons have departed and it had stopped raining.

"OK.", I thought, "Time for a hearty breakfast. For someone else. I wonder what's available here."

I ventured down to the cold galley and there were several boxes of dry Chinese breakfast cereal, "Shredded Tweet" and the like, some sort of obviously aged bakery, and a case of Taedonggang beer.

"Hmmm", I mused out loud, "Beer and rice crispies. Breakfast of champions."

Dax walks in, rubbing his eyes. He sees me drowning my rice cereal in foamy ersatz milk.

"Reminds me of field camp!" I smiled as I chowed on the morning's offerings.

After our 'hearty' breakfast, all the scientific parties gathered in the main stateroom. It was cramped, but the walls were magnetic and we could hang maps, well, charts actually since we're well offshore now, and plots the day's course.

Out in the Yellow Sea, we were supposedly over a subsurface, and by dint of being offshore, submarine, dome. Salt dome? Unlikely. Probably more of a [shale dome](#), which isn't a bad thing when hunting for oil and gas.

Looking at the charts, I ask the locals what our current position was relative to the domal uplift.

After several long moments of silence, I asked again.

"Umm, guys", I said, "If you're not going to be forthcoming with something as simple as positional data, then turn this boat 180<sup>0's</sup> and take us back to shore. I am fed up, as are my team, with this tight-holing of the simplest of data when you are the knotheds that asked us here for help. We get paid either way, and I for one wouldn't mind being paid triple to sit in the hotel's basement and drink"

After telling the translator to translate that last part literally, I sat back, pulled out a really nasty cigar, and went through all the threatening moves

of firing it up in the enclosed cabin.

“You will have to excuse us”, came the reply from one of the elders, “We are not used to dealing with *oegugseon* [foreigners].”

“Are you used to following orders?” I asked brusquely.

“Of course!” came the near-unanimous reply.

“Great. Then consider this an order: You will relay the appropriate information when asked by any Westerner on this cruise. Consider it as coming from the Supreme Leader of this expedition.” I noted.

Using the term ‘Supreme Leader’ was both a bow to their current bad-hair-cut in charge and my desire to let them know I was serious as a kick to the scrotum about the whole fucking deal.

There were a couple of gasps and some consternation talk, but eventually, one brave soul got up, walked over to the chart, and pointed to our relative location.

“There”, I added, “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Didn’t hurt in the least, did it?”

There were a few chuckles amongst our national colleagues, so I figured that was at least a little progress.

“OK, then”, I continued, “Volna? Ack? You’re up to bat.”

I turned the proceedings over to the geophysicists. They would devise the configuration of the towed array, our speed, direction, charge size, which was based on depth, and all the other geophysical flips and twists one has to do in order to acquire the best data.

This shit doesn’t come cheap. The Mesozoic-Paleozoic marine residual basin in the South Yellow Sea where these domes live is a potentially significant deep potential hydrocarbon reservoir. However, the imaging of the deep prospecting target is quite challenging due to the specific seismic-geological conditions. In the Central and Wunansha Uplifts, the penetration of the seismic wavefield is limited by the shallow high-velocity layers (HVLs) and the weak reflections in the deep carbonate rocks. With the conventional marine seismic acquisition technique, the deep weak reflection is difficult to image and identify. We confirm through numerical simulation that the combination of multi-level impulse source (i.e., explosive) array



and extended cable used in the seismic acquisition is crucial for improving the imaging quality.

With that, we're going to be recording a minimum of four stacks, with a receiver interval of 25 meters. The array will have a shot interval of 50 meters, with a 25 meter near offset, and a 2500 meter far offset. We will attempt to record 180 channels, off-end, with a sampling period of 0.5 seconds, and a record length of 5 seconds. We'll sail the same course 4 times to verify previous records and attempt to add 'fold', i.e., extra data from the same point, to the overall records.

That's the plan, at least.

Loads of preparation, logistics, and execution.

After a half an hour or so, both Volna and Ack are finished with the national scientists.

They set down their notebooks, pens, notes, and pointers; walk out of the meeting room and directly over to the galley.

"Hungry, fellas?" I inquire.

"Rock?", Ack asks, "You have explosives here, right? Sink us. Just fucking sink us right now." As he pours himself and Volna a stiff shot of real vodka.

"Uh, oh. Problems in Dreamland?" I ask, utilizing the derogatory name for the geophysical domain of exploration data.

"Un-be-fucking-believable.", Volna adds.

"Your colloquial American is coming along well, Volna." I snickered a bit.

"I learn from you", he spat, "Cannot believe this. They don't record while underway. They tow single array and stop. Then drop dynamite over side. They record. Then they do it again. Claim this gives them good fold. This is bullshit. You said devise program. HA! Take us to shore and let me teach them the fucking basics of geophysical acquisition. Then in a few years, we come back and do it right."

"Oh, fuck", I reply, wincing, "That bad?"

"Oh, no", Ack continues, "It's worse." As he down 100 milliliters of booze in one draught and pours another for Volna and is own self, "No on-board demultiplexing. No on-board pre-processing. No-onboard QA/QC. No on-

board anything. It's fucking hopeless. Sink us, I'd rather take my chances with the sharks."

"They *can't* do all that stuff or they *won't* do all that stuff," I asked, expecting the worst.

"Oh, it *might* be possible, with this museum-grade crap they call a computer they have on-board. It's just time-consuming, tricky, and will need constant attention. But with this raft of sad-sacks, flub-a-dubs and third rate hobbyists?" Ack and Volna agree as one.

"Consider it job security", I replied, "How about this? One test loop and we use that data to do what's necessary; just once. Then we can say we've shown them the way. After that, I'll leave it up to the National scientists."

"Good thing we have 2 full days, Rock", Volna said, "Because we do a single AC (acquisition) run, it'll take the rest of the time to show these buggers how it's done."

"Ack? You agree?" I asked.

Ack agreed, in spades.

"OK, gentlemen", I said, "Let's make it so. About time, too. I haven't blown anything up in a couple of weeks. I'm getting antsy. Let's go tell them the good news."

"NO! WE REFUSE!" was the cheery response from the nationals when Ack, Volna, and I laid out the rather lengthy program for the next couple of days.

"OK. Someone tell the Captain to head for home. We're done here." I calmly told our handlers and the translators.

Panic in Pyongyang.

Immediately, there is this hue and cry about how this was not supposed to be how this trip was going to work. This was to be an acquisition trip only. This was to be a one-off to show Best Korea geophysical prowess. This was supposed to be data gathering trip *on* the Western scientists...

Oops.

That last one was a bit of a mistake.

I turn to one of the translators and ask them to re-translate that last part, just in case I was hearing imaginary things.

“Oh, yes”, he replied, “He said they were here to gather data on the Western Scientists as well as offshore data.”

“Is that a fact?” I reacted. “Please tell them I need to see all my team members on the fantail immediately if you would. Sorry, translators and nationals not included in this little meeting.”

We reconvene on the fantail a few minutes later. I walk in on this little conclave with cigar and drink in hand.

“OK, gents”, I say, puffing a huge blue cloud, swigging a tot, “Here’s what I think we, as responsible international scientists, should do in this regrettable situation. We were asked to come here, with provisions that we would not be under cynosure, observation, or surveillance. Given ‘Open and Free Access’, no questions asked. We were to be treated as “esteemed guests”. This is obviously a load of dingo’s kidneys. I think we need to get as creative as possible and do whatever we can to provide as much deliberate misinformation to these characters to annoy, amaze, or disgust them as much as possible. Comments?”

There’s a general buzz, but no real dissention. After a few moment's discussion, Dax suggests we get a load of XXXXL condoms, and leave them around packaged as “Texas Medium”.

“That’s the spirit”, I reply. “Anyone one else up for a little Psychological Operations on our not-so-clever-nor-truthful hosts?”

We all agree that we will, in our own little way, start a campaign of deliberate misinformation, misdirection, and general petty bullshit nastiness for our hosts to discover and by which be dismayed.

Everyone’s in agreement. This trip has been a rotund bale of jeers from the get-go.

Promises made, promises broken. Itineraries approved then inexplicably disapproved. We make requests, they accede; and then nothing ever happens. It’s most frustrating.

We’re tolerating a lot of horse, bull, cow, and assorted other farmyard excrements; all in the name of international harmony and scientific goodwill. This has been an outgoing one-way street for too long. We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore.

“Hellfire and Dalmatians!” I growl, growing angrier every minute I think about the subject, “We need to take the high, low, and middle ground on this offensive. Nothing too overt or obvious; however we need to jank these bastards good. But they can’t realize they’re being janked...!”

Ack cuts in.

“The esteemed Dr. Rock is right. Psychotic...but absolutely right. We got to take these bastards. We could fight them with conventional weapons. That could take years...cost millions of lives. In this case... I think we have to go all out. I think this situation absolutely requires...a really futile and stupid gesture... be done on somebody's part.”

There’s a general buzz among the assembled.

“And we're just the guys to do it.”

Shouts and catcalls of deep agreement.

“Operation ‘Confound-a-Korean’” is now enacted.

“About fucking time!”

“Let’s do it!”

“Dissem gonna be bery messy! Me no watchin!”

“OK, I think, “Who’s the prequel-series wiseass?”

“OK, gentlemen”, I continue, “We continue with our scientific duties. No fucking around there. But, when it comes to...interpretation...opinion...or personal viewpoint; let’s go full impede. Dazzle them with brilliance or baffle them with bullshit.”

We all agree and after a couple of quick rounds of old thought provoker, we realize this trip has just taken a hard left into Wackyland. We will have to let our comrades onshore know of this, but that can wait until we return. Right now, we all have jobs to do. Real jobs, serious jobs, covert and sneaky jobs...

So, it’s back to the recording shack as we lay out the plans for the next couple of days.

Volna begins: “OK, listen up you primitive screwheads. We’re going to assemble and layout a recording array that’s called a Meisenheimer Triplet. You do know what a simple Meisenheimer Triplet is, don’t you?”

There's a slight murmur from our national friends, but in the end, they all plead ignorance.

“Right. Thought so. A Meisenheimer Triplet is a central towed array flanked by two shorter, subparallel flanking sub-frammitz arrays. We will assemble this array on-board, even though it's probably going to take every ounce of silver solder and electrician's tape you've got. The amount of data received is orders of magnitude greater than any single Sheriff-sonde array, like the ones you been using.”

Suddenly, there are nods and murmurs of agreement.

“Right”, Volna smiles sinisterly to me, “With that, we'll need to devise an explosive package, well, actually, a series of explosive packages based on the harmonia of the pre-bottom fore-sets, water depth, tow vehicle velocity, water column density, and decomposition coefficients of the said water column. Oh, yeah. Fish too.”

Volna is really getting into the spirit of the affair.

“Who is your explosives engineer?” Ack asks, “He's going to have to do some serious number-crunching with all the pre-blast data we'll need to supply. “

One quick translation and there's nothing but long faces and querulous looks from our national crowd.

“We have no explosives engineer”, the head Best Korean geophysicist laments. “Explosives are very, very heavily regulated by the government. That's why we have several Government Observers on board. They handle the explosives.”

“Oh?” Ack remarks, “Are they fully up to speed on the Barnard-Reichmann equations for hydro-displacement of serial charges? Which subset of the marine rarefication coefficients do they employ?”

“Ummm, don't know.” was the answer.

“Don't know? Well”, Volna continues, “Then, they must be pretty good with the Langefors-Kihlström formulae, right?”

“No. Not as such.” Came the response.

“I see”, Ack sighs, “Well, then, I guess they must utilize the Il'yushin algorithms then. OK, it's a bit old school, but they should still work.”

“Ah. Well. No.” was the rejoinder they offered.

“Well, then what the fuck do they use?” Volna explodes, “A modified Ambraseys-Hendorn model? Ghosh-Damen 1? Ghosh-Damen 2? Indian Fargin Standard? Prejaculated Rai-Singh protocols, fer’ chrissake? Which?”

Nothing but shaking heads and wringing hands.

“They take a case of dynamite, wire it up, and throw it overboard with a long fuse.” Was the eventual answer. “That’s why we stop to record.”

Long, exasperated sigh later, “Jesus Q. Tapdancing Christ on a crème cracker. No wonder you never get anything done.” Volna continues, “You characters are in luck. You just happen to be so lucky to have an internationally-renowned Master Blaster right here on board ship today.”

Volna turns the crowd over to me, “Doctor? Do your damnedest. And good luck.”

“Thanks, Volna”, I say, cigar in one hand, stalwart drink in the other, “OK, guys. Here’s the deal. When it comes to explosives and explosive design, I’m the hookin’ bull. *No one* has authority over me. Not the Captain. Not the boson’s mate. Not the Captain’s Consort even. Nor the guys in the cheap shiny suits. What I say, goes. No exceptions. No hesitation. We *green* or are we going back to shore?”

“ *Cholog* ?” they ask.

“Yes. ‘ *Cholog* ’. Green. Are we understanding one another? Are we all in agreement? *Are you fuckin’ diggin’ me, Beaumont?* ”

There’s some quick back and forth in Korean, a lot of seeming bad noise. Even the shiny suit squad and Coasties join in the fun.

“Grudgingly, we agree. *Green* as you say, Doctor Rock. You are the one in charge.” Came the head national’s reply.

“Splendid. I’m in charge of the charges.” I chuckle, puffing an enormous cloud of expensive Oscuro smoke, “Volna, Ack; please get me the required parameters. I’ll be in the ordnance locker to see what we’re working with here. C’mon fellas, chop-chop!”

Volna and Ack take their select set of geophysical wishers and wannabes while I get the rest of the locals, the shiny suit squad in reserve, but in tow.

I head off to the ordnance locker.

Dax runs behind “Hey! Wait for me.”

“We have to”, I snigger a reply, “We’re going to need a drinks runner.”

“Marvelous...” was the one-word response.

We get to the locked ordinance locker. It’s one of the few original structures remaining on the ship. The boat was torn down almost to the waterline and re-built for seismic acquisition, but they had enough brains to realize that the source of the seismic signals was usually explosive in nature. Dinoseis and Mini-Sossie were closed books to them.

Therefore, the locker remained intact, however grudgingly.

“Whew! And what a locker.” I whewed. “And what a lock. OK, who’s got the keys?”

There are general hemming and hawing and no one seems to know where the keys for the ordinance locker are kept.

“Well, gents”, I say, pointedly, “I would suggest that one or more of you toddle off and fucking find the goddamn keys or this will turn out to be a very short and unproductive trip, indeed.”

A while later, a bit longer than I personally care for, the boat’s Captain wanders up, all a-sowl and generally pissed-off looking.

“Who here needs the key to the explosives locker?” He asks in his Captainly, no-nonsense manner.

There’s more muttering and murmuring, but eventually, all fingers point toward me.

The Captain looks at me.

“Hello.”

He’s giving me the once over with a LASER stink eye. I don’t know which irritated him the most; the lit cigar, the drink, the Stetson, Hawaiian shirt, cargo shorts, Scottish knee socks or field boots.

“And who the hell are you”? He asks, oh, so wrongly, through an interpreter.

I stand up, fully puffed to full mammalian threat posture and say in a loud steady voice;

“I’m THE Doctor Rocknocker, the *MOTHERFUCKING PRO FROM DOVER* !, that’s who.”

Since I had a good 6 inches and way too many kilos on him; my loud, American and very un-oriental answer took him completely by surprise.

His eyes got as big as dinner plates and he shakily held out the ring of keys for the explosives locker.

“Why thank you very much”, I said, bowing in his direction ever so slightly. Wasn’t his fault he wasn’t totally clued in on *all* the recent goings-on aboard his vessel.

I toss the keys to Dax, “Here, earn your keep.” I snickered.

Dax deftly fields the keys, chuckles back, and begins the game of ‘which key for which lock’?

I thank the Captain and explain that I’m the *de facto* leader of this special education class, and make some pointed, mild epitaphs about landlubbers, national scientists, and the cargo of the totally clueless on board.

He sees I’m not a total boor and relaxes some. We haven’t really had a real introduction, so I grab a translator and engage the Captain in a short, though insightful conversation.

Cigars were exchanged. Handshakes were as well.

Seems he’s just as aggravated by these know-it-alls who really know-fuck-all. We see eye to eye and part friends once Dax finally figures out the combination to the weapons locker.

“Holy fuck!” I exclaim, “Now *that’s* a door.” I say looking at the slowly-opening covering of the weapon’s portico. Fully five solid inches of solid steel. Triple reinforced hinges. Deadman’s latches. Bringles-jams and solid, non-decabulated cast-steel cross-members.

Just the thing to contain an errant blast and send all that excess energy skyward instead of into the bowels of the boat.

OK, bonus points for that design feature.

I look inside, but it’s dark and fragrant as the inside of an irritated oyster in the bottom of the Tonga-Kermadec Trench.

Dax fumbles around and finds the light switch.



FLIP

“Hmmm.” I hummed. “Well, we’re all set for dynamite, I see.”

Case after case after case of leaking, cheap-ass Chinese knock-off sort-of Du Pont-style 50% dynamite. Box after box of Pseudo-Dyno-Nobel blasting caps. Delaminating, unwinding spools after spool of “PrimUcord”. Sticky “Korea” brand silk-woven coated Demolition Wire.

“Gads.” I sigh. “What a nightmare. Either this stuff goes off when you give it a dirty look or it doesn’t go off at all.”

Dax looks to me, “So, the trip’s a bust. Is that what you’re saying?”

“If we don’t find something that’ll work, probably,” I reply. “This shit’s worthless.”

We continue to search after I shoo everyone but Dax out of the locker. It’s damp and musty in here, smelling disconcertingly of kerosene, gherkins, and old sardines. That’s one sure sign of dynamite going bad. I warn Dax to be extra careful, that this stuff hasn’t had the best of handling. We could be in for an unexpected surprise.

So, we redouble our efforts and are much more circumspect.

Knock-off this and fake-ass that.

All Chinese in origin. It might have worked one day; but after sitting in here, unattended, unturned, and uncared for? I’m ready to both literally and figuratively pull the plug on this whole fiasco.

Dax is all smiles.

“Doctor?” Dax asks, “What is it that would make you happy?”

“A nice fishing boat, a huge never-emptying bank account, endless cigars, and a comfy chair back in the north of Baja Canada in a tavern on a good fishing lake,” I replied.

“Well”, Dax smiles, “I can’t do that, but how about this?” as he opens a cleverly hidden door.

I look in, let my eyes adjust to the low-light scenario to see no lakes, no huge bank accounts, nor fishing boats; but what I do see makes me smile wide.

It's a sub-locker full of familiar Made-in-the-USA, True Blue, American-manufacture *cyclo-trimethylene-tri-nitramine*, or Good Ol' C-4 explosive. Block after lovely hexahedral block of the stuff.

"Dax", I say, "Take a gold star out of petty cash. You've just saved the mission."

"I'll settle for a tall vodka and one of your cigars", Dax smiles.

"Later", I say, "We now have a little job which to attend."

With C-4, designing the impulse charges is seriously a walk in the park. They're already waterproof, so all I need is water depth and the number of seconds to which they want to record data. I can bundle a series of blocks of the stuff, charge them with a couple-three or four, just in case, blasting caps, and connect them with stout lengths of demolition wire. These will be dragged, with a 'Herring Dodger', to control depth, behind the boat as *we are underway*.

It's a novel idea, I know. One that's only been in use in the west for about 60 years.

We'll drag a daisy chain of C-4 packets. One after another, individual charges in the packets will detonate milliseconds apart. I can bundle the packets so that we can run a charge string of up to 12 discrete packets which will attenuate the amplification of the arrhythmic flux, I tell one of my Korean onlookers.

With this set-up, we can record data for literally sea-miles.

First, we will *moosh* the C-4 into a flattened, semi-hydrodynamically stable pancake or airfoil, OK, hydrofoil, shape; wire three or five of them together, charge them, then repeat.

Depending on what parameters Volna and Ack supply, the chain will just be a number of similar packets, trailing one after the other, detonating from back to front; down below the hydrophones, but well above the seafloor.

We know that the hydrophones will be at or very near the surface, but we need to know, explicitly, the basal bathymetry of the area we're about to shoot. Wouldn't do anyone any good if we drove over a seafloor hump and dragged the C-4 over it to have it detonate prematurely.

Or not at all.

So, we need to plot our course and sail it today while we get the hydrophone arrays built and we image the seafloor where we're going to do some blasting. After that, it'll probably be an all-nighter to create the blasting strings so we can spend the next day recording, and then head for home as we're nearly out of victuals and potables.

At least, that's the plan.

I convene a quick meeting and we plot a course on the latest charts. 30 kilometers of recording.

Shit, that's going to be a lot of explosives. Doable, but a pain.

Remembering the quality of the recording equipment, I suggest we do a test run in the morning of just 5 kilometers. If that works, and we can up it in increments.

Dax, Sagong the head Korean geophysicist, and I go to visit the Captain.

We visit the Captain and lay out our plans. He has no objections, as were in Best Korean waters and there are no obstacles out here like sunken wrecks, kelp forests, American aircraft carriers, or other impediments.

With that, we tell him to align the ship and let us know when he can begin doing the recon sortie.

He says that he can do that immediately, and before we're out of the pilothouse, we're recording bathymetric, i.e., depth, data. The technology's not much different, nor advanced, than a standard Lake Winnebago fish finder, so that's one disaster sorted.

We are sailing along in a series of parallel straight lines, which when the data are played back and deconvoluted, will give us a good idea of the bathymetry which we've been motoring over. It'll basically give us both a depth map and a surface, ok, bottom, map of the seafloor above which we're sailing. A little basic submarine hyperbolic quantum trigonometry and well, we have the data we need to plug into the various equations to see what we'll require when we want to record seismic data to 5000 milliseconds.

With that, there's not much else to do until we have the survey map. I dragoon Dax and Cliff into helping me inventory the explosives bunker.

“The hell with the dynamite, PrimUcord, and other Oriental-Knockoff Horseshit”, I instruct my helpers, “Let’s just count up the C-4, and see what our tally is. Oh, yeah, give me a tally of the blasting caps. Gotta use those ratty bastards, they’re the only actuators here I sort of, kind of, trust.”

With Dax, myself, and Cliff, we’re done in less than an hour. I decide that I’ll be the keeper of the keys and take them back to the Captain my own self. Rules of engagements, chain of command and all that hogwash.

I hand the keys over to the Captain and instruct the co-pilot to make an entry in the logbook that I returned the key to the Captain, this date, this time.

“By the book. It’s not just a good idea, it’s the law.” I muse.

## Chapter Eight

I wander back to the fantail to see how the Meisenheimer Triplet arrays are progressing.

It looks like an all-night welding shop had opened up on the boat's fantail. The arrays are going to be comprised of a central axis array of 30 hydrophones. Offset to the left and right of the central array, at scientifically, mathematically, and statistically precise distances, will be two offset lateral arrays of 45 hydrophones.

That is a large number of hydrophones; especially for this project, given its terms and conditions. Cabling all this is proving to be a pain in the ass.

“Well”, I suggest, “Why not use a couple of those spare channel marker buoys as head float points? Run the cables from each leg of the array to the buoys, then worry about constructing your crossbars.”

Volna and Ack consider that for a few minutes, then reply, “Well, Rock, that might work. However, there are two issues: can this tub pull an entire array? If not, well, that's fucked and scuttled. Plus, what can we use to keep the arrays positioned and infinitely orthogonal to each other?”

We called for a brain mashing session. Everyone was invited.

We found that there were some lengths of low-modulus spring steel on board. It was used for one project or another then promptly forgotten. They were in approximate 15 foot (~5 meter) lengths, and if we got creative, we could gin up some very tall, but thin triangular cross arms, each impinging upon the central lateral array. It would be self-righting and self-centering. Sort of like a huge, low angle snowplow, but in reverse.

Since I had the explosives all ready to go and could handle a welder, I volunteered Dax and Cliff to help me create the Triplet framework. Cliff proved to be a natural on the angle grinder, and Dax was a most capable hand with running and finding tools, welding goggles, arc electrodes, and fresh drinks.

We had the framework welded up in less than an hour, even with adding some extra shackles for auxiliary lines in case the main tow lines parted.

Be prepared. It's not just a good motto, it's a plan.

It was basically a 30+ foot wide piece of spring steel from which trailed the three streaming arrays of hydrophones. The cables would run back down the spine of the spring steel framework, to the channel markers holding it all above mean sea level. We could tie all the cables into the main hoist and use them as tethering as well. Recording cables are made of some tough stuff.

We hooked it up to the port yardarm and its 25-ton winch. We then lifted it off the deck, first without hydrophones. We needed to see how this unpremeditated contraption would track behind the boat. The Captain was on the intercom listening to our orders as we lifted it off the fantail and dropped it, none too gently, into the frothing Yellow Sea.

The Captain goosed the boat a bit and we pulled ahead of the floating array framework. We lead the towing cable to the notch in the center of the stern of the boat. This would position the framework of the arrays and allow us to tether it off to the pillion on the aft of the boat. Several wraps, some duct tape, a couple of trunnion-brundies, and all seemed well and secure.

We secured the towing array and safeguarded the cables. It appeared to be behaving itself.

We asked the Captain to slowly make for 3.5 knots.

Soon, we were towing a brand spanking new Meisenheimer Triplet array for the very first time in this part of the world.

It tracked the boat well, rarely sliding 2 or 3 degrees off course. This was critical. If the array swung to and fro too much, it would be impossible, even with state of the art recording equipment, to make any sense of the recorded data. But our little gizmo tracked like a bloodhound on Cool Hand Luke, nice and straight; it even bucked some of the cross waves from nosy passing Russian trawlers.

So far, so good.

I called and asked the Captain ease to a stop and to go to station keeping as we're going to winch the spreader up to the boat and attach the streaming hydrophone arrays.

This was a hellishly ticklish time. It was a bit windy, overcast, late in the afternoon, choppy irritated seas and the towed hydrophone arrays were fucking heavy. Sure, they float, but only because they displace so much water. Plus, we wanted to do this from the fantail, not from in the water.

After much swearing and profanity, dark oaths and the urge to send some nose-poker-inners into the briny deep, there were three hydrophone arrays affixed to the towing spreader framework, all floating hither and yon behind the boat.

“Captain, slow accelerate to 3.5 knots. Straight-line following 130 degrees, please.” was the request.

The old Soviet diesels complained and belched even more black smoke, but we puffed, growled, and strained onward. We were making slow headway as we watched the array unfurl in three distinct straight lines behind us.

“Holy shit.” I said to Volna and Ack, “It actually looks like it’s going to work.”

Volna, Dax, Cliff, and Ack were smiling, shaking their heads in agreement when there was an almighty subfloor #BOOM#.

“WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?” some multiply-degreed and exasperated Doctor of Geology yelled.

Seems one of the old Soviet diesel engines blew a seal. Loudly, coarsely, and without any shame whatsoever.

“Captain? Situation report?” was the request of the moment.

“Starboard engine down. But we can fix it. Has happened before.” was the reply.

“Marvelous.”

“Can we continue towing at 3.5 knots?” was the next question.

“Yes, but only in straight lines. Turns will be most difficult on one engine.” was the next answer.

“OK. Understood. Just do your best. We’ll need about 30 minutes of travel time to sort out the data. Can we do that safely?” was the next question.



“Yes. I think so. But no more. 30 minutes from MARK.” He replied.

“OK. We’ll handle the blunt end, you handle the pointy one. Out.” was the last rejoinder.

It was a tense 30 minutes, but aside from warning off a couple of nosy Russian fishing trawlers, some oblivious Chinese steamers, and that scattered school of Spotted seals; everything went to plan. We used the main winch to retrieve the framework and dragged it onto the fantail; hydrophones, and all.

We had teams handling the retrieval of the hydrophones, bundling them neatly for actual real deployment tomorrow. They were wet, slippery, and heavy. They did remarkably well considering it was their first time.

Everything stowed, there was one last item that needed to be checked.

The C-4 of course.

Dax informed the Captain of our little scheme and he just shook his head and said to warn the crews tearing the old Soviet diesel apart down below the waterline. Explosions are most certainly amplified through the water and into the engine compartment. It would be ultra noisy down there in a while.

Dax vowed we’d give them ample warning before each detonation.

Cliff and I, in the meantime, went to the explosives locker after Dax returned with the keys.

I selected five 1-kilo blocks of C-4 at random. I grabbed a box of blasting caps and some pull-set-forget fuses, a spool of that shitty silk-covered demolition wire, and an electronic blasting machine. It was battery-operated, just like the Captain America western version, but with a big, shiny, green button.

“Captain Korea?”

Flip-side of reality, folks.

Dax had the intercom set to the engine room. We’d let them know when we tossed a block of C-4 over the side.

“OK”, I said as everyone on the fantail looked on in rapt attention, “First: Safety. We’re going to learn the music of my people.”

They looked at each other with oddly bewildered looks at that pronouncement.

We went through the ‘clearing of the compass’, which, as you might have surmised, it somewhat different on a boat rather than in an open field.

Though the principles remain the same.

Then there was the ‘tootling with vigor’ of the air horn.

They jumped when I let off a few unannounced blasts from my portable pneumatic ptootler.

Then the “look once, look twice, look again. THINK!” clearing; being absolutely certain everyone’s where they should be and all is secured.

Then their favorite mantra: “FIRE IN THE HOLE”, thrice.

Evidently, as a collective, they’re not one for loud, emotional outbursts. Unless it was specifically called for. They really got into it, in multipart harmony.

Then, the ‘point, and “HIT IT!”.

Followed by an ersatz, at this point, report.

“Kaboom.”

I took one block of C-4 and left it in its pristine factory-supplied shape. I punched it with a blasting cap and tied it in securely with a step-over toehold sheepshank knot. To this, I attached a set-pull-forget 45-second fuse.

“OK, who’s got the best pitching arm here?” I asked the assembly.

All I got were an entire section of questioning eyes.

“OK, then”, I redoubled, “Who here can toss this thing the farthest? It’s about 1 - 1.5 kilos.”

A tall, lanky Korean geoscientist was pushed forward out of the crowd. He tells me his name is Hwan Dong-Wook.

“Groovy”, I reply, “I’m Rock. Here.” I say as I toss him the package. ”How far you think you can chuck this thing off the back of the boat?”

“Chuck?”

“Throw?”

“Oh.”

“Not too heavy. Awkward, but I think maybe 100 meters.” He replies.

“Far out.” I say, “Get ready.”

We do the Safety Dance and I tell Dax to warn the guys in the engine room.

“Hell. Just tell them to take bloody 15-minute break. Then we’ll be done here.” I said.

With the engine room clear, we tell the Captain to keep up flank speed. The remainders of the crew, even the engine-jockeys, are behind me, off the fantail, and under cover in the poopdeck.

“OK, Hwan. Hello? Remember me? Good. Now, then. I’m going to pull this tab here. You have 45 seconds before this thing detonates. Throw it as far as you can straight back of the boat, right? Please. Don’t drop it. That would ruin all our weekends.” I asked.

Hwan nods in agreement.

“We green, Mister?” I ask.

Hwan smiles, “Green, sir.”

All righty, then.

I pull the tab, yell fire in the hole, as I hand the package to Kwan.

Give him credit, that block of C-4 sailed all of 120 meters, if not 130.

4...3...2...1...KABOOM!

A strong gout of water zoomed skyward.

“Now that’s the way we do shit uptown”, I said to Kwan, shaking his hand in victory.

Kwan smiles and goes to amble off to brag to his buddies.

“Whoa there, buckaroo! Oh, no. We’ve only just begun. Get back over here and big your throwing arm as well.” I smile.

He smiles a curious smile. Idiomatic expressions here are often taken literally. It causes high and humorous jest.

Next, we try a flattened kilo of C-4, which will mimic the shape of the charges we’ll use the next day.

I flattened a bock of C-4 it to approximate Chicago pan-pizza crust thickness. Set, primed, and charged; we repeat the previous experiment.

“OK, that worked as well. Two for two. Such luck. We win a cookie.” I smiled.

Kwan smiled too. This was destined to go onto his permanent personal record.

I tore a block of C-4 in half. I stomped it. I rolled it. I did evil things to it. I was being very mean to it. I abused it like a sausage patty at St. Alphonso's pancake breakfast.

Then I primed, set, and charged it.

Kwan chucked it a good 130 meters. At the 45 second mark, we were rewarded with a sizeable boom and gout of seawater.

"OK, Mr. Kwan. Thank you. We're going to try some remote detonations. You're most welcome to stay if you like." I said.

He liked.

I rigged up a block of C-4 with a blasting cap and employed that awful silk-coated, slimy, shitty, slippery demo wire. We'd simply drop it off the back of the boat and spool out what we thought was a good length of wire. I'd hook up the blasting machine and Kwan would get to push the big, shiny, green 'Captain Korea' detonic button.

"Mr. Kwan, if you please," I said.

He pushes the button.

Nothing.

“Mr. Kwan. You need to \*M \*A \*S \*H down on that fucking button. Put some meat into it!” I say.

“OK!” he says and mashes the hell out of the button.

Not as loud nor as tall a gout of water, as we were probably close to dragging bottom, but very passable.

“One last time”, I say, and stomp the block of C-4 Detroit hand-tossed pizza thick. Insert blasting cap, secure, tape on demo wire. Then let it flap out behind the boat in the wake of the one remaining diesel. It was like trolling for musky back in any Sawyer County lake; except the sucker minnow here could take out a small building.

Once a decent distance away, Dax is pestering me to handle the detonator.

“Mr. Kwan”, I ask, “May Dax here have a go? He’s been a good boy today.”

Mr. Kwan is all smiles as he relinquishes the machine over to Dax.

“OK, Dax. Show ’em how it’s done.” I say, smiling.

“Hot damn. I never done this before”, Dax gushingly admits.

I look at Dr. Dax with wide eyes.

“Is that right? Well... I guess you're about ready, then, aren't you?” I smile back with that disarmingly wide smile that makes Komodo dragons gulp in disbelief.

“Any day now, Dr. Dax.” I say.

Dax grins and mashes down on the big, shiny, green button.

Nothing.

“Let me see that damn thing. Oh, fuck. Terminal’s loose. Oriental crap.” I quietly grouse.

One quick Leatherman- persuaded fix and back to Dax.

“Hit it?” I beseech.

Dax does so and we’re rewarded with quite the shower. The flappy, flat shape acted just like a hydrofoil and kept it about just a foot or so below the surface of the sudsy sea.

“I love it when a plan comes together”, I smile as I pull out a new cigar and fire it up.

The next morning, after a wonderfully incommensurate canned Chinese breakfast, it was time to go hunting and bag some data.

The geophysical data quest was on.

I had Mr. Kwan appointed official Korean:Not Korean liaison, as he’d be relaying messages back and forth via radio to the Captain.



All this was going to take a surfeit of cunning and cuteness, as well as a significant amount of communication and compliance.

“OK, let’s get that array in the water. Let’s get a move on! Lift that barge, tote that bale!” Ack yelled at the not-understanding Korean counterparts.

“Ack”, I said, “Decorum, please.”

“OK, Rock. It’s just that I hate repeating myself. Sorry.” Ack relented.

“No worries, Ack. Not their fault they’re a bunch of highly-educated numbskulls unaccustomed to physical labor.” I sniggered back.

Ack smiles back at me, knowingly.

With the aid of every translator, the Meisenheimer Triplet array slid noiselessly into the frothing water. The floats had been adjusted to the nominal excursion on the central array, with a 3-degree outset on the towed outrigging lateral arms.

Slowly, even with the old Soviet diesel repaired, we wanted a nice, even acceleration up to 3.5 knots as we deployed the 45-30-45 hydrophone arrays.

Too much side current, too much wave action or too many nosy Russian ‘Fishing’ Trawlers leaving a wake when they drove by to chase sardines or give us the once over, and we’ll had 120 macraméd and insanely tangled hydrophones.

That would not be, in the language of the industry, a good thing.

We volleyed twin sets of red flares off the stern of the boat alerting everyone around that we were a 'tow vessel' and were dragging 350 meters worth of hydrophones and recording array behind us.

They were under the international law of the sea to give way, heave to, and keep the fuck out of our way.

Yes. Birds too.

Volna, Ivan, and Cliff are in the recording shack. I ask Dax to go back and see if we're green or if all our efforts had been for naught.

The array is behaving itself. We've got 1-2 meter seas, a slight NE current at about 0.5 knots west, and a dusty, sneezy yellow-tinged east wind blowing in out of Manchuria.

Surprisingly, this is a good recording environment with good environmental parameters.

Dax reports all hydrophones are alert, responding and we're getting good ping data from the pinger phone at the head of the array we use to send out test signals.

PING interrogation.

ping response.

"Looks like 120 channels, at present. Even with just that lil' ol' pinger, we're already seeing down about 0.3 seconds." Volna notes.

Ack continues with some much needed good news, "We've jiggered and jury-rigged the 'phones such that they allow rapid-flow data transmission

and recording that not only supplies inverse multiplicative reactive current for use in the unilateral phase detectors but is also capable of automatically synchronizing the cardinal echo acoustic-accelerometers.”

Volna continues, “Which is very good news. We’ll test every ‘phone and if we get similar results, it’ll be up to you and your crew, Rock.”

“Oh, no worries”, I replied, “Dax, Cliff and I are ready. As are Mr. Kwan and a few other disposable locals. Just give us the high sign and we’ll begin annoying the local marine life.”

Volna, Ivan, and Ack shoo Dax and me out of the recording booth. It’s hot, cramped, and crowded, so we have no problem vacating. Since Dax already has the explosives locker keys, we wander over to locker to retrieve some of our bundles of seismic sound source materials.

We go up to the door, and Dax produces the keys. Suddenly, one of the mothering uglies in the shiny, shitty, ill-fitting suits blocks our way.

“No! It is not permitted!” he yells.

“My good man. I’m a geologist. I’m permitted everywhere.” I said, half in jest as I thought he finally had a sense of humor implanted.

“No! It is not permitted!” he repeats.

“Dax, is it just me or is this guy’s needle stuck? Look here, Chuckles, I’m the Motherfucking Pro From Dover and not only a fully licensed master blaster but a special VIP scientific envoi of your government brought here to help you characters crawl out of the 10th century.” I said, calmly though forcefully.

“No! It is not permitted!” he repeats.

“NOW LOOK HERE, YOU FARGIN’...!” I began; but he suddenly steals in, swipes the keys from Dax, deftly unlocks the door, pushes it open, hands the keys back to Dax, and bids us entry.

“Dax? Did that just happen?” I asked querulously.

Herr Shiny Suit is standing there with a shit-wearing grin a Korean ‘ri’-wide.

“I was told you were fond of japes.” He smiles.

“Why you inscrutable little shyster.” I grin back. “Look, Herr Mac, if you want a cigar that badly, just ask.”

“Oh, Doctor Rock-nim”, he smiles, applying the Korean honorific, “But tell me? Where is the fun in that?”

That bright and sunny dusty morning, Dax and I made a new friend by the name of Col. Chang Byeong-Cheol.

As with other items of an auspicious nature, I file this away in the “Keep Guarded but Close” file for future use. Agents Rack and Ruin back home will be so pleased.

And he was an official ‘handler’. I only wish I had a few exploding cigar implants for one of the cigars I gave him over the remainder of the cruise. I like japes? He would have appreciated the irony.

Dax and I load up and let Col. Chang lock up for us. I pocket the keys as we'll need to return a few times over the duration of the day. As I am responsible for the explosives locker, I keep the keys.

Dax, Mr. Kwan, and I are sitting in our not-bolted-down-to-the-deck chairs on the fantail, smoking cigars; although Mr. Kwan preferred some pastel cigarettes, and contemplating our lunch.

“Liquid or canned?” Dax asked.

Mr. Kwan returns with an absolutely perfect chilled Rocknocker for me, a cold local beer for Dax, and something citrusy and either low-octane or non-alcoholic for himself.

“Finest kind, Mr. Kwan.”, I say and salute him from my comfy reclining position.

A cigar and a half later, I'm standing by the stern, watching the Meisenheimer Triplet array splash and fumble away in the briny surf. It's acting reasonably, and handling the always unexpected, but continuously present, rogue waves, rollers and ripples in three dimensions, quite offhandedly. For a last-minute lash-up with dodgy parts and dodgier electronics, it looks like it was actually going to work.

I wander back to the recording room and see that things are going well. One bad phone, but we can cover for that with redundant recording. That is, we'll leave the recording window open longer and repeat the same phase without having to re-shoot it. It's an old geophysical recording trick. Beats the hell out of dragging the whole gadget back on board to replace one faulty phone.

“You guys about ready for some big booms?” I ask, “I'm getting punchy out here on the deck, I feel the need to blow some shit up.”

“Rock”, Volna says, “Go fire off your critter-chaser charges. By the time the dust settles from that, we’ll be at T=0. Give us 10 more minutes and you can begin to deploy.”

“Roger that!” I said, “’bout fucking time!”, I added under my breath.

Back on the fantail, I whip out my knife of many uses and chop a couple of blocks of C-4 into quarters. These are my critter-chaser charges. Unless you’re right next to one when it detonates, it’ll just go poom, scare the hell out of you and give you time to clear the area.

I prime a dozen quarter-kilo’ers with caps and set-pull-forget 45-second delay detonators.

On the back of the boat, we have about a dozen or so Korean nationals, from Coasties to covert Government guys, translators, observers, geologists, and geophysicists. There’s also the western contingent present, so it is a bit crowded.

“OK folks! “ I yell over the thrum of the old Soviet diesels, “We need to set a few small charges before the big show to chase away any local aquatic livestock. I’ve got a dozen bangers here that need to go out in all directions behind the boat, **BUT AWAY FROM THE BLOODY ARRAY.**”

I wait a couple of ticks until I see the translators are finished.

“OK, who wants to go first?” I ask.

Multiple hands shoot into the air.

“Fine. But we’re not doing anything until I hear a recital of the Safety Dance. Gentlemen?”

I stood there, slightly agape and smiling quirkily. It was the first time I’ve ever heard the Safety Dance in full 3-part Korean harmony. They even pointed to me to tootle them with vigor with my small air horn at the appropriate juncture.

Now I know why they like karaoke so much over here.

“OK. Perfect.” I say, pointing to the closest local, “Up here, please.”

He cautiously wanders over. He speaks no English, I no Korean. We’re both smiling like loons.

With a translator, I tell him, “I’ll prime the charge. I hand it to you. You throw it with all your might to the right of the towed array.”, as I gesture emphatically the direction I want this block thrown. “We green?”

After we clear up the chromatic question, the fuse is smoking on block #1 and I hand him the potentially lethal little bundle.

“That way!” I say, pointing rearward and to the starboard.

He hurls it a sizeable distance. Exactly 45 seconds from pulling the detonator, the charge detonates. Nice little boom and a small gout of water. Schooling baitfish can actually be seen to scatter at the surface.

“Job well done,” I say, as I shake his hand and ask for contestant #2.

Prime. Set. Pull. Toss. Boom. Freshen up drink. Lather. Boom. Rinse. Relight cigar. Repeat.

After almost all the Koreans had their chance, I asked if any of the western guys wanted in on the fun. Dax tossed one a good 150 meters. For a little guy, I guess all that solitary masturbation really builds up the muscles of your right arm.

He was less than impressed with my analysis.

I had one left. Dax and Mr. Kwan took the keys and went to the explosives locker to retrieve our first set of daisy-chained explosive seismic noise-makers. I had one quarter-block left.

One left.

What to do? What to do?

Why, make a Frisbee™ out of the damn thing, of course!

I stick the cap in the middle and see how far out one can sling the thing into the sea.

I flattened out the C-4 with an empty beer bottle, of which we had a large reserve, and forged a pretty passable flying-faux-Frisbee™. I molded in the blasting cap to the center of the disk, and gave it a test spin before yanking the fuse. It spun fairly well, not perfect, but, as they say, close enough for government work.

“Fire in the hole, gentlemen!” I said as I pulled the fuse and give the disk a healthy schwing off the back of the deck.



It wobbled, it wibbled, but it flew; more or less straight, more or less true.

It landed with a soft plop on the surface and began to sink slowly out of sight. Five seconds later, there was a credible hole in the water where the C-4 Frisbee™ had, only moments before, been.

“Well, that’s that. “ I said to each and sundry. “And here comes the real show.” As Mr. Kwan and Dax deposited a single daisy chain of reefed and wrangled explosives on the fantail.

Each one of these was exemplary works of the detonic arts, I noted to my Korean comrades.

I explained their genesis and use.

“You see, gentlemen?” I said, as I held up and pointed out the various components of each set of explosive devices, “It’s like this: the main windings were of the normal locus-o-delta type placed in panendermic semi-boloidol slots in relation to the pre-centrode stator. Every seventh conductor being connected by a nonreversible treme-splice to the differential trundle-bung on the up-end of the splivimeters.”

Several were nodding in agreement. Dax was attempting to not wet himself laughing silently.

Continuing: “I use C-4, cyclotrimethylene-trinitramine, because it lacks cerulene crystals, which are naturally occurring metabaconductors that exhibit a significant skin effect suppression at sub-microacoustic frequencies. Once derefined, their average in-plane electromagnetic permeability drops to zero, which is a property we can exploit. Unlike conventional 6-[2-[(4-amino-4-carboxybutanoyl) amino]-3-

(carboxymethylamino)-3-oxopropyl] sulfanyl-5-hydroxyicosa-7, 9, 11, 14-tetraenoic acid materials, no external acoustic bias is required due to the nanocrystal's large audile anisotropic impression."

"I see. I see." several of my Korean counterparts crooned.

"Good. Good" I say, "Now, which parameter do you think is the most important?"

The befuddled looks on their faces were one for the books. Too bad I left my camera in my stateroom.

Dax, Mr. Kwan, myself and Ivan begin to deploy the seismic sources. I'm galving everything like a man possessed as the individual packets slide by me at a rapid rate. So far, so good.

We really overdid the Western-Union splices, soldering them with silver-solder and wrapping each in that oily elephant-shit putty, then taping each against the ravages of saltwater.

We used 'herring dodgers' for alignment and depth control. They were nothing more than thin strips of sheet metal, about 35 centimeters in length, and rounded at both ends, and a mathematically-precise bend in the middle.

Featuring a hard side-to-side wobble, it would almost tip over in one direction, then rapidly right itself, to almost tip over the other direction. The result was it tracked straight and true behind the boat. A little more lead in one direction or the other and it was eminently steerable. Adding lead fishing weights along the lines of connection provided easily adjustable depth control in addition to the dodgers.

With that, we were fully deployed. Meisenheimer Triplet array of marine acoustic hydrophones trailing along nicely. One daisy chain to the port and one to starboard of the array at the proper predetermined depth.

We all assumed our positions. I was the blaster, of course, Dax was our communications officer, and several other people were doing something more or less equally as important, especially if you were to ask them.

Watches synchronized, Ack and Volna began the recording sequence. They'd send me signals to actuate the last packet on each chain of sources. They'd record, and we'd see how it was progressing.

Mr. Kwan would be in constant communication with the Captain so we could speed up, slow down, or begin one of four wide turns in this recording project.

"Ack, we good to go?" I asked.

"Just a second, Rock", Ack replies, "Got a twitchy sonde on the port array. Killing it and ramping the two adjacent to compensate. T-15 seconds, MARK!"

"Mr. Kwan, NOW!", I shout. Mr. Kwan fires the Very pistol into the air to release the green flares, letting everyone in the area know we're actively recording data, and therefore, have the right of way.

Move it. Law of the sea.

I popped the stopwatch. In 15 seconds, unless I heard otherwise, I'd detonate the last two packets on each of the out-riggered arrays.

“5...4...3...2...1...Firing!” as I mashed down the big, shiny, green button on Kaptain Korea.

There was an unholy reverberation as the multiple kilos of C-4 detonated milliseconds apart. They were deep enough so we didn't get any gouts of water, just big, roiling boils.

Ack runs back to the fantail and shouts, “You got it guys, the hydrophones worked! The computers went crazy, we've got data coming out of our ears!”

“Excelsior!” I replied, “Let's continue. Next shot in 38 seconds.”

Shot after shot went off without a flaw.

Dax and Mr. Kwan, along with numerous other locals, were feeding the C-4 seismic source bundles adroitly as we continued on the cruise. The next challenge was the port turn, the first of four. If we were lucky, we'd not get the sources and hydrophones tangled and have to call it a day.

But the Captain was an able-bodied old sea-hand. He made that turn so neat and so slick, we all had to ask if we'd actually made the turn.

The captain smiled when we asked the question. He was an old man of the sea.

More firings and the arrays were responding without a hitch. We were on leg three of four, just coming out of a starboard turn. So far, so good.

When suddenly a Japanese fishing-factory ship hove into view.

Not only into view but directly in our fucking path.

We're making 3.5 knots, steady. The Japanese fishing-factory ship was making about 2 knots. If they didn't get the fuck out of the way, we'd collide.

So much for the law of the sea.

Mr. Kwan fires off the green flares anew, letting them know we're in active data acquisition mode and our course is pre-set. We're like a freight train. Towing the Meisenheimer Triplet behind us and all the explosives, we just can't stop and hope everything behind us stops. It won't. It'll collide with the stern of our boat, and I don't want to think what would happen to our brilliant creation if it smashed into the back of our vessel at 3 knots or more.

"Dax", I yelled, "Grab a translator. Get to the pilothouse, and raise that Jap boat. Tell them to move their fucking ass."

I'm still timing detonations and we're still steaming ahead at 3.5 knots. I can't leave and go chew out the Jap Captain. I have to stay here and time the detonations.

We're getting vast mountains of data, the first-ever of its kind from this part of the world. We're seeing preliminary reflections from over 4 seconds. That, roughly, translates to 20,000 feet.

But if that fucking Jap boat doesn't get out of our way, we can't 'close the loop' and we'd end up with literally incalculable errors of closure. Along with a huge pile of uncoordinated, unprocessed seismic.

And the loss of huge volumes of newly acquired data.

Now I'm pissed. All that work and the teams really coming together, now this.

"Where's a fucking airstrike when you need one?" I smirk, scanning the skies for a friendly B-52.

The Jap boat is looming larger, and we're still right at 3.5 knots. Dax ran back to tell me the Captain tried, he tried, and now Ivan was going to try and level with the Jap Captain and get them the hell out of our path.

"Oh, fuck Dax", I said, "What time is it?"

"15:45 local", Dax replies. "Why?"

"Oh, just in case anyone asks us when WWII began..." I replied.

The Jap fishing-factory ship is looming directly in our path. I'm still timing detonations, Ack is recording as a man possessed, and Dax is running back and forth from the pilothouse to the stern with news updates.

Suddenly, we see great columns of black bunker smoke erupt from the twin stacks of the Japanese fishing-factory ship. We hear the deep rumble of finely machined and manufactured sea-turbines spooling up to operational speed. We notice the big fishing-factory begin to create boiling cavitation waves before it as it picks up speed.

The huge ship is doing 15 knots away in no time. All we have to deal with now is riding out the wake of the fucking thing.

Up one side and down the other.

I time the last of the seismic source charges, and with all that drama, the data cruise is finished. The Captain lets us know he'll decelerate gradually to allow the Meisenheimer Triplet to slow along with us. I've already had the remaining spent demolition wire reeled in and stowed.

Ivan and Dax come strolling back to the fantail. I'm in awe. Ivan actually did something productive. Will wonders never cease?

I'm tired, pooped to be exact. That was one long and hairy tour of duty. I splot down in my not-bolted-to-the-deck chair, and Dax and Ivan follow.

I pull out a fresh cigar. Ivan leans over Dax and plucks it from my fingers. Considering what he must have done, I didn't say a word.

Mr. Kwan arrives with fresh drinks for everyone. I accept mine gratefully.

I clip and fire a new cigar. I sip my expertly prepared drink. I'm going nuts not knowing what Ivan did.

"Dax?" I inquire, "Could you please ask Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik what he said to that Jap boat to get them to move the fuck out of the way?"

"Why, yes, Doctor, I could do that," Dax replies.

He does.

"Well?" I ask.

"Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik merely told the Captain of the Japanese fishing-factory ship that he was in violation of the laws of the sea

by being in the pre-ordained flight path of a new Russian nuclear-powered astronomical vessel that was out on its virgin shakedown cruise. We were towing a revolutionary new atomic imaging apparatus designed to record by reflection large portions of the sky. Also, that we couldn't stop and if we collided, there'd be a whole lot of heavily irradiated fish, one heavily irradiated factory fishing vessel at the bottom of the Yellow Sea, and one very pissed-off set of Russian 'advisors' descending on the Japanese Embassy in Moscow."

I looked over at Ivan, sitting there without a care in the world, enjoying a fresh vodka and one of my cigars. He looked over to me and gave a small wave.

"He didn't?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. He did. In that inimitable bluster he has. I made sure to stay out of his way, just in case." Dax chuckled.

"Godddamn, Ivan", I said, raising my glass to him in salute, "Damn glad you're on our side."

He looked over to me, grinned, puffed his cigar, and gave another small wave.

We finally slowed to a stop and we decided it would be a great learning experience if our Korean counterparts learned, by doing, how to which aboard three sets of hydrophones and a jury-rigged, and hastily built Meisenheimer Triplet seismic array.

In other words, we're going to let them clean up.



About an hour later, Ack shows up and heaves himself into a vacant deck chair.

Mr. Kwan was on the spot with a fresh drink for him.

“Well, Ack? “ I asked, “Just how did we do?”

“It’s a damn good thing I brought those compression algorithms”, Ack relates, “Otherwise we’d never have been able to record all the data.”

“Truth?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah”, Ack agrees, “We’ve filled every Exabyte™ tape they had on board. Yeah, I know. ‘Old school’, but it still works. 150 GB per tape, which I juiced to 310 GB with compression. We now have three full cases of new data. New data, old tapes. Old tapes, old farts. It all works out in the end.”

“As so it should. Prosit!” I say, and the sentiment is echoed around the boat.

With that, we all gather together on the fantail; westerner, local, Ph.D. to orderly. Even the guys in the ill-fitting shiny suits join in.

“Gentlemen”, I begin, leaving time for the translators, “Our trip has been a success. More seismic data than what you’ll know to do with, and excellent cooperation from the east and the west. I congratulate the lot of you and say this: The drinking light is lit!”

“Doctor?” one Korean seismic character, with whom I’ve never spoken, entreats.

“Yes?” I reply.

“We are most upset that you chose to go with the <spit> American-made C-4 instead of the locally produced dynamite. We find this to be a ploy by you westerners to disgrace the standing of Oriental manufacture. What do you have to say for yourself?” he charges.

## Chapter Nine

“I say that you’re way the fuck out of line, Chuckles. Are you an educated, experienced, fully licensed and internationally renowned master blaster?” I asked.

“No, but...” he tried to continue.

“But nothing, Scooter.” I said, “What, other than your insane xenophobia and nationalism, causes you to come to such unfounded, not to say stupid, conclusions?”

He looked down at the deck. Evidently, he was not used to being challenged in such a manner. He realized he walked face-first into a metaphorical wood chipper.

“I’m waiting for your answer, pally.” I continued.

Still nothing. He was either deep in thought or ill at ease from newly soggy undergarments.

“Want to know why I chose what I did? Fine, meet back here in 15 damn minutes.”

He looks at me with a most perplexed, and ignorant, look on his face.

“Dax, Cliff? I need you.” I say.

We go back to the weapons locker and I explain my idea.

“Let’s load a case of typical, TYPICAL Chinese-made dynamite. Then let’s load a case of American C-4. Be very careful with that leaky Chinese shit. Wait one. I’ll do it if you want and you can handle the C-4.” I say.

“Ah, Rock; yeah. We’d appreciate it. You being the Pro from Dover, after all.” Cliff agrees.

“No worries”, I say, “I got this. You make me up a nice, tightly packed case of C-4. For demonstration purposes.”

I find a near-empty case of dynamite and begin to judiciously fill the thing with random samples of shitty and leaky Chinese manufactured and Korean not-too-well-cared-for dynamite.

This stuff was so incredibly shitty and poorly manufactured that even when leaking and nasty, it was nowhere near as dangerous as its Western counterpart. It was loaded with so much and many interstitials, like sawdust, diatomaceous earth, literal horseshit, and shredded newspaper, the nitro denatured itself to some degree as it oozed out.

Plus, in the non-climate controlled weapons locker; the high humidity, salt air, and poor circulation from the small open grate facing the sea, the nitro had desensitized somewhat and evaporated. It left only sticky, thin, fly-ridden films rather than the usual ‘waiting for a good reason to explode’ puddles.

It was in no way as twitchy as that locker back in Nevada. Oh, but be assured, it was still a shit show.

If I really wanted to, I could blow myself, this boat and all occupants into the next dimension rather easily, but it was nothing like that old locker back in that disused Nevada mine. I still needed to be scrupulously careful as

there could potentially be puddles of the pale yellow, viscous liquid explody stuff, instead of the thin films I was mostly finding.

Either way, it required caution and judiciousness.

Nitro's twitchy as fuck and the last thing I need is a dropped nail, blasting cap, or hunk of the rotten box falling into an errant nitro wet patch...

Extra attention was exercised.

Dax and Cliff are halfway through, and I'm still picking through the leaky, smelly bundles.

"Next time", I mused to myself, "I'm writing in a 'Handling fucked-up explosives"-clause in my contract. No matter how much I'm being paid for this, it ain't enough..."

We find a couple of expendable, dry-rotted 'life preserver' floaty-rings, upon which we secure both cases of explosives. They're tethered with a rope and primed with a number of blasting caps.

I let the head local Korean crank examine both to ensure that I'm not trying to pull a fast one.

He did not notice the 3-pound bag of Tannerite (an impact-actuated explosive) I snuck in the middle of the box of Chinese TNT.

"Now. Satisfied that they're equal?" I asked. "Nothing fishy here. Just dynamite in bundles, with caps. Then, over here, C-4 blocks with cap. OK?"

He was satisfied; but only after letting a couple of the shiny suit squad check as well.

“Well”, I smirked,” So much for your ‘covert observation’, asshole.” This guy was DPRK secret service or equivalent.

“Holy cold-pack cheese-food product fuck”, I cogitate, “They are so goddamned suspicious”.

I ask Dax to go over to the pilothouse and borrow the mauled AK-47 I saw hanging on the bulkhead there. They keep it for run-ins with cranky sharks, walruses, and lovesick blue-footed boobies evidently.

“OK, here’s what we’ll do. We’ll float each out, and I’ll trail with demolition wire. Once we’re a few hundred meters out, you can press the big, shiny, green button and detonate your dynamite. I even used 6 blasting caps, to give each bundle its own. You saw that. We green?” I ask.

He was, although suspicious of what I had in mind. He agreed although he refused to use my terminology, the stodgy prick.

So float away the dynamite case we did.

The case of Chinese dynamite floated out and away from the boat, leaving an oily slick in its wake. As it got to around 200-225 meters or so, I requested a rendition of the Korean version of the Safety Dance, as it was just too fucking hilarious to watch.

Once completed, I handed Doubting Korean Thomas the detonator.

“Your turn, Tweedles”, I said, “Hit the button to spark off your “much-better-than-the-West’s” Oriental dynamite.”

He grabbed the detonator, gnashed a tooth in my direction, and mashed down on the big, shiny, green button with a vengeance.

PFftt! PAH-foof! fuff

There was a cheery little pop, a puff of acrid smoke, and not much else.

Let it be said from the onset that I just selected examples of the Oriental manufactured dynamite at random. I didn’t look for the worst or leakiest. Though truthfully I really didn’t have much too choice in the matter.

“You! You swindled me! You knew the dynamite wouldn’t explode! Somehow you knew it!!” he swore in my general direction.

“Try it again”, I said after retrieving the detonator and doing a quick re-wire to another bank of blasting caps.

“Gumeong-e bul!” [“Fire in the hole!”].

MASH goes the big, shiny, green button anew.

Pffftt!” \*Pop. Poooof! Piffle. Blerp.

Nothing but a cute little pop, a poof, and a few acrid puffs of smoke.

He was crestfallen.

He had taken on the Motherfucking Pro from Dover in a necessarily explosive subject, with inevitably disastrous results.

I asked if anyone here was weapons trained. A couple of Coasties raised their hands.

“And you are?” I asked the closest one.

“Lt. P'an Tae-Hyun, Sir”, as he snaps a snappy salute.

“Groovy.”, I reply and retrieve the AK from Dax.

“Can you squeeze off a couple of shots and hit that floating box of dynamite?” I asked.

“Yes, sir!” he replied, smiling.

“OK then”, I replied and turned to the crowd.

“Dynamite is usually pretty stable stuff and won't detonate without a blasting cap or impulse source. A bullet will most certainly not detonate it. However, I've stuck in 3 pounds, imperial, of Tannerite, which is a type of binary explosive used for targeting. Tannerite will most definitely and energetically explode when impacted by a high-velocity bullet. I think we can agree that an AK-47 round is high-velocity?” I asked.

There were nods and a buzz of general agreement.

“Now, there's the better part of a case of unexploded dynamite out there. That's what we in the business call very, very fucking dangerous. Now



those three pounds of Tannerite should vaporize everything within a 10-meter radius if it detonates as designed. Agreed?" I asked.

Again, there were nods and a buzz of general agreement.

"Lieutenant P'an?" I asked, "At your discretion. Fire at will. Or the dynamite case, as it were."

He nodded. He walked over to the furthest point on the stern, checked to see everyone was back and out of harm's way, as he was a consummate professional. He futzed around with the old AK for a bit and took a shot.

It was low and outside.

"Ball one", I snickered.

"Sights are off. Not any problems." He remarked.

The next round found its mark. The Tannerite exploded adeptly.

It threw sticks of unexploded Chinese dynamite over a 20-meter radius. They each sank into the briny deep leaving only an oily spot to mark their entry and eventual watery grave.

The top of the case of dynamite was blown off, but the floaty ring remained. We reeled it back in to find a few more scorched, but unexploded, sticks of fine Oriental manufacture explosive on the bottom of the case.

These were motherfucking dangerous. Cantankerous dynamite has no place on a ship.

I remarked, however, that this would be no problem. Dax and Cliff brought up the case of C-4, which I had wired with one single blasting cap and booster.

We had Korean Doubting Thomas and his shiny suit buddies give it the once over to ensure I wasn't trying to pull a fast one.

He agreed, it was nothing but C-4 as advertised.

One of the more expendable Coasties jumped down on the stern transom-rack which is just above the waterline on the back of the boat. He wired the two rings together and set them adrift, tethered by a good nylon rope with my nasty, silky demolition wires trailing.

Dax was working the rope and I was handling the spool of demolition wire. I had a good 350 meters of the stuff on the spool and wasn't about to return a single centimeter.

Old habits and all.

As they floated away, Mr. Kwan asked if we'd like a bit of refreshment, as, gosh, it sure was dusty out here today.

Of course, we agreed in unison.

Good old Mr. Kwan.

So, we're unspooling our lines slowly, drinking our end of the day refreshers, smoking cigars, and watching our Oriental colleagues getting antsy every minute.

I knew what a case of C-4 was going to do when detonated. It would be one hell of a show.

I was so confident with my design I had Lt. P'ay return the AK to the pilothouse. Wouldn't work here anyways if the C-4 failed to detonate.

But that's not going to happen.

Dr. Pro from Dover Rocknocker has spoken.

Finally, I'm almost out of demolition wire, and Dax has tied off the tether.

I motion over to Herr Doubting Thomas and hand him the detonator.

"For ye of little faith", I smiled, recalling the entreaty that even Satan quotes the Bible for his own nefarious uses.

But first, an encore of the Korean Safety Dance. They're guaranteed to raise a smile.

I look to the character fumbling with the detonator.

"At your convenience, good sir", I say, dripping insincerity.

"Gumeong-e bul!" ["Fire in the hole!"]. Mash goes the big, shiny, green button.

**KA-MOTHERING-FUCKINGLY-HUGE-BOOM!**

Even over 300 meters away, every one of us not only saw but felt that shock wave. It was like a solid Savate kick to the chest. The boat even rocked a bit in appreciation.

I smile, retrieved the detonator, safe it, and reply: “And that is the singular reason why I used good old American manufacture C-4 as a sonic seismic source rather than shitty, leaky Oriental dynamite. Any further questions?”

He shook his head in agreement, bowed slightly in my direction, slunk away, and that was the very last we ever saw of Mr. Korean Doubting Thomas.

The Captain saw and felt the detonation. He put the boat in park, actually, he handed it over to the sub-pilot for station keeping and came back to the fantail.

He wanted to know if we were now officially finished with our project.

We maintained that we were and it had come off very, very successfully; in no small degree because of his boat handling abilities.

He came over to me and shanghaied one of the translators.

“Doctor Stone?” he asked.

“Hrmp. Close enough.” I smiled.

“May I be first to congratulate your team. In eight sorties, you and your teams are the first to fulfill mission parameters. I am pleased to say that this

will go on all our permanent records. It will mean bonuses for all present. I salute you.” And does with a naval flourish.

“No shit? Well, thanks, Cap”, I reply, “But I’m just the den mother for this special education class. Without them, and all their hard work, it’d never have happened.”

“I knew you would say this”, he smiled, “You are leader of men. We see that. You are teacher, but also not afraid to work. You should do this more often. Use your education and experience to train and teach others.” He says, shaking my hand.

Now it’s time for me to wonder. Did he hear of my offer back home? I don’t think he did, I’ve been playing those cards very close to the vest, as it were. I am now officially confused and bebothered.

But, since I don’t believe in anything, much less coincidence, I’m going to chalk it up to happenstance and just gratefully consider the source.

He asks that we wait here and he’ll return forthwith.

“On a boat this size, there are not too many places we can sneak off to...” I chuckle.

He returns with a very, very old bottle of something quite unidentifiable since it appears to be lacking a label. He yells something in official Korean and suddenly, a tray with little, itty-bitty demitasse-style glasses appear along with some smoked fish, I think, nibbles of some kind.

He pours a dram for all present. No one dares take as much as a preemptory sniff until he’s finished with the ceremony.

Everyone thusly charged, he begins a toast.

“Shoo-buddy”, I think, “I’ve been down this road before.”

It was quick, succinct, brief, and laudatory.

According to him, we had ‘hung the moon’.

I liked this style of toasting. Left more time to drink and for camaraderie.

The project thus finished, as we were running out of potables, especially freshwater, victuals, and toilet paper; we were headed back to base. That is, back to the hotel to see what our comrades who chose to stay onshore had developed.

But, that was going to be for another day. First, we needed to chug our way back to port, both literally and figuratively.

Ahem.

Before which, though, there were some housekeeping and paperwork chores. Dax, Cliff, and I did a quick reconnaissance of the explosives locker and created a ‘used’ manifest; which all three of us signed.

They may be officious, they may be obtrusive, but damn, they certainly love their goddamned paperwork over here.

We gave copies to the head shiny suit, one for the Captain, and we retained copies for our records. Along with notes that we expended two rounds from the pilothouse AK, as we were trying to out-officious these officious paper-pushers.

We made certain the keys were returned and logged in the proper logbooks and the explosives locker was locked securely, solidly, and soundly. Before which, we policed up the weapons locker and actually offered to the gods of the briny deep, quite the quantity of unsafe, leaky dynamite, and other ordinance that was more a disaster waiting to happen rather than inventory.

Seawater would neutralize the nasties and in the case of anything metallic, it'd be gone within a fortnight. and the phosphates might provide some nice fertilizer for some lucky passing Cnidarians. We were in water of near 45 fathoms. This stuff would never hurt another living thing.

The Captain was very pleased that we had taken that task upon ourselves. He wasn't allowed to do anything about what was in the locker, but he was responsible for it and keeping the wrong people out of it. I commented that was a fairly stupid way of handling things, and he mentioned that he'd appreciate it if I made an official note of it to the powers that be once we go feet-dry, i.e., get back to shore.

I assured him we most certainly would.

From then on, all we had to do was putt-putt our way back to port.

It was going to take some hours and we'd end up berthing during the wee hours. This would not be a problem as our bus and driver would be waiting for us no matter what the time. He would briskly and without fanfare, return us to our hotel.

That we were actually looking forward to bunking back in the old hotel sort of gave one an idea of the Spartan arrangements we had endured for the last three days.

Most of the Westerners grouched and complained in a humorous manner. Hell, it was only three bloody days. Some of our Oriental friends were so totally aghast they vowed to lodge formal complaints once they returned to dry land.

Landlubbers.

Odd that once we hit the beach, they all scattered to the four winds and not a single letter nor either a peep of protest was ever forthcoming.

Yes, this is an intensely weird place.

We wandered down the gangplank, cigars a-fume, and drinks recently and for one last time, refreshed by Mr. Kwan. The shiny suit squad was supervising the offloading of the seismic data we had collected and had seen it soundly sealed and concealed in the very living bowels of the bus. It was to return with us to the hotel, where we'd demand a receipt. Then it would be off to the "Technological Center" on Scientific Street for processing.

They assured us that they'd handle that themselves. Evidently we were good enough to acquire the data, but not good enough to see the finished product.

Ack, Volna, and Ivan chuckled.

"OK, you pirates. What did you do?" I asked

"They can try with all their might. But without the decryption key, they'll spend years processing encoded compressed nonsense." They snickered. "We did offer to come and help set up the decryption for the decompression of the raw data, but they said they could handle it themselves. Oh, well. We tried. Seriously, we did." Ack and Volna snickered.



“Well, keep it handy in case they come to their senses before we get out of here,” I said.

“Always our intention, Herr Denmother”, Volna chuckles.

“Oh, you heard that?” I snickered quietly.

Back at the hotel, the majority of us sent our sea-gear to our rooms via the on-site laundry. That being settled, the majority of us retired to the catacombs of the basement.

We needed strong drink, decent, non-tinned food, and seats that didn’t slop around every time you sat down.

Well, with the acquisition of our sea legs, two out of three wasn’t bad.

Since the hour was much too late, I decide that tomorrow, well, later today, would be a day of R&R for everyone.

Moreover, I was informed that tomorrow would be the “Day of the Sun” celebration, the insanely earnest celebration birth anniversary of Kim Il-sung, founder and Eternal President of North Korea. It’s supposed to be some sort of big, hairy nationwide deal. But aside from a couple of small posters, we heard little and knew less about the holiday and its celebration.

Everyone’s being even more uncharacteristically low key. It’s odd like there’s something weird going on here.

“What? Something weird and covert and sneaky going on in Best Korea? Pshaw, you old fart. You’re letting the paranoids get to you!”, I mused to

myself.

This place will do that to you after a while.

I asked the front desk to place a note that made the rest of today a day of R&R in everyone's mailbox. After another cigar, some decent prawn stir-fry, and a couple-twelve really stiff drinks, we were all ready to invade the land of Nod for a few hours.

I went downstairs for a drink, a nosh, and a smoke. I ran out of NK won as we tend to use them in Western Expat high-stakes poker games, so I needed to trade some of my weird Middle Eastern currency for weird Best Korea currency.

I was used to the 900:1 won:US dollar (equivalent) trade-off, but after cashing in the equivalent of US\$500 in Middle Eastern dinero, I walked off with 650,000 won, not 450,000.

"Pardon me, Ms. Cashier", I said to the nice little local woman behind the bird-cage security wires, "I do think you gave me too much."

She took my stack, re-counted it, and proclaimed it correct.

"I thought the exchange rate was 900 to the dollar?" I asked.

"No", she remarked, "Now 1,336."

"Any idea what's causing the fluctuations?" I asked.

She just smiled and shook her head 'no'. I smiled back and tipped her 50 UAE dirhams for the information.

“Weird. Now what?” I mused.

Little did I know...

The next morning dawned dim and early as there some sort of something going on outside.

Oh, yes, it was ‘The Day of the Sun’ celebration. I discovered it was is an annual public holiday in North Korea celebrating the birth anniversary of Kim Il-sung, founder, and Eternal President and local Poobah-in-Charge of North Korea. It is the most important national holiday in the country, and is considered to be the North Korean pseudo-secular equivalent of Christmas.

“Well,” I thought to myself, “I picked a damn good day to call for an R&R break.”

Then I found out, why no one told us about any of this is still unknown, that the next two days after the holiday would also be considered a holiday.

Come to find out, there are all sorts of intrusive, inconvenient, and wholly unnecessary nonsense that accompany these high holy days here in Best Korea. There are exhibitions, fireworks, song and dance events, athletics competitions, idea seminars: “Think about it!”, and visits to places connected with Kim Il-sung's life, including his birthplace in Mangyongdae.

Shops close, the hotel televisions block any other ‘programming’ and show only ‘special’ movies. Either ridiculously fake documentaries on the life of the also ever so ronrey Kim Il-sung or movies he especially enjoyed. People parade to his statue on Mansu Hill to deposit flowers; later in the day, it resembled a pollinated glacier.

There's general obviously forced elation, all of which is extraordinarily strained and appears fake. People are trucked by the groaning busload to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun where the dead maniac lies in state.

"Fuck this", I said in the exact spirit of international amity, "I'm going to the bar."

I go downstairs to the basement bar, and even though it's a high holy day, it's open early. It didn't used to be open until the afternoon, but since we've arrived, they have adjusted their hours for us.

They have also doubled their daily receipts. So they've got that going for them, which is nice.

One of my favorite barkeeps was station keeping that morning. I greeted him in the usual style and expressed to Mr. Ho Gun the best holiday wishes.

"Hi! Ho!", I said, "Annyeonghaseyo", which comes out 'Annie young eez-yo!' in my Baja Canuckian dialect.

Mr. Ho laughs at my attempt at Korean, but he does appreciate the effort.

"Doctor Rock", he says, "Dawn greetings. You will drink what?"

Nice and direct, I like that.

"Ye' ken Greenland Coffee, me ol' mucker?" I asked in a swirl of different dizzying dialects.

Koran confounds me, so I thought I'd return the favor.

“No, but I’m sure it’s coffee with some of your usual high-proof liquors, correct?” he smiles as I hand him a nice, oily Oscuro cigar.

“For Best Most Happy Returns: Day of the Sun”, I said, wagging the stogie, as I hand it over.

“However, you are correct. Normally, ‘authentic’ Greenland Coffee is a paltry 1/3rd ounce each of Whiskey, Kahlua, and Grand Marnier with excess coffee. Well, I don’t cotton to those liquors or measures. So my Greenland Coffee recipe, really from Greenland, by the way, is Siku Vodka, or any other high-octane vodka, as long as it’s premium. Then Immiak, which is Greenland’s version of Jagermeister, so let’s just go with Jager. Then finish it off with a shot of Tia Maria or Kahlua, if available. Oh, yes, then hot coffee. Silly me, almost forgot...” I conclude.

“And measures?” Mr. Ho asked.

“Whatever fills the cup”, I replied, in a bastardization of an old Russian toast.

“OK, how about a 35 mils (~1 ounce) stiff shot each booze, then hot coffee to fill your mug? With a chilled vodka chaser, as per usual?” He asks.

“Make it so, Mr. Ho,” I say. “No whipped cream or crème liqueurs, please. I’m lactose intolerant, and, well, no one wants to hear that...”

He laughs and whips together a very nice morning sunriser.

It’s a real day off.

In a very, very weird land.

It's Festival outside and I stayed up most of the night calling people back in the world, creating and updating dossiers, doing explosives-tracking paperwork, worrying over logistics, and how and when the fuck we're going to eventually get out of here.

Fuck it, double front. I'm doing my 'people watch', perched high on Mahogany Ridge. I'm taking, for the first time since, hell, I left the Middle East, some real downtime.

I figured I deserved it.

I was the only one at the bar, but after a short time, there were festival-goers who infiltrated down into the hotel's subterranean catacombs. They didn't know of the bar's recently expanded hours and when they saw me sitting high up on Mahogany Ridge, smoking my ubiquitous cigar, they rejoiced.

Obligatory Festival and alcohol! Better than beer and power tools.

In the Baja Canada time-honored tradition, I have a pile of the local currency sitting on the bar. At the new exchange rate of 1,386 won to the dollar, I'm making out like a bandit.

Drinks here are cheap, really cheap, to begin with. With this fluctuation in exchange rates, which I figured reflected the holiday, I was flush. In the chips. Well-heeled. I've got a lot of what it takes to get along.

So, I was feeling magnanimous. I was tipping people very well.

"Paper?" one local asked.

“Sure. How much for a week-old English version of the Daily Worker’s Manifest and Pork Belly Futures Digest? 100 won? Here’s 1,000. Keep the change.”

Not wanting to become over-caffeinated, I switched from Greenland Coffees after a couple to my usual potato juice and citrus concoction. Each one came in a tall, frosted gimlet glass, a very nice touch, and was expertly made my Mr. Ho after I showed him once when we first arrived.

Each one, with the current exchange rate, was about 500 won; an exorbitant sum for any local. It was about US\$0.40 for me. I bought several for people who bellied up to the bar and tried to engage me in conversation.

I was used to handing out business cards, hell, one never knew where contacts could lead; and not receiving one in return.

Today, I collected four new business cards; two from various European expats, and two from locals.

I guess Festival! time brings out the best and least paranoid in people.

It’s only 1000 hours in the AM and people here are already seriously lubricated.

This will be a fun few days.

I decided to get a rather tall drink in one of my 100-ounce Kum-n-Go travel cups. With all the hoo-ha going on around here, I haven’t seen a handler, translator, or guide since we got off the boat. I decide with all the shenanigans and goings-on around the place on this festival day, no one

would give me nor my wardrobe a second look if I were to venture outdoors for a walkabout.

Besides, we're on a bloody island. It's not like I can go too damned far.

So, quicker than a bunny fucks, I get my drink, fire up a cigar, and walk around the lobby of the hotel. There are the usual comings and goings of tourists, local workers, the security forces, and all that allied tat.

I wait until a tour bus pulls up and all eyes are somewhere besides me.

Pfft! And I'm standing outside the hotel, looking at all the sights.

Which, truth be told, weren't much.

Yanggak Island is a slovenly-manicured island with shrubberies, tracks, trails, and assorted support buildings. The river is basically hidden behind stunted shrubs and evergreens, and the remains of the defunct golf course. There's a stadium on the island, which was thronging with festival-goers today. I don't know what sport, if any, they play there, and didn't care enough to ask anyone.

There was a cinema hall, which was currently empty and looking in need of some dire repair. There's some sort of Chinese health complex in the process of being built or torn down, it was hard to tell which. Needless to say, the scenery paled almost immediately.

I did, after a concerted effort, find a small platform that overlooked the Taedong River. It was a very nice little observation platform with a couple of new-Tudor-esque electrical replica gas lights and two concrete benches where a weary traveler could sit and just watch the river.



So I did.

I was interested in the fish of the river, and wondered if any of the locals did any fishing; or if it was forbidden, as are so many 'proletariat' activities are in town.

I did see a few locals, huddled out of plain sight, down by the shores of the river fishing with long, 10 meter, reel-less poles. In Britain, they would call this type of fishing 'noodling'.

I didn't see them catch anything, but in the bar later, I spoke with a local who told me that they catch various species of fish here. These include Asian Aroana, Blue Guppy, Catfish, Crab, Eel, Halibut, Hucho Perryi, Octopus, Orange Guppy, Pacific Flying Squid, Rainbow Trout, Salmon, and Tuna.

I'm not saying my informant was lying or embroidering the tale, but from the nasty condition of the river, I think Coney Island Whitefish, Cotton River Horse, Dumpster Trout, and Bugle-Mouthed Salmon would be the more common species.

I had enough perambulation and even though I wasn't given the least look, I felt a bit uncomfortable out here. That unfiltered sun and equally unfiltered air. After that, I wandered back to the hotel and went to enter to go to my room.

"HALT! Who goes there?" some door guard yelled at me.

"An American turista who was out on a walk", I replied.

"Impossible!", he replied, "Tourists are not allowed out without their guides."

“Look, Herr Mac”, I said, “I’m Dr. Rocknocker, and I am an invited Western Petroleum Scientist with the UN special-invited group here to evaluate the country’s oil and gas potential.”

“You are not allowed.” He replied loudly.

“My good man”, I replied, equally loudly, "Not allowed? Not allowed? I’m a geologist, I’m allowed everywhere.”

With that, I grab the handle of the ornate door, take a slurp out of my drink, and sally forth into the hotel.

Of course, he goes non-linear. He follows me and is making all sorts of bad noise. He is almost literally dancing around me, pointing, and exclaiming that I’m not allowed.

Then, he made a bit of a mistake.

He grabbed my arm.

Really, really poor career move.

I switched my drink to my left hand and executed a pretty spiffy opposite-side wrist grab on the noisy little nerf herder.

He was so shocked by this turn of events, he went slightly white and was rendered mute for a short time.

I frog marched the little irritant up to the front desk and asked the head clerk there to explain to my captive audience who I was and why I was here.

The clerk smiled and gave the character whom I was dragging around a quick background on the guy who was currently holding him captive. When I heard “*dagteo lag nokeo*, “Dr. Rocknocker”], I dropped this guy’s hand and just took a few steps back.

After a minute or two, he comes over, very, very abashed. He apologizes as he wasn’t told that any Americans were allowed outside the hotel.

I told him ‘No problem’, as I really didn’t have any special permission and didn’t want to get the guy into any trouble. I offered him a cigar, which he refused, but he readily accepted the half-pack of Sobranie pastel cigarettes I had in the pocket of my Hawaiian shirt.

I decided from that point to just stay inside the hotel to smoke, drink, and avoid any further Imperial entanglements.

I wandered on down to the casino because I was bored and it was unusually quiet. Too hepped-up to sleep, too tired to work, it was that odd interarea between “should I be giving a fuck” and “who the fuck cares?”

Leaving the basement, I wandered around the ground floor, just taking in the sights, and looking at the “Festival Specials” at the hotel shops.

I found an empty, unlocked conference room that looked inviting. About two dozen chairs, a large wooden table, TV monitors, and a southern view of the city from slightly above ground level.

I walked in like I owned the place, as it is always monumentally easier to get forgiveness than permission, sat down at the head of the table, propped my feet up, found an ashtray, and began playing with the remote to see what was available.

Evidently, these rooms were available for rent by various factions, cadres, and other sorts of like-minded individuals. However, whoever was here last forgot to re-set the filters on the satellite television.

There was real the BBC, real-time. There was German TV, Russian TV, Japanese TV, and even some American TV; all the best of the absolutely prohibited hit parade.

I shut it down and left immediately. I went to find my comrades. They simply had to see this.

I located Dax first, as he was losing won at a rapid rate down at the basement casino. He said he'd spread the word to any of the team members down in the tunnels and we'd meet at Conference Room #1.

I had taken the precaution before leaving to move the "Occupied/Unoccupied" placard to indicate it was in use and that if you hadn't reserved the room, you'd do best to stay the fuck out.

I waited the obligatory 20 minutes for the elevator and went up to 'our' floor.

I knocked on all the doors where I knew they were occupied by our occupants. I found a few of our team and informed them that if they were so inclined, there would be an unannounced, impromptu, and wholly illicit meeting down in Conference room number 1; complete with refreshments and real, uncensored television. They all agreed and said they'd rouse the rest of our team on the floor.

I was feeling so brazen, that when I went down to the ground floor, I stopped at the front desk and ordered lunch and drinks for my team in Conference Room #1.

“Oh, sir”, the desk clerk responded, “We don’t have any reservations today for Conference Room #1.”

“Well”, I replied, “We are in there and if it wasn’t reserved, how would that have happened? The room would have been marked as unavailable, which it clearly was not; as it was open and available and we are now occupying it. Therefore, it wasn’t marked unavailable so it must have been available; not unavailable as you postulate. It’s almost a simple example of the single equation theory of universal containment. So we are meeting there now and requiring refreshments. It’s simply a logical progression of the facts of the matter.”

“You are, of course, correct”, she immediately responded, distracted by all the Festival goings-on in the hotel, “Now, you said you’d like to order 4 dozen assorted meat and cheese sandwiches, two cases of beer, and a mixed case of bottled liquor?”

“Yes”, I replied, “You see, it’s only going to be a brief meeting. I’ll also need ice, carbonated and non-carbonated mixers, sliced citrus fruit, and an on-call bartender if you have one available.”

“Oh, yes sir,”, she replied, “That will be immediately arranged. Anything else?”

“Yes”, I replied, “I’ll need about a dozen ashtrays, of the larger variety. Also, I am going to leave explicit instructions with you to disseminate to hotel staff that we are not to be disturbed. This is a very high-level meeting

of the scientists of the IUPG. We will be discussing, umm, ‘sensitive information’”.

I used the international ‘don’t-even-think-of-bothering-us’ buzzword to let her know we were being very serious indeed.

“Oh, yes sir”, she stiffened.

“Marvelous”, I said and slipped her 1000 won for her troubles. All sighs of nervousness instantly disappeared.

“Excellent. Excellent service.”, I said, rubbing both hands together most Mr. Burnsly.

I go over to the conference room and see that our order has begun to already arrive. Have to hand it to them, you call for room service and you get room service. Especially if you’re well known around the hotel to be free with imported cigars, pastel cigarettes, and lavish tips.

One by one, my teammates filtered in. There was everyone from our earlier pleasure cruise, and most of the force that remained back in the hotel to prepare the paperwork for our ground assault.

Cigars, cigarettes, and pipes were lit. Sandwiches consumed and drinks were downed. After everyone had a chance to see their home-town, or at least home-county, version of the news, I decided that it would indeed be a good time to have a bit of a meeting. It was going nuts outside with the Festival, and as long as we were in here, we were being left alone.

After the obligatory facilities break, I returned from a 40-minute round trip to my room to get a couple of my field notebooks. I wanted a record of the proceedings, no matter how spur-of-the-moment.

When I returned, I thought the room looked a bit spare. I did a quick headcount and I noted we were missing someone. I glanced through my notes and saw that our Bulgarian geomechanic, Dr. Iskren Dragomirov Dinev, or 'Iskren' was not present.

"Hey, guys", I asked aloud, "Anyone seen Iskren lately?"

There was a brief conclave and the answer was a solid negative.

I called the front desk and got his room number. I asked them to ring his room for me. His room phone rang and rang and rang, but no answer.

"Who last saw Iskren?" I asked the assembled crew.

The Finnish PT, Joon, recalls drinking with him at the casino the night before last. He seemed normally jovial as was normal for him.

"Anyone else? Or since?" I asked.

Again, the answer was negative.

"Something's not right", I thought, my rock sense was tingling. "Dax, Cliff, you're with me."

We all left, stopped by the front desk, and asked for medical assistance. We explained where we were going and the sudden absence of our Bulgarian friend. We expressed deep concern.

25 minutes later, Dax, Cliff, me, the hotel security chief, and hotel doctor were standing outside Iskren's room. We had pounded on the door for a good 3 minutes. He certainly wasn't in the shower.

No answer.

"Fuck this. Open it", I said.

"Under whose authority?" the chief of hotel security asked.

"Mine. Dr. Rocknocker. I'm the team leader of the IUPG crew. Do it." I said.

The door was laboriously opened, as both door bolt locks had to be breached. The room was dark, silent, and entirely unnerving. In the gloom, it appeared that there was a human form, unmoving, on the bed.

"I'm a rock Doctor. I think we need a medical doctor here." I said to the hotel sawbones.

The hotel doctor went in without switching on the lights nor touching anything. He examined the mound on the bed. Apparently, it wasn't a pile of dirty laundry.

"Was the occupant of this room a large Caucasian male, approximately 60-65 years of age?" He asked.

"Yes", we all answered together.

"I'm afraid he's dead." The doctor replied.



Dax looked at Cliff who looked at me. In unison, all that was heard was a tripartite:

“Oh...fuck.”

## Chapter Ten

“Well, if that doesn’t throw the damper on things.” Dax remarks on our trip back down to the ground floor.

“Yeah. How rude. Up and deceasing your own self without bothering to tell anyone beforehand.” I noted.

“This is going to be a bloody balls-up. Trust me. This is going to be inordinately messy. A bog-standard botch job. A total dog’s dinner, just wait and see.” Cliffs adds.

“First, we have to contact IUPGS. Then what? Does Bulgaria have a consulate or embassy here? I wouldn’t think so...Then what?” I grieved. For once, I was rather low; both emotionally and on ideas.

“Let’s go back to the conference room and let everyone know. We’ll pull a brain session together. We should be able to sort out what needs to be done. The hotel already knows, so the state security forces also do as well. Be prepared for lengthy interrogation sessions, Gentlemen”, Cliff advised.

Back in the conference room, we relayed the sad information. All were taken aback and there were general notes of commiseration. However, since no one knew Iskren too well personally, it was more detached professionalism rather than overt weeping and wailing.

“Let us toast to our fallen comrade!” was accepted as both entirely appropriate and a damn good idea.

I got on the conference room phone and ordered up some more sandwiches, mixers, and bottles of booze. The moment was obviously structured that way, I reasoned.

We made our toasts to our fallen comrade and we had half a chalkboard filled with suggestions of what to do next.

The main consensus was: “Nothing.”

As in there was not much we could do. We were foreign nationals in a strangely foreign land. Our comrade was the sole member of his country, that is, Bulgaria, and the closest geographically we had aboard was Dr. Academician Ivan. No one wanted to loose Ivan on the DPRK security forces and have to deal with all that international fallout.

After some number of hours, after I suggested we all remain in the conference room as we'd (A.) be together, as in unity there is strength, (2.) we'd have each other's backs when and if it came to interrogations, and, (iii.) this is where the free booze was.

Then there was a polite knock on the door.

I, as the den mother of this special education class, slowly got up and answered the knock.

It was a cadre of DPRK internal security forces, kitted out in their spiffy, tailor-made, and actually, quite smart-looking uniforms. Shoes and buttons polished to mirror-finishes, pants creases that could cut flesh, and enough polished brass to construct a spittoon.

"Hello? Yes?" I said through the semi-opened door.

"May we please come in? If the time is convenient.", the head military type, very treacly asked.

"Of course", I replied, "Please, do come in."

Four of them entered as one. They did a quick-step, tight-march formation together and went to the head of the conference table.

"Good day, gentlemen. I am Colonel Hwangbo Dong-Hyeon of Internal State Security. First, we must offer condolences on the loss of your comrade. It must have come as a shock." He intones.

There are mutters of "Thanks." and "Damn right it was."

"I have been entrusted to update you on the, ah, 'situation'. First, Dr. Iskren Dragomirov Dinev, recently deceased, has been examined by the best medical practitioners in the country. He was obviously a foreign national and state guest, and we do not wish this to be a cause of suspicion or mistrust, especially during this auspicious Festival season." He asserted.

We listened with rapt attention.

"I am authorized to tell you that it does not appear that the late Dr. Dinev expired of any untoward circumstances; or 'foul play', I believe is the western term. It has been ascertained that he expired due to wholly natural causes; namely massive myocardial infarction. Given his age, apparent health, and, ah, mass, this does seem a most reasonable explanation. This has been verified by no less than three DPRK medical professionals; one of

which is the Emeritus teaching professor of Cardiology at Pyongyang Medical University. Again, you have our deepest condolences on the loss of your comrade.” He continued.

“I do remember Iskren complaining of gas pains the other night at the bar,” Joon agreed. “Thought nothing of it, given the change in all our diets.”

Colonel Hwangbo studied Joon like an entomologist examining a particularly fascinating new species of beetle.

“Which has been fine! Just rather rich compared to our usual food!” Joon hastily added.

Satisfied that Joon wasn’t making light of the ‘fine’ North Korean cuisine, Colonel Hwangbo continued, “As such, the Bulgarian Embassy here in Pyongyang has been contacted and apprised of the situation. They have taken over the case, as well as recovered the mortal remains and possessions of Dr. Dinev; all of which were conserved and authenticated by his Bulgarian national counterparts.”

“Ah, that’s good”, I said, “I’m pleased that there actually is a Bulgarian embassy here.”

“Ah. So.”, Col. Hwangbo continued, “Yes. They have already taken possession of Dr. Dinev’s mortal remains and possessions as I had noted, and will handle their repatriation to his country and family. As you can see, we have acted in the best of faith and with the utmost respect for your lately departed. Again, our condolences.”

There were some “Harrumphs”, and “Yeah, rights”, from the crowd, but since I was the team leader, it fell to me to handle this situation from here on out.

“Yes, indeed”, I replied, “We see that and do so deeply appreciate your efficiency and your keeping open the lines of communication. We have absolutely no room to complain. You, your team, your country, and your services have acted to the highest degree of professionalism and decorum. Let me extend, for the team, our heartiest appreciations in this most unfortunate matter.”

That seemed to please the Korean security forces. So much so they didn’t see the rolling eyes and smirks of grudging compliance from the crowd. I

gave the evil-eye to several who were twittering quietly at my delivery of a load of over-the-top twaddle in the name of international goodwill.

“Thank you, Doctor...? Doctor...?” he asked.

“Doctor Rocknocker.” I replied, “It’s spelled just as it sounds,” I chuckled a knowing chuckle.

Colonel Hwangbo cracked a small smile for the first time since we met.

“As long as our orders of business are concluded, “ I inquired, “Might we offer you and your men a drink or sandwich or...”

“Cigar?” he suddenly brightened.

I smiled the sly, smirking smile of one of those used to the old duplicitous game of international diplomacy.

“Why”, I replied smilingly, “Of course.”

Col Hwangbo gratefully accepted a brace of fine Oscuro cigars. Probably more tobacco he’s seen in one place at one time since the last he roused a snozzled Western journalist or hammered European tourist with an overage of custom’s tobacco allowances.

His team eschewed cigars, but gladly accepted a pack each of pastel-colored Sobranie cocktail cigarettes.

It still slays me to see these battle-hardened, armed-to-the-teeth, unsmiling servants of the great state of Best Korea mincing about the courtyard smoking avocado, baby-blue, and peach-colored pastel cigarettes.

The Colonel and his team left after a couple of quick smokes, sandwiches, and surreptitious beers. I even enticed the Colonel into a couple of convivial vodka toasts when his team was otherwise occupied.

“Well, gang”, I said, closing the door, “Looks like that situation has been handled, most appropriately at that. We’ll miss ol’ Iskren, but at least he went fast and hopefully painlessly.”

I knew that last one was but a load of old dingo’s kidneys as I’ve had run-ins with cardiac disorders in the past and they are anything *but* painless. In any case, that was, as I noted, in the past. What was done is done. It was as it was. It is as it is.

“So, gentlemen”, I say, “Let us get back to work. Reality calls. Now, we’ve given you landlubbers the lowdown on our seismic pleasure cruise. Now

we'd like to hear what you who had stayed onshore have come up with.”

Erlan, Graco, and Viv fill us in on the regional geology of Best Korea and lay out a plan to examine the sedimentary piles closest to the few paved roads in the north and east of the country.

We'll be traveling by bus, as my request for four or five off-road vehicles was denied due to timing and lack of availability.

Yeah. Right. What a massive pile of bovine biogenic colluvium. A country with a military as huge as Best Korea's and they can't spare a few jeeps or Hummer reproductions?

Truth be told, they still don't trust us and don't want to let us out of their sight.

However, we did manage to snag some internal publications from the Central Geological Survey of Mineral Resources, which we figured as a major coup. Never before were Westerners allowed to even know of the existence of these materials, much less be able to research (read: slyly copy) them.

That 'personal shaver' I carried was actually a sneaky personal copier, a Vupoint ST470 Magic Wand Portable Scanner with all the external stickers peeled off, and any serial numbers abraded away.

Hey, they photograph us from every angle on the sly, listen in on our conversations, record our phone calls...hell, turnabout isn't just fair play, it's almost expected.

It'd be rude to refuse to play along.

Anyways, we learned that The Korean Peninsula (KP) occupies a junction area of three large tectonic domains that are the Paleo-Central Asian Orogenic Belt, Paleo-Tethyan Orogenic Belt, and the Western Pacific Orogenic Belt.

Tectono-fascinating.

To summarize:

The Archean Rangrim massif is divided into the Rangrim and Kwanmo submassifs, high-grade region and greenstone belt, respectively.

Early Paleoproterozoic rocks underwent metamorphism up to granulite facies, which may be correlated to the Jiao-Liao-Ji mobile belt in the North

China Craton (NCC).

Proterozoic rift sequences in North Korea are similar to those in the NCC with rare late Paleoproterozoic strata and more Neoproterozoic strata.

Mesozoic igneous rocks are extensively distributed in the KP.

The main Paleozoic basin, the Phyongnam basin in NK, have a similar Paleozoic tectono-stratigraphy to the NCC.

Of most interest is item #5. The Phyongnam basin is the only sedimentary and depositional basin of mention in the north of the Korean peninsula; and therefore the center of our attention as it pertains to oil and gas.

The potential source rocks, and possible reservoirs, include the Paleozoic Late Ordovician Miru Series was identified as the Koksan Series and subsequently renamed. The 170-meter thick limestone and siltstone centered around the P'yongnam Basin have extensive crinoid, coral, and gastropod fossils. Paleogeography researchers have suggested that corals formed in the Miru Sea—a branch of the South Yangtze Sea. At the base of the Taedong Synthem is the P'yong'an Supergroup, which lies disconformably atop older Paleozoic rocks.

In the Pyongyang Coalfield it is divided into the 650-meter sandstone, shale, and conglomerate of the Nogam Formation, the 500-meter Kobangsan Formation, 350-meter coal-bearing Sadong Formation and 250-meter chert-bearing Hongjom Formation, all typically assigned to an Upper Permian shallow marine environment.

In the Mesozoic, north of Pyongyang, Precambrian basement rocks are unconformably overlain by a Jurassic limestone conglomerate ascending to layers of siltstone and mudstone. The Upper Jurassic Shinuiju Formation northwest of Shinuiju has sandstone, conglomerate, and mudstone up to two kilometers thick.

Offshore drilling in the West Korea Bay Basin indicates these rocks are the onshore extension of offshore units. It is subdivided into fluvial rocks and Upper Jurassic black shale, limestone, conglomerate and sandstone formed in a lake environment.

There are very few Cenozoic sediments known in North Korea, likely as a result of erosion due to uplift of the peninsula. Submarine normal faults along the eastern coastline may have driven crustal tilting. The 350-meter

thick Bongsan Coalfield in Hwanghae Province on the west coast preserves and coal-bearing layers dating to the Eocene.

Further to the north, in the West Korea Bay Basin Eocene and Oligocene sedimentary rocks up to three kilometers thick unconformably overlie Mesozoic rocks, formed in lakes and coal swamps during the Paleogene.

What this meant is that we'd need to travel mostly northeast and/or southwest. This was fortuitous as the paved roads in the country were created in structural valleys formed by the primary fault trends in the country. The main trans-tensional set trended NE:SW and the conjugate set trends approximately 90° to the main set at NW:SE.

The topography was heavily dissected by drainages and the terrain consists mostly of hills and mountains separated by deep, narrow valleys. The coastal plains are wide in the west and discontinuous in the east.

The plan was to take the bus north to Suncheon, then hang a right off towards Unsan and Yongha. There were outcrops between the last two towns and they appear to be upper Paleozoic to Lower Mesozoic clastics. Ideal oil and gas hunting grounds.

From there, we'd head north-northeast towards Yangwon. There appeared to be some fair to excellent outcrops of rocks that are as of yet, unidentified as to age. From there, we'd continue to follow the outcrop belts either to their termination at the basin's edges or at international borders with China or Russia.

But, once we hit the field, time goes into relative warp. Put a bunch of geologists out on some relatively virgin outcrops and just stand back as they spend hour after hour after hour first looking for evidence of the formation's provenance, it's age and field relations. Then begin the heartfelt, stalwart, and sometimes vicious, arguments between all concerned about each and every one of those salient points.

We were all looking forward to it and wouldn't have it any other way. It's our intellectual and scientific equivalent of meat and potatoes.

We all agreed on a way forward and generated a document to deliver to those in charge of our logistics on this trip. There would be a total of 11 Western geoscientists, four guides, perhaps a couple of national geologists or geophysicists, and whatever cadre the shiny suit squad wanted to include.



There would also be a driver, his relief, and a couple of extra translators. Good thing it was a large bus, as it's going to be a huge crew.

We needed to allow our handlers a full day to arrange room and board for us while in the field, as we had to be bivouacked somewhere outside our fine hotel. It needed to be secure, pass sanctuary muster, and be 'controllable', referring to both Western scientists and nosy locals.

One thing we found odd was the lack of concern for long-term logistics, not to mention the end of our self-ordained indentured servitude. When this trip and all the Western geoscientists were contacted, we were all assured of an opportunity to meet with the Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-Un once our trip was completed.

We were to personally deliver one hell of an international photo-op. A 'hey look how progressive we are' meeting and our findings in this wonderful and progressive country.

But lately, with what we thought was the fallout of the Festival washing out all the usual propaganda, we've heard nothing about Herr Comrade Leader Supremo, K1J1-Un. Nor had we heard one iota about our intended final meeting with him before we left for China.

Since there are "absolutely no" COVID-19 cases in Best Korea, it seemed, well, odd that Beijing was our only possible current exit port of call, and onward to our individual homes.

There were all flavors of rumors flying all throughout the basement bars and casinos of the hotel. One claimed that Kim was now receiving treatment at a villa in the Mount Myohyang resort north of the capital Pyongyang after cardiovascular surgery. That he was near death and that his sister, Kim Yo Jong, is already warming up in the North Korean political bullpen if her brother kacks it.

Others said Kim is believed to be staying at an unspecified location outside of Pyongyang, with some close confidants. It was said that Kim appeared to be normally engaged with state affairs and there has not been any unusual movement or emergency reaction from North Korea's governing party, military, or cabinet.

There was also one other that tries to cover up any conspiracy rumors by shouting over a raspy bullhorn: "Pay no attention to that man behind the

curtain!", "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!"; but most ignored that little crank.

We all thought that rather odd, but of fairly low concern. In the final analysis, it would have little impact on our studies and their outcome. In other words, it wouldn't affect our pay one way or the other. We all felt like we've given more than what was called for on missions such as this.

And we still haven't a clue as to when this will all come to an end.

However, we all agreed to the consultation, it would have been fun to meet with him and have our pictures taken with the Supreme Leader. Dr. Academician Ivan Ivanovich Khimik. was especially cheesed that he might miss the opportunity to make finger-vee bunny ears behind the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the DPRK during one of our photo sessions.

We all agree if we do somehow find ourselves in the same room with Ivan and Kim Jong-Un, we'll form a human shield around the latter. We want to get back home; as we've all heard the rumors of the horrors of 'political realignment' camps here in Best Korea.

So the meeting breaks up and I'm left with Dax to take the final inventory. Two loads of sandwiches gone, piles of used napkins, ketchup-y table linens, bacon rinds and chicken bones, drippy ends of ice cream cones, prune pits, peach pits, orange peel, gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal, pizza crusts, and withered greens, soggy beans and tangerines, crusts of black burned buttered toast, gristly bits of beefy roasts...

"The hell with this", I say, I grab the last nearly full bottle of vodka and hand Dax a bottle of Royal Navy dark Rum.

"Tally's good", I say, not really giving two tiny shits at this point. "At least, I think it is. Let's make like horseshit and hit the trail."

"I'm headed back to our floor and going to zone out in front of some old, looped BBC for the next few hours with a cold drink and hot cigar." I proclaim.

"Oh, hell", Dax says, "I agree. It's been a weird couple of days. Let's go." And so we do.

On the way, I leave the logistics concerns and itinerary for the upcoming field trips with the front desk clerk. I slip her 1000 won as its Festival! and I had a bulgy pocketful of same. She smiled and quietly said there's be a surprise waiting for me in my room when I got there.

"Rock, you fucking old hound!", Dax exclaimed as he punched me lightly on the shoulder. "Taking a dip in the hotel secretarial pool?"

"Dax, you surprise me", I said in my defense, "I have been, and continue to be, happily married for the last 38 years to the most loving, most intelligent, most well-connected, and most accurate snap-shot with a Glock .380 Automatic I know of."

"Well, me ol' mucker", Dax smiles slyly, "If one has been happily married for 38 years, one must have a little something on the side. Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge, 'eh, Squire?"

"Oh, nothing like that", I replied, while waiting the obligatory 30 minutes for the fucking elevator to arrive. "I couldn't break my word to Esme, and not because I don't believe in a God that will send me to Hell without an electric fan or because it's not the right thing to do. I simply don't want to. A man is only as good as his word; and if he loses that, he loses too much. I couldn't function without people thinking that I'm square and on the level. My business would crumble to dust. As would my marriage."

"Yeah, there is that", Dax agrees, "You say something is going to happen and God damn, it fucking happens. That's what makes you honest and honestly scary."

I stare intently at the annunciator that tells me the fucking elevator is stuck on 4 again.

"You're not mob, are you?" Dax harshly whispers, snickeringly.

I turn to face Dax and smile wistfully.

*"Я с уважением отказываюсь отвечать, потому что я искренне верю, что мой ответ может обвинить меня",* I reply quietly.

"What the hell does that mean?" Dax demands.

"I respectfully decline to answer because I honestly believe my answer might tend to incriminate me", I calmly reply.

"Oh, look. Bloody elevator's finally here." I note and stride aboard.

Dax gets caught up in the tsunami of the crowd and is carried bodily inside. It was so remorseless, he almost lost his grip on his bottle of Dark Rum.

Up on 'our' floor, I go to key open my room. Dax is just down the hall and looking around to see what special surprise might show up. I was too tired to wait so I just push in, and see all my field clothes fully laundered, pressed, and either folded or hanging.

Someone broke into my room during the day and committed a compound neatness.

“POUND! Pound! POUND!” Hmm, appears to be someone at my door.

“Yes, Dax?” I said.

“You too?” he fumed, “Everything, cleaned to within an inch if its life. They even polished my bloody field boots.”

“Oh, fuck”, I said and ran to find mine re-pristinized.

“FUCK! FUCK! FUCKITYFUCKFUCK!” I swore. They had polished my field boots and removed the fine years-of-work-to-acquire near-subsurface of the leather's oil layer. They polished the water-proofing and conditioning out of the leather of our boots.

“OK. OK.”, I said, “Minor emergency. Cool out. I have the solution.”

I toss Dax a small can. It was brown, oily, and claimed to be “Neatsfoot oil”. It was the SPF- 500 of field leathers.

“Go ahead and oil them up with that”, I told Dax, “I've got another can, so don't worry. Use what you need, don't be shy, but if there's any left, let me know. I'll combine ours and offer it to anyone else in the team who had their boots steam-cleaned.”

So, a bit later, I'm sitting on my hotel room's floor, on several sheets of newspaper, rubbing Neatsfoot Oil into my ancient, multinational size 16 EEE Vasque™ Tracker field boots.

Then there's a knock at the door.

“It's open. Enter carefully”, I say aloud.

It's a bell clerk with a room service cart. On the cart are a bucket of ice, a bowl of sliced limes, I think, several gimlet glasses, some Best Korean 'Air Koryo' carbonated citrus drink, and a fresh bottle of “Kaesong” vodka.

“Compliments of the front desk”, the bellman says.

I stand up, tip him a few thousand won, and set a new record in mixology; a fresh brace of drinks in less than 7.3 seconds.

I offer the bellman the lighter one and he accepts with a wide smile.

I say “□□” (geonbae) literally means 'empty glass', which is similar to the expression 'bottom's up'. For you see, my Korean's coming along a treat.

We clink glasses and send those drinks to the places that they'll do the best.

The bellman smiles offloads the cart onto the table in my room, shakes my hand, and departs.

I finish my boots, my drink, and my cigar. After another drink or seven, I crater early. Dax was right; it had been a long, weird day.

The next day, Festival! is still going strong, but still no word on the whereabouts of *El Líder Supremo*. I find that odd, only slightly interesting, and since it will impact the day's events zero, I file it away for maybe later use.

I go to the hotel pool around 0530 and there's no one there. I'm able to get in a good 100 laps, unburdened with either small talk or by yammering kids blocking my lanes. I go early as I don't wear gloves in the water, obviously. Statistically, there is less chance there will be others, adults and kids included, that would get freaked out by my gnarly left hand. I really don't feel like recounting the old Russian Rig Accident story again.

After a brisk shower and double shower-scotch back in my room, I dress casually and wander down to the casino and bar level. It's essentially breakfast time, but with the revelers not giving two hoots to AM vs. PM, it's surprisingly busy. I find a perch up on Mahogany Ridge and order a classical breakfast cocktail of one liter of beer and 100 milliliters of chilled vodka.

I see Mr. Ho is manning the bar. I ask him to ring the massage parlor down the hall and see if Ms. Nang Bo-Hee is free sometime this morning.

He does and reports that she has an open hour and a half at 0900. Would I like it or any portion of that time?

“I'll take the lot”, I said. “Tell them I'll be there spot on 0900.”

“That’s great.”, Mr. Ho says, hanging up the phone, “Doctor Rock, they tell me that with the Festival discount and you taking the full 90 minutes, they can cut you a very special deal.”

“I’ll bet”, I replied, “Like what?”

“Oh, I cannot say for they did not tell me”, he smiled, “They will tell you when you arrive.”

“Marvelous”, I exhaled tiredly. “Another, Mr. Ho; make it a double, if you would please.”

The massage center here is run by a group not employed directly by the hotel. It’s a separate entity altogether. They run specials and have different discount programs that are not only not controlled nor advertised by the hotel, but they’re also not in any way beholden to the hotel, except for rent, I suppose and run it like their own little fiefdom.

Ms. Nang, my preferred masseuse, is a little, tiny Korean lassie about 5 feet tall and probably all of 90 pounds soaking wet. However, she is amazingly well trained and could probably put me in the hospital for a lengthy visit with her wiles and methods of flesh, bone, and muscle manipulation.

She offers a whole suite of different massage genres: Swedish, hot stone, aromatherapy, deep tissue, sport, trigger point, reflexology, shiatsu, Thai, and Rolfing.

Oh, fuck. I know Rolfing. I tried that nonsense back in grad school with an old east Indian lady that could have linebackered for the Minnesota Vikings. That shit fucking *hurt*. Today, it’d incapacitate me permanently. That’s a definite no-go.

I decide that it’s going to be the Hot Stone-treatment today. A geological-manipulation inquiry.

At 0900 I’m the only client at the massage ‘store’. It’s early, day two of the festival, and people are either sleeping off the previous night’s festivities or too wobbly to even think of partaking in a massage.

I’ve had several major back surgeries over the years, including one bilateral laminectomy about seven years ago that removed 7.5 *kilos* of overgrown bone and muscle from my lumbar region, so I’ve been very cautious about soliciting a massage. The masseuse has to know that area is

strictly *verboden* and will do everything to avoid annoying that particular piece of bodily real-estate.

I've walked or limped out of massages before where the practitioner said they understood my reticence, but went ahead and kneaded and provoked that land of keloids and deep-body scar tissue.

However, based on past experience, Ms. Nang knows full well my reluctance as well as my desires. That's the reason I'm returning. She's very, very good; a consummate professional and has a never-ending series of jokes and observations while she's pummeling you into submission.

Today, we retire to a private cubicle and she hands me a small robe or napkin, not sure which, of Korean manufacture.

She tells me to get *au natural* and to wear the robe while she prepares the tools of her trade.

OK, I'm not a small person; not by a long shot. This robe, however, is made for a sprite, not even for a small person.

She returns to our massage cubicle as I'm sitting there, at the end of the massage table, sipping my drink clad only in my dapper red-and-white checkered boxers.

"You need to be unclothed, Doctor. Use the robe. OK, sir Rock?" she says.

"Ms. Nang," I said, shaking my head, "It's one or the other." I show her how laughable the robe is as I can't even get it over my upper arm. It's not even as a tea towel when it comes to covering my expansive acres of exposed epidermis.

"I can close door.", she says, "I'm used to it. I am professional. Does not bother me if it does not bother you."

I lost all forms of bashfulness, timidity, or prudery long, long ago. After years and years of Russian *banya*, Swedish massage, Turkish baths, and surgery; well, if it don't bother you, it don't bother me.

"OK", I say, using the robe as a small two-dimensional breechcloth. She tells me to 'hop' up on the massage table and lie down, facing the floor.

After chuckling about the fact that I haven't hopped for decades, I wander over to the nicely padded and extremely clean massage table and lie down.

She rearranges the 'robe' to cover my backside and tells me to relax. She'll be right back with the stones.

I've never tried this type of massage before, but as a geologist, I must; if for nothing else, progress in the name of science.

Ms. Nang returns with a large parcel consisting of many sizes of steamed stones. They were river-washed and tumbled basalt from the looks of them, all wrapped in a large fuzzy towel.

Now she finds the large towels...

She selects them one by one and places them in 'special, strategic' spots on my exposed back. From the lower 2/3rds of the nape of the neck, down the spine, over the fundus mountains, and down the back of each leg.

It's a warm, almost hot in some places, but not an uncomfortable feeling. She returns to adjust them, grind them in a bit in places, and flip them to extract all that igneous lithological thermal goodness.

I have to admit, at that point, it was feeling quite delightful. Relaxed; I had my drink and was being kneaded. My dorsal musculature was being de-lithified by the application of hot rocks and expert point massage.

All was going quite well as Ms. Nang was building a huge tip in her 'job well done' bank.

Then the rocks had all attained room temperature. She excused herself to reload with another minor outcrop's-worth and told me to flip over for round two of the process.

"In for a dime, in for a dollar", I said, as I flipped over and use the robe as a laughable forward-facing breechcloth.

Ms. Nang mentioned that she was always fascinated by Westerners and their surplus of bodily fuzz. With my long, shoulder-length silver hair, full Grizzly Adams beard that drooped down to my sternum, and torso that picked up where my beard left off; she was quite unprepared to see the beached silver-gray panda that awaited upon her return.

"Dr. Rock!", she exclaimed, "You are as a bear! So much hair. And silver color!"

"Yeah, sorry", I replied, "Just the hand genetics dealt me. I guess it's an adaptation for ethanol-fueled organisms that never feel cold."



“I will soon return.” She titters excitedly and almost runs out of the room.

“Hmmm. I wonder what that’s all about?” I muse as I lie largely undraped in the massage cubicle.

Suddenly, the door bursts open and every female massage practitioner there herded into the room. They simply had to see the specimen upon which the delightful Ms. Nang was working.

OK, truth be told, I was a bit taken aback. Here I am lying on an elevated, and heavily padded, massage table. I’m ‘wearing’ only a crooked, worried grin and a sheet of a cotton washcloth that measures about 12x12 inches.

They Oohed! and Ahhhed!

I did feel like some form of an alien animal suddenly thrust out into public view. It was a bit disconcerting, but as usual, I just tried to deflect any unease with jokes and idiot remarks. At my age, not much is going to bother me, and this I found all the more laughable than troubling.

Suddenly, I was fielding their barrage of questions:

“You are American? All American men so...hairy?”

“Yes and no”, I replied. I also mentioned I hadn’t undertaken a study in that particular subject.

“Why you so big?” one tiny lass asked, eyes as big as dinner plates.

“Genetics”. I replied. “Just a corn-fed Baja Canadian doofus. We grow ‘em big back home.”

“Can we touch?” one particularly brave little lass asks.

“Touch what?” I asked. Look, I might be over 6 decades old, but there are still some areas reserved for my one and only betrothed.

I did tell Esme of this whole event later that evening during our nightly call. She laughed herself silly.

“Your beard! Oriental men never have such beard. We touch maybe?” she implored.

I was going to say “Go nuts”, but I decided that a simple “Sure” would be more fitting.

So they did. They were enthralled. They had never before, from what I was told, seen such a large silver-gray ZZ Top-style beard, especially here at the

hotel. That part was weird enough, but when they started in on working their way south toward the equator, I had to say something to dissuade them.

“Where were you girls 45 years ago?” I laughed.

I don’t think they got the joke. They became somewhat bolder in their austral exploratory activities.

“OK! Time out! Ms. Nang! We have an appointment to keep”, I said as I shooed the rest of the lassies away, “We need to finish what we started.”

By the time that the third syllable of that last sentence came into being, I knew it wasn’t the right thing to say.

They all laughed and tittered as Ms. Nang ushered them out of the room. I could have sworn I heard the door lock behind them.

Ms. Nang reprieved her earlier stone placement therapy, with a couple of strategic detours.

She wasn’t that type of masseuse, and I wasn’t looking for that type of massage. She did, however, knead and pummel me mercilessly.

I’ve been bruised less from barroom brawls.

Finally, she announces that she’s finished. She’ll leave while I shower, as she used essential aromatic oils, and would await me out in the lobby.

After showering, I felt like a large bowl of pummeled Jello. I felt relaxed, and for the first time in weeks, my back was silent. My head was clear as a spring Sunday morn in Reykjavik.

The full 90 minutes, plus sideshow, was 4,500 won.

I paid the owner the required sum and handed Ms. Nang an additional 15,000 for a job well done. And for another anecdote that goes into the hopper.

I left the massage parlor feeling quite fine, thank you. I wandered over to the bar to see if I could augment and prolong this feeling of harmony with the universe. The mental picture even now of all those cooing Korean lassies in the massage room never fails to elicit a laugh and head shake.

A few hours later, I’m back in my room, tidying up my field notes and making certain all my paperwork was heavily encoded and up to date. It

was, so I placed a number of expensive overseas calls to catch up with everyone on the outside.

I'm thinking of calling room service to have my mini-bar repaired when my room phone rings.

"Now who would be calling me at this hour?" I wondered.

It was the tour group leader. He informed me that the itinerary had been worked out and we'd be leaving tomorrow for the field at 0600. We were to arrive with all our luggage and be prepared to check out. We would spend at least a week in the field, if not two, depending on our results, and be bivouacking in different places in the interior of the country.

I thanked him for the information and said I'd inform the rest of the team. He told me that wouldn't be necessary as they would come up to or floor, deliver the notice verbally, or by note if they were out of their rooms. If I wanted to later call each participant and ensure they were apprised of the situation, that would be most appreciated.

I assured him I would do so and that we'd be ready, to a man, at 0600 the next day.

I whip up 10 Post-it™ notes and stick one on each member's door.

"Leaving for the field. Check out 0530. Wheels up 0600. Bring all luggage. Road trip!"

## Chapter Eleven

That being handled, I leave a wakeup call for 0430 as I want a shower and a couple shower-sunrisers before we leave. It takes me about 10 minutes to pack. I call home to let Es know what's going on. She's not in, so I leave a message. Same for my friends Rack and Ruin of the Agency. They're thrilled so far with my reports.

The security forces here are absolutely going to freak if they reverse-review my phone records once we leave.

Covert? Schmovert. I'm too old for playing such games.

The next morning, after a sudsy shower and a couple of vodka-infused shower-beers; I'm in the lobby with all my kit, checked-out, and waiting on the tour leader. My passport was stamp-stamp-stampity-stamped here at the hotel, which I thought was weird, but after spending time in this here country, not all that unusual.

At 0545 on the dime, the tour bus pulls into the lot. Without a word, bellhops grab near all my kit and escort it out to the waiting bus.

After tipping each extravagantly, I fire up a huge cigar, and wander around outside, loitering by the bus. I see members of my team at the front desk, checking out. Everything's been paid for already, they just have to sign documents that they're not secreting hotel towels or televisions or errant nationals in their luggage.

It's a weird country.

I see them loading box breakfasts for us as well as box lunches on the bus. Hell, they're actually doing 'field trip' correctly.

If the bus us fueled up, we can go for days at this rate. There are several coolers bearing the hotel's brand and I sidle over to see what they're carrying.

Case after case of iced-down beer and a couple of cases of various high-octane potables; and over there? A couple of boxes of mixers...ah, soda... pop...carbonated citrusy goodness.

"OK", I sigh, "All is as it should be. Now the field excursion may begin."

My teammates filter outside as does their luggage. I suggest they get out and keep what is necessary for preliminary outcrop excursions; such as a backpack or knapsack, hammer, acid bottles, field notebooks, Brunton compass, lighters, cameras, personal tobacco products, and the like in the bus. That way, we don't have to go tearing through all the luggage at every stop.

I pull out a bundle of 100 [Hubco™](#) large geological *dual*-sample bags. That's right: 'dual' sample...

I distribute these to everyone on the team. I ask that they devise their own numbering system and make absolutely certain I have a copy of it when we're done. I'll be correlating and curating all the samples when we get back to the world.

I ask that a cooler of drinks are left on board the bus, rather than in the hold. It's humid, sticky, and muggy today. We must expend valiant effort in remaining hydrated and this will help.

Luckily, the bus has on-board lavatory facilities.

We are seated on the bus, my 10 collective team members, myself, our 4 'guides', 'Yuk', 'No', 'Man', and 'Kong'; our driver, relief driver, one incredibly shy national geologist, Myung-Dae Soo, and four of the shiny suit clan.

The hotel wheels out a large cart laden with pastries and a huge coffee urn. A bit of a "*Bon Voyage*" from the casino and bar crowd, as they put this together for us when they heard we were leaving.

"Hey. That's really nice of them." Dax notes.

Dax handed over our raw "elevator waiting" funds as we didn't have time to run it through the casino-machine before we left. We donated over 75,000 won to our friends at the bar, casino, and massage parlor. The ones delivering our going away present assured us it would be divided equitably.

"It best be", I laughed, "You never know when one of us might be back!"

There was a collective horrified look on their faces for the merest moments. Then they all laughed and said that they hoped we would return someday soon.

"Nice folks", I thought, "Stupid as shit country, but nice folks."

We had all separately left tips for the room maids, bellmen, and matrons back before we checked-out.

There was a flurry of handshaking and goodbyes. Not a bad hotel experience here in the so-called land of Best Korea.

Serious dark coffee was passed out amongst the riders, but Ivan, myself, and Dax were already giving one of my emergency flasks a workout.

Ivan smiled and said: “We drink our coffee the *Russian way*. That is to say we had vodka before it and vodka afterward. HA!”

Ivan and I are cut from the same bolt.

Faux-doughnuts, pseudo-bear claws and fake-long johns all distributed; the bus is fired up, and rumbling. We are exhorted to watch our drinks as we pull away from the hotel and into the wilds of Northern Korea.

I’m humming away:

On the road again -Just can't wait to get on the road again,

The life I love is bashing rocks in the field with my friends.

And I can't wait to get on the road again

On the road again.

Goin' places that we've never been,

Seein' things that we may never see again...

--

“Rock?”, Dax inquires.

“Yes?” I reply.

“Do please shut up.”

“Music hater”, I muse and comply.

We’re rolling down the highway, as it were, headed generally north. We all have cameras of one kind or another; and rather than relieve us of them, they quietly and without much fuss, slowly darken the windows.

They claim it’s to keep the sun out and temperatures down, but just before things go all black, we’re seeing sights and scenes of the true North Korea. They’re trying to keep us from seeing that en route to the outcrops.

This new bus has some sort of electronic tint-control gizmo for the windows. However, if one has a pair of polarizing sunglasses, as all good field geologists do, you see right past that and can view the passing scenery unencumbered.

I return from a quick beer-recycling loo trip and am amused to see 10 Western scientists, sitting in a blacked-out bus, all wearing polarizing sunglasses.

It was just the surreal note this trip needed as we left the confines of the capital city.

We traveled north, and the empties pile began to grow. We had a few trash bags we had liberated from the hotel, but the shiny suits were very insistent that every empty can, bottle, and bag, yes they had beer in bags...had to be repatriated to a box in the far back of the bus.

Evidently, they either were paid a bounty on each container or were accountable for each vessel. They were soon to realize just the capacity for drink that a group of 11 seasoned very Senior Field Geologists, and one stowaway geologist-in-training can amass.

As we ply our way northward, we see the agricultural side of North Korea. The contrast between rural areas and the capital was striking. There were miles of rice paddies being harvested by people with sickles in their hands. And no cars on the highway. It was most destabilizing for this Westerner.

I think we saw a maximum of three tractors, as most of the work was done with ox power, there was very little evidence of rural electrification. Oh, hold on. We saw many more tractors, I should correct that: we saw three *running* and not rusted *into* oblivion tractors.

The farmers we see are using equipment that is quite literally medieval - single-share plows pulled by large, cranky bovines; sweeping sickles to bring in the harvest, and twin-engine, bilateral, botanical-fired ox-carts to transport it. It's hard to believe that this third-world level of poverty exists in the same country that's capable of building rockets, nuclear weapons, and tall, well-appointed hotels.

But when we stop at a motorway service station for fuel - a bizarre alien spaceship-like building squatting over the empty carriageways - we do encounter a *jangmadang*, or semi-official market. Here they are selling cans

of knock-off Vietnamese Red Bull and Malaysian-made King Cobra™ Cola.

It reminds me of Russia right after the wall fell. Off the Trans-Siberian Railway in Krasnoyarsk, the Gateway to Eastern Siberia. You can buy Chinese hams, Chinese sodas, Chinese knock-off liquor, and those bloody delicious little bullets of Vitamin-C, Chinese mandarins.

Here, it's similar. You can get most anything you desire, except it isn't of Korean manufacture. That stuff is even too shitty to pawn off on tourists.

Instead, it's knock-off Malaysian, Chinese, or Indonesian beer, wine, or soft drinks.

"Tiger-brand energy drink. Now with 40% more real tiger." Here? I believe them.

Vodka from everywhere not known for its vodka distilling prowess. Rural hotel shops sell nastily stale crisps, gummy gummies, filling-ripping 'chewy' taffy or caramel, and biscuits with a severely limited choice. Rural hotels do not have full electricity so beer is warm and often tossed on the table, waiting for tourists to arrive - as is the food. We were warned to be prepared for cold rice, cold fish, cold potato - and plenty of kimchi and tofu.

Back on the road again, we're passing small burgers that are not on any of our maps; even the ones we traded for back in the hotel that are specially marked: "For Internal Use ONLY!".

They were amazingly the same. Clean. Bright. Uncluttered. And attended by cadres of prim, uniform-clad, though non-military people. They were all doing a day's work keeping everything neat and clean.

There were no cars, trucks, forklifts...only rickshaws and ox-carts. However every one of these 'towns' were identical, and exactly, as Ivan pointed out, 'X' number of minutes apart.

"Watch! Is so!", Ivan said. We passed one of these villages, and exactly 3 minutes later, an exact copy. Three minutes later? Another one. 3 more minutes? Xerox-city.

"What the fuck?" Dax asked.

"Potemkin village." Comrade Dr. Academician Ivan replied.



A Potemkin village is any construction, literal or figurative, whose sole purpose is to provide an external façade to a country which is faring poorly. It is for making people believe that the country is faring better, although statistics and data would suggest otherwise.

“Russia pioneered the process,” Ivan noted with no small amount of pride. “During Cold War with West, entire cities were built, moved, raised, and razed. Ever hear of Krasnoyarsk-25? Atomic Research City? Supposed place of weapons study and manufacture. Huge ‘accident’. Entire city demolished, total populace relocated supposedly, after massive nuclear calamity.”

“Is that true? Cliff asks.

“No. Not at all.” Ivan smiles, “Deliberate misinformation. At least for K-25. It was diversion for actual towns where accidents; nuclear, biological, or worse, had happened. West so concerned about K-25 because it was big, near big capital city of Krasnoyarsk and suitably located out in the taiga. Easy to spot, easy to watch. Kept Western satellites busy while real towns of I-33, U-10, and AR-13 out in the forest were quietly demolished and people relocated or mass buried after some horrible, horrible accidents...”

“You think it’s the same here?” I asked Ivan.

“No, Dr. Rock”, Ivan smiled, and helped himself to my freshly constructed, but untouched, Yorshch, “This is all fake and bluster. Make West think everything is all A-OK, is that right idiom?”

“Yep.” I reply, “Precisely.”

“Make West believe all is OK and green”, as he winks at me, “And bustling and growing. Cover up what is real case here. We all see it and we see right through. Shoddy even for Asians.”

We all had to snicker and smirk as the shiny suit squad, who sat up at the front of the bus, and were not supposed to be listening; reacted like every cell in their bodies were just hit with a drop of pure lemon juice.

“Comrade Dr. Academician. Decorum, please.” I snickered.

“Oh, fuck them!”, Ivan replied, “I am old Russian. They try and pull burlap over my eyes? St. Petersburg? Moscow? Krasnoyarsk.? I’ve been there, seen them. They think this display of tawdriness...Even goofy American and Canadian can see the fakes they are. Britisher? I’m not so sure...”

“Damn, Doctor., I said to Ivan, “You’re just making friends all over the planet today.”

We all knew it was in jest; but the shiny suit squad certainly had their feathers ruffled and either didn’t care or wanted us to know we were under their observation.

“Fuck them twice”, Ivan said, “Ask them for bottle opener. I’m too lazy to search for my field jackknife.”

I hand him my pocket Leatherman and he pries the top of another bottle of ‘Budveiser’ beer.

“They can’t even make fake the name correctly”, he smirks and drains the bottle.

‘Town’ after ‘town’ and even that parade gets uninteresting. We’re headed north and finally come to a crossroads.

The bus driver, who must be a regular paranoid-maniac because he actually stopped to look for oncoming traffic, which we have seen precisely none since leaving the capital city, made a hard right. We’re heading back and up into the hills, leaving the bright lights of the big city far behind.

After an hour or so of driving, we pull off to the left-hand side of the road.

“Rock, Ivan, Cliff...holy shit, look at this!” Dax was uncharacteristically excited.

It was an open field that leads to a series of low outcrops of polychromatic, obviously sedimentary rocks. Magentas, greens, purples, rust-reds, browns, blacks, olive greens...holy shit. A real sedimentary pile.

We filed out of the bus with our field gear. The shiny suit squad started in with a bullhorn.

“You will wait for tour guides!”

“You will listen to group leaders!”

“You will not stray from the designated paths set up...”

No one heard them as the group of 11 remaining Western geoscientists were already across the highway and hieing for the exposures like outcrop-seeking multiple-warhead re-entry vehicles.

“You must wait!” we heard from exasperated voices back at the bus. “You must stop!”

“You must piss off!” Cliff said, “This is what we’ve been waiting over two weeks to see!”

“They are very angry with us”, Myung-dae the young Korean geologist said. “I find that just too bad.”

“And you are?” I asked.

Myung-dae Soo, the young Korean geologist, introduced himself.

“Well”, I said, “Welcome aboard. I’m Dr. Rock.”

“They are very, very angry”, he repeats.

“So? Are you tagging along to give them internal reports?” I asked.

“No, Doctor”, he replied, “I too am a geologist. I want to get away from those assholes and see some real rocks.”

“Who are you with?” I ask, “What group?”

“I am 5th-year student at Pyongyang College. I am not *officially* here. We were told in class that you were coming. I decided to see if I could join you. This morning, I was standing by bus and they thought I was hotel worker or orderly. I was given cooler full of beer and told to find place for it on the bus. I did and after that, just stayed in the back. I am stowaway. I am ashamed, but I had to see for myself. But, I like Western field trips so far!”

“No shit? Well, then”, I said, “Double welcome aboard. None of this ‘I am ashamed’ shit. You’re a geologist, but you haven’t even worked through your first field-evening get-together with us. But this is no pleasure cruise. It’s real work, real geology, real serious science shit. You savvy?”

“Yes, sir, Doctor Rocknocker from Sultanate in the Middle East.” Myung-dae smiled.

“And you fucking stay close to me”, I smirked.

I fired a couple of *BLAAATS!* from my portable air horn.

“Field Meeting! Field Meeting! Assholes & Elbows!” I called aloud.

Everyone gathered within earshot.

“OK, guys, here’s the deal. We do not know how long we’ve got here. So, let’s split up into teams. Geophysicists, go do your structural thing.

Stratigraphers? Field relations. Geologists? Let's go talk to some roney-rooking-rocks. No offense, Mr. Myung."

Myung-dae was laughing up a storm. He got that reference. He later told us all around the campfire he thought 'Team America' was a "fucking hilarious movie."

Oh, we are going to be a *real* bad influence on this poor kid.

The groups spontaneously broke up into 4 or 5 sub-groups. They headed for areas they thought were important and they were photographing, measuring, pounding on rocks, and arguing within minutes.

"No, you idiot! It's continental. Look at those adhesion ripples."

"The fuck you know. It's only a little low-level eggbeater tectonics. Where the fuck would you get continental collision-size energy around here?"

"Oh, the fuck you say. It's non-marine. Those are mud cracks. Look at the sandy aeolian infill, fer chrissake."

Formal? Proper? Detached Doctors of Geology?

Not when you're in the field. It all goes out the window when different opinions collide like subducting plates.

"The music of my people!" I said to Morse.

"I thought that was the 'Safety Dance'?" he chided.

"We're a big family. We can have more than one." I snickered.

We're wandering around the site, with individual purpose.

We are looking for or looking at *items of interest*.

We're hacking at the outcrops.

We're all looking at...*things*.

It's hard to describe. Get a load of geologists or geology students out of the office, lab, or classroom; stick them out on a bare expanse of heavily weathered rock and it's simply...numinous.

We're rebuilding worlds here.

This rock says this.

This rock says that.

And you're not fluent in that dialect. Here, let me interpret for you...

We're at each other's throats, in the academic-metaphorical sense. Tempers have been known to run hot. There has been the occasional bloody nose or rocks sailing down an outcrop without the obligate "HEADACHE!" call. Hammers and Marsh Picks have ended up swimming without the owner's knowledge.

But once we're back; settled in the hotel room, tavern, or around the campfire, we're all a Band of Brothers again. It's an odd thing to watch; as if you're not of the clan, you'd need an interpreter. It defies all boundaries: political, sexual, educational, geographical, linguistic, social, *et cetera*.

We're all geologists first. We share the common scientific bond of Geology. That's why Geology is *the* First Science.

Plus we tend to drink a serious fucking whole bloody awful lot.

We've all been on that 'crawlin' home puker'.

We've also been to the ends of the earth: the deepest depths, the highest heights, we deal with the greatest pressures, the hottest temperatures; we've been to the mountain, we've seen the elephant, and we've held a bear's nose to dogshit.

We wear the scars attained in our travels like badges of honor.

We're God-Damned *Scientists*.

Back off, man. [Geologist comin' through.](#)

Anyways, I'm looking at the bedding-plane boundaries between the purple unit and the underlying olive-green unit. The upper unit it looks, to me, continental in origin. Fluvial, perhaps. The lower unit is much finer-grained. Marine mudstone, perhaps? But what age?

The cadged Korean Geological maps are worse than useless. They never would go down to the outcrop scale. Consulting them, they don't even note these exposures in a field sense.

Myung-dae, who is working about 35 meters down-section from me calls out, "Doctors! Sirs! Look here! I've found something!"

We all wander over as he is hacking away at the dusty, eroded rock. He stands and dusts off his find.

It's a very large, nearly 1-meter diameter, coiled fossil cephalopod.

I wander over for a closer look. Dax, Cliff, Morse, and Ivan do as well.

“Blimey! Will you look at that? Outstanding, Mr. Myung!” Cliff says.

“Well, that confirms it. This layer, at least, is marine. Look at that suture pattern”, I say, dusting off an unweathered bit.

“Look at the radius of coiling.”, Cliff joins in.

We’re slowly wresting information out of this silent witness.

“Ornamentation?”, Dr. Ivan asks. “Knobs, bosses, and excrutions?” Oh, yes.”

In unison, we declare: “*Hyphoplites!*”

Morse adds, “And therefore...these rocks are middle Cretaceous. Marine. Not bad...”

“Need to get some samples for geochemical analysis. Dig deep, gentlemen, we need unweathered samples for TOC (Total Organic Carbon) content.”, Dr. Erlen Meyer notes.

With that, we have a relative age of the rock, a good idea of its depositional environment, and therefore extent, ideas of field relationships, and an indication of some of its fauna.

Could it be source rock worthy?

Samples? Best get diggin’, Beaumont.

That unit is right smack in the middle of this pile of rocks. Dax and I will work up-section and Ivan and Cliff will work down-section. We’re going to see what lies above, what lies below, what trends we can discern, and develop an idea of what happened here some 100 million years ago.

This is what happens when you get geologists out in the field with the proper amounts of field gear, outcrops, and alcohol.

Overall, the deeper down-section, and therefore, earlier in geological time you go, the more marine the rocks are. Conversely, the higher you go in the column, i.e., up-section, into younger rocks, the more continental it appears.

We find fragments of marine fish fossils, sea-crocodile scutes and teeth, heaps of mosasaur coprolites, i.e., fossil shit piles, and other indications that the lower, older rocks are Lower Cretaceous ocean basin-fill.

But up higher; we find mud cracks, rain prints, land turtle shells, land-snails (*Bellerophonitid* gastropods), and what may actually be a fossil feather. All indications of a more continental, i.e., fluvial (river), floodplain, lacustrine (lake), and paludal (swamp) deposition.

That's my particular bailiwick.

I'm 'elephant walking' along the upper outcrops looking for fossils. You basically bend over at the waist and sweep from left to right as you take exaggerated step after step, scanning the ground looking for...well...it takes years, but once you see it, you never forget it.

"Fossil sign".

A disjunct endemism. Something not *in situ*. Something *out of place*. A bit of a different, out of context color. Out of context texture. Out of context size. Out of context *context*.

Something that looks like it shouldn't ought to be there.

I'm picking up 1 cm. square hunks of what look like an ordinary rock. I taste them. Well, I stick them to my tongue. If it liquefies and runs away, it's ordinary mudstone, shale, or the like.

If it sticks...well, it might just be fossil bone.

"PTWTWOO!"

"Damn right, Rock", Cliff says from behind me, "Fucking North Korea tastes terrible."

"Still, it's the best way I know to..." I paused.

"Got something?" Cliff asked.

"Look here." I said, "Anthill. Big, nasty buggers. Look around the edges. Pieces of flat, cream-colored rock on this gaudy purple stuff. Tongue test? They stick like cockleburs. Let's look upslope, see if there's a drainage..."

There it was, a nice little drainage incised about 1.5 meters deep into the nearly horizontal rocks we were walking on.

"Any float?" I asked.

"Not yet," Cliff said.

We followed the weak, little drainage that was cut into the outcrop, up another couple of meters.

There were very scrappy, very small, very scattered pieces of that same cream-colored rock. Some were ornamented with a scroll-work or some sort of striations. Most un-geological. More biological. We followed the trail, up here, around here, over there.

Cliff noticed it first, a soccer-ball sized lump of completely out-of-place crème-colored 'rock' working its way out by gradual erosion of the variegated pastels of the continental rocks upon which we were treading.

I got there first and began to clear the area with my Estwing.

"Careful. Careful", Cliff admonished.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Mind your Mincies. [Mince pies = eyes]", as I'm swinging away at the reluctant, reticent, rocks.

The excavation grew, slowly. From the rounded dome, we could see small sutures that had developed...

Then condyles, fenestrae, then more 'bone'. Then a jaw, teeth, vertebrae...

"HOLY DOUBLE-DAMN SHIT!" I tootled my air horn. We needed the group to see this.

It was a skull. A dinosaur skull. A small, non-avian dinosaur skull.

Everyone has crowded around and looked at the small quarry we had just built.

"Whatcha got, Rock? Cliff?" Joon asked.

"Fuck me, but I think we've got us a dinosaur skull," I said.

Professor Doctor Academician Ivan walked over and cleared the area.

As Professor Emeritus, he had pole position priority.

"I agree." is all he said.

I cleared the area and let others take a whack at opening up the quarry.

We may have been low on power tools, but we had a surfeit of opinions.

"OK," I said, "Let's look at the facts..."

Age? Cretaceous. Probably lower to lower-middle Cretaceous.

Continental deposits. That's very fine sand we're hacking away. Fluvial, without a doubt. Or, possibly aeolian; there's no such thing as a geological certainty. Dunes? Ephemeral creeks? Low floodplain? Geo-talk... .



Small size. Potentially a juvenile?

Nope. Not a juvie. Sutures are closed, fused. This is, well was, an adult; perhaps a subadult, given its size.

*In situ*? In place? Or washed in?

Hard to tell when all you've exposed is half the critter's brain box.

"Look at that!" Myung-dae exclaimed, "Squamosal bones and the inner parietals...temporal fenestrae. It had a frill; a small one."

"OK," I said, looking closely at the exposed scrappy remains, "Fucking-A Bubba. Nailed it." I said, giving him the thumbs up.

"Ceratopsian. Look at those greens-grinder molars. There's some small osteoderms on the skull; knobby old bastard. Early critter." I continued.

Others looked around and confirmed my observations.

"Reminds me of *Protoceratops* from when I was back in Mongolia," I said.

Dax chimed in with, "Looks something like *Psittacosaurus* from back in the Cretaceous Belly River of Canada."

Drs. Ivan and Morse agree. "Most assuredly. It is definitely proto-ceratopsian. Young adult, as Dr. Rock notes by the cranial sutures. Do they have a record of proto-ceratopsians here?"

Myung-dae replies, "I have read reports of Korean proto-ceratopsian found in South Korea. Not long ago, 2019, it is called...ah... *Auroraceratops*. It is a genus of bipedal basal neo-ceratopsian dinosaur."

"Bipedal?" I query. "Well, there's a fine how do you do. All the proto-ceratopsians I've known were obligate quadrupeds."

"Well", Ivan, Dax, Cliff, and Morse agree, "That should give the shiny suit squad something to report. That'll keep them the hell out of our hair for a while."

We photograph each step as we excavate the critter. It's more or less *in situ*, buried where it fell. Probably killed by a sand slip off a dune, or a river sandbar slip and burial. It's not complete, but we do have the skull and a good portion of the post-cranial elements to about just before the pelvis. A good pectoral girdle, skull, jaw, frill, forelimbs, forefeet...easily half-a cute little herbivorous dinosaur. About the size of a smallish Highland Coo or large Great Dane.

We flag it with the team particulars, it's GPS position, and carefully rebury the animal. We don't have any of the equipment nor time to excavate it properly, but we can conserve it. Of course, we'll be informing the proper authorities of our discovery.

I have an absolutely ancient Polaroid instant camera. Before re-internment, I take several pictures of our "*Koreasaurus*", as we've dubbed the animal, with items for scale; like a hammer, cigar, and oddly enough, a photographic scale. Then I get a photo of the whole crew standing around, drinking warm beers from their individual day packs, smiling about the find 'they' made.

We hear the melodious tootle of the bus's horns. We make sure to pack out all our trash and wander back to our terrestrial transport.

"You were gone too long!" the chief shiny suited character goes all ballistic on me.

"Watch yourself, Herr Mac.", I calmly said, "You're going to burn your nose on my cigar."

"You left without your handlers...err...guides!" he fumed.

"Hey, Scooter. Cool out. We're geologists. We never get lost." I said.

It sometimes just takes us longer to get back than it took us to leave...

"Your impertinence will be reported." He smoldered.

"Report this, Mother Chuckler", I observed and held out the pictures of our newly discovered *Koreasaurus*.

"Show those photos to *your* handlers," I said in a mocking tone. "We found a brand new species of God-damned dinosaur for you geezers. It took us less than two hours. You can spin it that it's a new, never-before-seen species of very specialized dinosaur found right here in beautiful Korea del Norte. Be quite the scientific coup, don't you think? Trust us. We won't say anything."

He immediately shut up and went into conference with the rest of the shiny suit squad.

"Doctor", one of the clan covert asked, "This is a new dinosaur?"

I had a thunderbolt of an idea.

“Oh! Yes, it is. I’d stake my reputation on it. You’ve had no concerted search here for the beasts and well, with the normalizing of relations between your country and the world, it allowed your specialists to perform real science. In fact, on the bus is the young North Korean geoscientist who made the discovery.” I said. “Give me a minute. I’ll go and get him. I think he was off taking a shi...ah, using the lavatory. Just give me a minute.”

I did have an idea. A wonderful idea. A wonderfully evil idea.

Back on the bus, I ordered the doors closed.

“Gentlemen! Ears and eyes! Please.” I said loudly.

Continuing...

“The shiny suits have their knickers all a-twist because we don’t want to listen to them; the assholes. Fuck that. I’ve got an idea. Let’s make our young acolyte here, Mr. Myung-dae Soo, a national hero. He would probably get his ass in a crack for sneaking on board the Western bus today the way he did. Well, double fuck that. Let’s all say *he* found the dinosaur. Let him take the glory for the homeland. No one else will ever need to know.” I said smiling.

“Fuck Yeah! You bet! Замечательное! Ihmeellisiä! Maravilhoso! Geweldig!”

Good to know we’re all on the same page. Geologists. You can always count on them...

“Mr. Myung-dae Soo? Front and center. Time to go and become ‘Hero of Best Korea’.” I smiled.

He was absolutely terrified.

“Doctor...I ...don't...wait...no...” he stammered.

Cliff, Dax, Ivan, and I trotted him out to confront the shiny suit squad.

“Don’t worry, Myung. We’ve got your back. Trust us.” I said in a low conspiratorial tone.

The shiny suit squad turned as one and gave Mr. Myung the Stink Eye treatment.

“Here you go. The man of the hour. Mr. Myung-Dae Soo, young geologist and up and coming paleontologist.” I say loudly and with the utmost honor.

They look at him and the Korean erupts in rapid-fire staccato bursts.

Cliff just wanders in and interjects, “Yes. Righto. Top form. Found the float. Tracked down that dino like he was on safari. Highest marks. Good man!”

Dax adds more fuel to the fire. “Like he knew where to go, knew where to look. He’s a natural.”

Dr. Academician Ivan blustered forth: “Excellent scholar. Excellent field man. Banner geologist.”

I couldn’t have added more. The shiny suit squad was gobsmacked.

I asked Myung-dae what they were saying.

“They were talking about reprisals. Reporting to authorities. Then, they stopped. You have them completely confounded.” He said.

“How so?” I asked, quietly.

“Between an international incident where we don’t listen to our handlers and this potential important scientific discovery.” Mr. Myung-dae reported, trying hard to parse the evolving situation.

“Yes”, I added to Ivan’s bluster.

To the shiny suits: “I’ve worked as visiting Dinosaurian Vertebrate Paleontology Curator at all the major American museums. This is a find quite unlike anything known. It is a watershed discovery. It will help unravel the evolution and distribution of the clan *Dinosauria* for the whole Korean Peninsula. Perhaps, even with international impact on the recent finds in China.”

I laid it on with a trowel.

I hit all the buzzwords.

“Yes. Yes, perhaps.”, the head shiny-suiter said. “I will report this bit of very good news to the proper authorities. Myung-dae, with us. We require more information.”

“Ah, we’d prefer him to ride in back with us if you don’t mind. Scientific courtesy, old man. He needs to be classically de-interviewed after such a find.” I insisted, making certain I stand as tall, wide, and menacing as possible while smiling like a damned Cheshire cat, one smoking a very large cigar.

“Very well. We are not far from our evening stop. We can talk later.” He agreed.

We all moseyed, laughing silently, back to the bus; literally supporting our young hero Mr. Myung-dae as he seemed to have gone all wobbly of late.

Myung-dae was ashen-white. He looked like he had just given birth to a basketball. He was visibly shaking.

We get on the bus and I whip up a stout Yorshch for the young hero of the hour.

“Here! This is for you. If you’re going to be a world-class geologist, you’d damn sure better start acting like one.” I smile broadly.

There were hoots, cheers, and cat-calls.

Beers were popped, bottles uncorked; cigars, cigarettes, and pipes lit.

“Damn Skippy!” some anonymous reveler added.

Myung-dae slurped a good half the drink. I offered him a cigar. He stopped shaking enough to accept the novel offer.

Remember “crawlin’ home puker”? He’s taken his first step into a larger world.

OK, just to recap. Here are the *dramatis personae* left on the bus...

Bus driver (Kim) and his relief (Won).

My team and I. That’s 11 Western geoscientists: Morse, Cliff, Volna, Ack, Viv, Graco, Erlen, Dr. Academician Ivan, Joon, Dax, and myself.

Then there are our guides: Yuk, No, Man, and Kong.

Our stowaway hero geologist-in-training: Myung-dae Soo, aka, “Mung”.

And the four members of the shiny suit clan: Pak, Mak, Tak, and Jak. At least, that’s the names we used when we addressed them.

The bus was rumbling down the deserted highway. We were headed more or less due east, passing the occasional Potemkin Village. They knew we cracked their code long ago, so they didn’t bother with darkening the windows any longer.

We are passing a series of highway road cut outcrops. We’re only going approximately 35 or 40 miles per hour. Suddenly, Morse jumps out of his seat and runs up to the driver.

“STOP! STOP! Back up! We almost missed it!” he barks in heavily Russian inflected English.

The driver, shaken to the core, just slams on the brakes. The bus grinds to a stop. Good thing there’s no traffic out here.

Or anywhere else, for that matter.

Jak of the suit clan jumps up and asks “What is the problem?”

“How could you miss that?” Morse shouts. “Huge fault. Mineralization. I saw that from a glimpse. We must return to investigate.”

“Is not possible. We have appointment at the hotel.” Jak replies.

“Fuck that!”, Morse shouts. I guess he’s just really into faults...

I wander up and try to defuse the situation.

“OK, guys, cool out. Let’s be reasonable. Do it our way. Go back to that road cut. We spend a half-hour there then we go on to the hotel. The hotel will still be there when we arrive, won’t it? Even if we’re a bit late?” I ask.

Jak looks to Pak, who converses with Mak and Tak. They know they’re outgunned.

The driver shifts the bus into reverse and we *back* down the luckily deserted highway over a mile to the outcrop in question.

We had to admit, it was a mother beautiful normal fault. In perfect, textbook cross-section.

Morse and Joon were on it like white on rice; given the mineralization along the fault plane. All sorts of implications for the thermal and geological history of the area. But with just one exposure like this, more or less just a real interesting geo-oddity.

We spent precisely 30 minutes at the exposure, and when our handlers requested we re-board and head to the motel, we complied like nice, normal sort of folks.

I believe the appropriate maxim here is: “Lull them into a false sense of security...”

Once more down the road we travel. Beers popped, bottles uncorked; you know, the usual.

Forty-five minutes later, we pull into, I kid you not, a replica US of A 1950s *Motor-Inn*.

“Mr. Myung”, I ask, “What the hell is this?”

## Chapter Twelve

“I do not know, Rock”, he slightly slurred, as he was working on Yorshch number 3, “I have never before traveled out this far beyond the city.”

“Wait one.”, I demand, “You’re a 5th-year geology student and never been out of the city? Don’t you go on field trips?”

“They are forbidden.”, he smiled back, “That’s one reason I decided to go with you on your bus.”

I looked at Dax, Ivan, and Morse.

“Un-be-fucking-believable.” I uttered.

Even more un-be-fucking-believable was the “Rancho Bright Star” Motor Hotel. Right here, in the wilds of Best Korea.

We pull into the parking lot of the motel, and the bus parks down about 300 meters along the side of a small lake.

Yes, a small lake. Complete with piers, those goofy [swan-boats](#) you peddle along in, and [paddle boats](#) like these.

OK, let me try and set this surreal scene. We’re out in the wilds of Best Korea, somewhere northeast of Pyongyang, between Kaechon and Tokchan as best as we can figure it.

We have just pulled into a roadside motel that is a displaced molecule of the 1950s western US.

There is a central unpaved elliptical trackway, around 350-450 meters to a side.

The east side borders on a suspiciously man-made looking lake complete with paddle boats, piers, and benches for sitting while gazing out over the wonders of this diminutive out-of-place body of water. The motel boasts rental fishing gear, bait for sale, and swim toys such as lie-lows, rafts, rings, and the like for guests intent on lake frolicking.

In the center of the ellipse are wooden beach-style chairs, lounges, seats, and benches. There is a large pile of firewood and a central fire pit.

On the western side of the ellipse are a zig-zag series of single-and-double occupancy cabanas. There are exactly 19 of them. All identical, all with



wide bay-windows to overlook the glories of the parking lot and the faux-lake beyond.

Also on the western side, but set back slightly, just after the entrance; is the front office building, central store, and restaurant.

We all walk off the bus, just scrutinizing and gawping where we've arrived.

As an American, I think I was the most confounded by all this. I've stayed at places in Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico that looked identical to this place. However, that was almost 50 years ago.

The Canadians, Europeans, Russians, and other assorted geographical sundry might have seen pictures like this in Like® and LOOK® magazines, but they've never before really experienced them. They were just befuddled and amused.

I was genuinely and abnormally speechless. But I recovered quickly.

We were told by Jak, Mac, Tak, and Pak to go and stake out a cabana for ourselves. They would retrieve the keys for each and have them distributed them as necessary. Our luggage would be taken off the bus and brought to our cabanas by motel employees once we were all set and sorted.

"Ones who can read English, Russian, Portuguese, Canuckian?" I mused. "More of the shiny-suit squad, undercover division."

We all took our respective cabanas and luggage was quickly distributed. I was somewhat abstemiously impressed at the efficiency.

The cabanas were new. Not just 'slightly used', or 'sort of new'; I mean brand-spanking, brushed aluminum, and Molly-be-damned new. We couldn't have been the second or third guests in here. The only blemish that betrayed any previous occupant was a minor cigarette burn on the side of the washbasin in the small bathroom.

The cabanas all had a nice, firm bed, a table, a few chairs, a fully stocked mini-bar, no phone, but a television and nausea-inducing-color shag-pile carpeting.

It *was* a real throwback to the 1950s.

My reverie was interrupted by a knock on my cabana door.

"Dinner in 30 minutes. Main restaurant. Front of complex." barked an orderly.

“WOOF!” I barked back.

Not knowing if this was a dry county of Korea, I decided to grab a bottle of vodka and a couple of beers out of my private stash to accompany me to dinner. I decided to finish the cigar I already had lit rather than light another for the long slog to the restaurant.

About 15 minutes later, I’m swinging a liter bottle of real 100-octane Russian vodka like a dinner bell. I have two tall cans of Taedonggang Special Dark in the pockets of my field shorts. I have on my best, new, and most hopelessly garish Hawaiian shirt, “Laika was the First Party Animal” T-shirt, freshly whisked field boots, and my obligatory Stetson. Of course, I was chomping a cigar; but it was new and as of yet, unlit.

I arrived at the hotel front office and was steered to the back where the restaurant lived. There were placards at each seat with our names and affiliations, albeit in Korean. Luckily, a quasi-sober young Mr. Myung was there and helped us find our proper seats.

I was at one end of the table and it was Dr. Academician Ivan at the other end. Evidently, in Korea, it’s a big, fat, hairy deal where one is seated at the table during these assembly dinners. I was at one end by dint of being the team leader and Ivan the other as he was the oldest old fart on the team.

“Nonsense!”, I said, as I dragged young Mr. Myung from his seat and plopped him down at the head of the table where I was bid to sit.

“The man of the hour!” I said. No one, except for young Myung, complained in the least.

I poured him a very stiff drink.

“Cool out.” I exhorted, “You need to learn to observe, to learn...” I smiled.

Evidently our guides, No, Kong, and that crowd, were eating elsewhere that evening.

However, Pak, Mac, Jak, and Tak of the shiny suit squad were joining us on that eventide for victuals.

I held up my unlit cigar and asked the crowd: “Objections?”

There were none as most were smoking cigarettes or pipes by this point.

I pulled out the brace of beers I brought along and set the liter of vodka to the right-hand side of my plate.

A most Russian maneuver.

I looked down the table. Not a single one of us failed to bring along something high-powered to drink. It was unanimous. Not a single geologist there, save for young Myung, failed to bring along a Safety Blitz.

It proved unnecessary, as the shiny suit squad shuffled in, sat down, and barked orders to the rarified air.

Bottles of local beer, nicely chilled, appeared for everyone. Bottles of local hooch also appeared and were distributed around the table at strategic intervals. Our unopened personal drinks were set aside for later. We wouldn't want to seem ungallant now, would we?

It was all very proper, that first set of table toasts.

The shiny suit squad was wound pretty tightly that night. What with a bunch of self-thinking and operating western geoscientists doing whatever the hell they saw fit, the young Hero of Best Korea, a stowaway, but finder of new dinosaurs. I think we just overloaded them with new, unmanageable, voluminous, and contradictory information.

They were used to servile, subservient sheep; not crotchety old knurled rams like us.

Of course, we had two Russians in attendance, plus an American who spent many years in Russia and thus considered a naturalized, though still rough-around-the-edges, Russian.

OK, Siberian.

It's didn't take long, but after the first wan and halfhearted toast to the east and the west and various other sundry semi-pleasantries, one or more Russians would take over the chore of Tamandar, or toastmaster.

Professor Dr. Academician Ivan leads off between the first round of drinks and the limp, grisly-looking semi-green salad course.

Dr. Ivan: “Давайте выпьем за успех нашего дела!” [Let us drink to the success of our project!]

There were the appropriate responses and “Here, here's!”

Then, Dr. Ivan noticed our hosts in the shiny suits were solely social sippers.

Toasting is a seriously big deal. Once a toast has been voiced in someone's honor, drinkers who participated in the toast are expected to drink their glass dry as a show of respect to the toastee.

Only a sip? This will not do...

“Пусть мы будем страдать так же печально, как капли водки, которые мы собираемся оставить в наших очках! [May we suffer as much sorrow as drops of vodka we are about to leave in our glasses!] Dr. Morse commands.

In other words: “Bottoms Up!”

However, the glasses are always topped up after every toast – this is called “osvezhit” [refresh] in Russia.

And so, not with a whimper, but with a bang, the evening began...

There were bottles of Korean Soju, of course, in many different flavors and strengths. We left the lighter stuff for the guys in the shiny suits. We were soon inadvertently and unknowingly publicly shaming them by only opting for refills with the highest octane of the brands available.

They took that as sort of an affront; perhaps not intentional, but damned if they'd let a mob of western geologists get the better of *them*.

You can see where this is headed, can't you?

Along with the Soju, there was *Hongju*, a red-colored and oddly-tasting liquor of local origin. There was *Okroju*, a millet, rice or sorghum-sourced distillate of around 90 proof. Also present was *Munbae-ju*, a pear-flavored drink with a mild, 80 proof kick.

Aside from distilled spirits, several types of wine, such as *maesil-ju* (plum wine), and *bokbunja-ju* made their appearance, as well as the ubiquitous beer. Apart from the offerings of the Taedonggang Brewing Company, there were Chinese beers like Tsingtao and Harbin, along with some, surprisingly, European beers like Erdinger, Tiger, Bavarian Pils, and Heineken.

The non-Korean beers were not included in the cost of the meal, so I slid the head waiter some 75,000 won, or about USD\$60.00.

“Is that going to be enough to cover the drinks tonight?” I asked Myung to translate.

“Tonight. Tomorrow. Next week. Yes!” He laughed. He was finally getting into the spirit and spirits of the evening.

OK, drinks were handled. We also had our own supplies with us and larger larders back in our cabanas; just in case.

The fuse was well and properly lit.

After the salad; a soup course of thin, some sort of edible, we hoped, animal broth was served. We scrupulously knew to say nothing but high praise about the food we were being offered, even though it was others (the UN Discretionary Forces) that were paying for this ‘feast’.

The toasts ran from the light: “Good to be in good country with good friends”. Thanks, Dax.

To the ridiculous: “May the fate of our countries aspire as high as the esteem we have for this banquet.”

OK, I laid it on a bit thick with that one. Every Westerner snickered; they saw right through my verbal façade. The shiny suit squad was definitely getting slightly swozzled, as I saw one surreptitiously swipe away a tear in appreciation of such high homage.

Over the meat course, which bets are still out pending results of the DNA tests Erle will run once back in Calgary as to species; we had time to sit, reflect, have a smoke, and relax a while.

Of course, Dr. Morse chose this time to take his Tamandar duties out for a little exercise.

More toasts. More bottoms up! incitements. More beer! More wine! Don’t let your glass go dry. Try this! Try that! What the fuck is this other thing?

“Up your bottoms!” one of the shiny suits said in a fit of shaky oriental reverie.

The empties pile grew at a prodigious rate. One box was for liquor bottles, deader than Julius Caesar. Another for wine bottles. Yet another for cans, bottles, and bags of beer; which we thought most amusing.

The dinner wore on, all 7 courses of gustatory delight. In between each, a round of toasts which, by now, had orbited the table once and was attempting re-entry.

The geoscientists by this point were just getting started. After the mystery meat, sweet puddings, cakes, and pie for afters, and a cheese board with wine course; our hosts thought we'd all be either so exhausted or shitfaced that we'd have to be dragged to our cabanas via forklift. Or ox-cart, whichever was most convenient.

Sorry, *nae chingu* [my friend], not this crowd. There was a fire pit outside, a lake that needed investigating, swan boats that needed to be tested for seaworthiness, and loads and loads of beer, wine, and booze that required drinking.

Besides, we needed to curate our hand samples. We still had some real work to do.

After the final toast; Pak, the head of the shiny suits stood, wobbly, and bade us good night.

We all replied 'good night' to him, and as a man, stood up, grabbed all the liquor we could carry, and headed to the firepit and chairs outside by the lake.

The absolute, abject appearance of alcohol-tainted alarm on their faces was one I wish I could have captured on film.

Dax was there first and began building a council fire in the firepit. Have to hand it to the crazy Canuck, he knew his campfires. He had a roaring blaze going within the space of 10 minutes.

We all re-adjusted our chairs around the campfire and attended to our samples. The larger portion of the hand sample would go into the bigger bag for testing and identification. A small piece representative of the whole would go into the smaller bag. All field tags would be filled out with proper identification numbers. The smaller bags were tossed into a common pile for future laboratory investigation; the larger bags, by dint of their mass, would go into the cargo hold of the bus. No matter how you sliced it, there would always be samples for analysis; one size or the other.

That took about a half an hour and during that magical time, little was said, although vast amounts of beer and liquor, as well as cigars and cigarettes, disappeared. This was a solemn field-time tradition. It was the traditional cap to the day in the field.

After that, the really serious drinking and relaxation set in.

We all sat around the fire, and in the spirit of the [Four Yorkshiremen](#), spontaneous field stories broke out.

Pak, Tak, Jak, and Mak joined us; but at a bit of a refined distance. They really, really wanted to go to bed, or call their superiors and report what they were being forced to go through, or be just about anywhere else on the planet rather than here.

Now the drinking began to get serious.

“Rock”, Dax said, “You old duffer. Regale us with the tale of your finely fuckered fingers.”

There were a few audible gasps around the fire at that time. Everyone knew of my physical deformity but scrupulously avoided mentioning it out of fear of breaching propriety.

“Why, Dax!”, I said loudly, superficially fighting back real pain, “God damn. You know how sensitive I am about my hand! Fuck! How can you ask? Such unmitigated gall! Such hubris! I am appalled and aghast!” I whiled down to a sullen silence...

Even the guys in the shiny suit squad looked horror-struck. How could one callout an obvious bodily deformity much less make light of it?

“Oh, sorry, Rock”, Dax quietly replied, “Is there anything I can do to recompense?”

The entire crew went silent while they waited for my reply.

“Um....yeah...well,” I said quietly.

Then I said very loudly: “Get off yer dead ass and make me a stiff fucking drink while I tell everyone here of my Siberian close-shave, ya’ hoser!”

I was able to dodge most of the empties thrown my way, but I did catch a couple right in my gaudy new Hawaiian shirt.

No respect.

I spent the better part of a half an hour regaling all present with my tale of finger-fuckery. The lost circulation, the spraying mud, fire on the rig, the worm, and the power tongs, all in most-detailed Technicolor and ethanol-fueled anecdotalism.

They laughed, they gasped, they got white at some junctures. I didn’t leave out anything. It was a full 10-gauge recitation. I mentioned the current

tantalum implants I'm testing and told them of earlier titanium rejections and *all* the pain and suffering.

Oh, the pain. Yes, Dax, I do need another. Make it a double.

"Vodka does not ease pain. But it does get your mind off it." I was heard to utter.

Not to be outdone, Dr. Academician Ivan delighted us with his tales of being buried in an avalanche up above the Arctic Circle, high in the big-latitudes near Franz Joseph Land.

Right. Now everyone was getting in on the revelry.

We heard harrowing tales of auto accidents out in the field; errant drainage ditches and an ancient field vehicle going way too fast. Falling off outcrops or being beamed by errant gravity-induced rocks. Talus slides, rock falls, landslides, flood, storms, earthquakes, volcanos, rhyolite ash-fall tuffs...the litany went on and on.

Each got more lurid as the empties pile began to grow. Pak, Mac, Tak, and Jak were sipping their drinks but I think their growing green hue was due to our stories of near and not so near misses.

Joon, the tall Finn, stood up and in front of the whole fraternity, dropped trou and exposed the back of his right leg for all to see. A four-fold gash of scar-tissue alongside his cute little tighty-whities.

"Bear attack. In the woods searching for this lost outcrop. Taking samples for geochemical analysis for my Master's, bear mauled me from behind!" Joon explained.

We were at that point in the revelry that someone just had to ask "Are you sure that's all the bear had in mind?"

Even Joon thought that to be riotously funny.

The shiny suit squad, somewhere during the narrative, went from "Trying to keep up and not appear loaded" to "I don't give a fuck. I'm going to show these guys!" drunk.

I'm sitting there, in near proximity to the roaring fire, smoking a huge cigar, three cans of beer of various fullness to my left, and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  bottle of real high potency Russian vodka to my right. I'm exchanging quips, insults, and



stories along with the rest of the crowd; just as time-honored traditions demand.

We're all drinking like, well, a whole group of seasoned field geologists camping out in the field after a successful day in the field.

Mr. Myung is laughing uproariously. He was even loosening up enough to make some not terribly pleasant observations about his home country and dear *AWOL* leader. He figured that as long as he was in the clan of geologists, we'd protect him.

Mr. Pak of the shiny suit squad wanders up and has a listen. After a few minutes, he wobbles over to me and tells me, nay, orders me, to stand up.

The crowd goes silent. Propriety has been breached. Not North Korean decorum, but the sanctity of the geological field campfire.

"No one gets vexed and ratty around the fire. Stow it for another time, Chuckles."

"You. Large American. Stand up and face me." He orders.

"Which one?" I laughed back at him.

"What?" he asked, slurring slightly.

"Well if stand up, I certainly can't face you unless you hop up here in this chair," I said.

"Stand Up, American!" he officiously orders.

Silence from the crowd. All that is heard is the snap and crackle of the council fire.

So, I stand up. Cigar firmly in jaw, one hand on the arm of the chair, the other tending to my can of Heineken and *Russkaya yorshch*.

"Yes?" I ask.

"I don't smoke, I don't drink, and I don't swear. Oh shit! I do smoke and drink!" he laughs, nearly falling over at his jest, punching me lightly on the arm.

"May I please have one of your cigars?" he drunkenly asks and falls forward so that I need to react quickly and catch him before he face-plants.

"Of course!" I say. "Would any of your friends wish one as well?"

I look over and there are three heads bobbing like those little bobbly doggy statues idiot people put on the dashboards of their cars.

“Well then!”, I order, “Get your happy camper asses over here and join us!”

Everyone around the fire hoots and yells in agreement.

They slowly, sloppily, and shakily wander their chairs over and seat themselves around the fire ring.

I clip the ends of four of my ‘give away’ cigars, as I’m sure a Triple-Maduro Camacho would probably kill them in their current state. Still, they are stout Cuban seconds, and by that, still highly-potent cigars.

“No, you knothed. Wait for the tip to glow. Then puff, you goof!” I exhort them.

I ask Dax to rustle up four of the plastic cups that have been circulating around the campfire. He finds a double brace of them, briefly washes them out, and hands them to me.

I distribute one each to Tak, Pak, Mac, and Jak.

“The only way to really enjoy a fine cigar is to enjoy it with a fine drink. Here. Hold out your cups.” I ordered.

I pour them each about 100 milliliters of Russian 100-proof vodka, and I take the time to re-freshen my Yorshch.

“Geongang-e” [To your health!], I say, as the Korean toast is easy to remember if you break it down as Geo-n-gang-E!

They smile. They laugh. They go white as I polish off my Yorshch and turn the can upside down. Not a drop spilled out, just as it should be.

Have to give them credit, they each choked down that ration of booze. However, I think they forget about the lit cigars they had in their other hands.

“YEEOUCH!” Pak cried after he jabbed the charcoal of his cigar into the back of his hand.

“That’s how it starts, Mr. Pak. Keep that up and you’ll end up like this!” I shout and wave my keloidified and scarred hand under his nose.

He almost passes out, but his chair caught him this time.

The roars of laughter around the campfire at this time is one of my best memories of the whole trip as other inveigles them to try their particular favorite booze.

The reverie's going along at a fine clip. Small sub-groups clump together to discuss one thing or another, mostly geological minutaea about the day's happenings.

Suddenly, Grako stands up.

“What's the story on this lake? Good fishing?” he asks the collective.

Mak looks up; really, really, drunk off his pins. “It is fake lake. Some fish have been planted. It is more for show and swim.”

Jak lolls his head around to agree with Mak.

Tak looks like he's going to add to the conversation, but just slurps another draft of his multiple-origin drink.

Pak, on the other hand, leaps up and is running. First goes the shirt and tie. Then the shoes. Then pants. He's down to drawers and runs at full tilt to the pier that extends some 50 meters out over the lake. He hit that pier like Evel Knievel hitting the Snake River Canyon Jump. We watch him accelerate over the wooden pier, and we're all laughing like loons shouting “GO! GO! GO!”

He flew a good distance and hit the water with an enormous splash. He swims over to one of the untethered swan boats and hangs on for dear life.

To a man, we all stood up and applauded.

It was warm out, so I decided that a dip might just be the thing. I lose my shorts and Hawaiian shirt, but keep my lit cigar, vodka bottle, and Stetson. I slowly get up and walk toward the lake. To the edge of the water and right into the point where neutral buoyancy takes over. Dax follows, and walking out on the dock, laughs and tosses me a swim ring.

“Here, now you won't sink and douse your cigar.” He laughs.

He strips down to skivvies and dives in as well.

I'm bobbing around just keeping my head and cigar out of the water. My cigar is lit and my vodka bottle is nestled in the crease of my Stetson. The water's warm, suspiciously so. I don't give it another thought as it's actually quite pleasant and quite possibly radioactive.

Then the rest of the crowd decides that a midnight dip would be just the thing.

Mr. Pak was eventually found alive, still clinging to the swan boat. Dax and Joon dragged him over to the pier and tossed him up there so he wouldn't drown.

He was, as we say back home, "Fully Krausened."

The rest of the shiny suit squad were sound-out in their chairs. They were sonorously snoring along, adding an interesting one-note counterpart to the harmony of the crackling campfire.

We all out in the lake, bobbing and paddling along. Viv grabbed a cooler full of beer and we develop a fine game of keeping the cooler afloat as we withdraw full beers and invested our empties.

I toss in my vodka bottle so anyone who wants to augment his beer is free and clear to do so.

Some folks are not one with the water, so after ten or fifteen minutes, some of them ease back to the campfire. They re-stoke it to its former glory and are dry within minutes.

Old water dogs like Dax, Ivan, myself, Viv, and Erlen are floating along, smoking our cigars, drinking our drinks of choice, and scanning the skies of satellites, meteorites, and anything else that might crop up on this clear, cloudless night. Gad, it was pitch black, save for the glow of the fire, starlit, cloudless, and starlit. Beauty of a sight, the stellar backbone of the night.

After an hour or so, we decide it's time to get back to shore. Back we go and around the campfire, the shiny suit squad are snoring soundly and one or more of our team decides it's time for some kip.

The old-timers, Ivan, my own self, Dax, and Viv all hang around the fire for a while longer.

"It's so nice out here tonight", I comment, "Who would have thought this is the way things would work out when we were contacted for this project?"

Several comments of agreement are heard. Then we hear a wan, squeaky voice from behind us.

"Ah! Yes, Mr. Pak", I ask. "Grab you a beer?"

“Oh, no...I now remember...must tell you, gentlemen...tomorrow morning...local school children will be coming. Perform Korean dance and songs for your pleasure. 1000 hours. Good night.”, as he drags himself soggly and overwhelmed to his cabana.

“1000? Holy Wow. Pass me a beer. It’s still early then.” I laugh, as I retrieve the vodka from Ivan and Morse.

We all cratered about an hour or hour and a half later. The room was most comfortable and seemingly secure. Since our handlers, er...guides were nowhere to be seen that evening, and the shiny suit squad got a little lubricated, well, we were certainly on our own.

One sleep later, and after a brisk morning shower with a brace of breakfast beers, I was over at the restaurant scanning the breakfast menu. Damn, I was downright peckish.

Most everyone was there. Young Myung, although looking a bit frazzled around the edges. Most all the Westerners, except Dax. He was down at the lake, trying his luck at fishing.

After eggs, toast, sausage, and coffee; we wandered with a CARE package for Dax. He had landed some very nice trout-looking sort of fish and was planning on presenting them to Pak and his crowd.

“Dax”, I said, “After last night’s festivities, that’s just pure evil”, and smiled.

“Just trying to b neighborly”, he explains.

It’s about 0930 and Pak and his crew are in the restaurant. They are looking very, very haggard. Very rough around the edges, right through to the core. We thought it would be too nasty to send them a round of breakfast drinks, but Viv had to talk me out of a round of Bloody Marys.

Dax took care of that and presented them three of the fish he had just caught.

Olive-green isn’t a usual Oriental color, now is it? Pak, Mac, Tak, and Jak all corroborated that conclusion.

They accepted the fish gratefully and had the head waiter whisk them away as quickly as possible.

We all sit down for coffee and pastries while we wait for the kids to show up.

I fire up a cigar. Others are smoking cigarettes or pipes, and talking excitedly about getting back into the field.

“How? How? How is it possible?” Pak asks.

“Who what, Mr. Pak?” I ask.

“How can you be so...undamaged by last night?” he asks.

“What? That little campfire meeting? Genetics, I guess. Wait. I’ll ask around.” I stand up and ask for attention.

“Gentlemen, Mr. Pak here wants to know how we feel after last night,” I say.

“How should we feel? It was a field night. I feel fine.” Gracko says.

Dax agrees, “Fine fettle. Never felt fettler.”

Dr. Academician Ivan replies, “Must be superiority of Russian upbringing and culture. You should see real Russian party!”

One after the other relate how they feel just fine and are looking forward to another full field day.

The waiter arrives with dry toast and tea for the shiny suit squad. We order beers to go with our smokes.

“You people are inhuman.” Mr. Pak moans.

“Nah. Just geologists. The only ethanol-fueled organisms in existence!” We laugh. “Vodka is just kind of a hobby.”

The local elementary school arrives at 1000 hours and for the next hour, regales us with Korean dance and song about how wonderful it is to be Korean, live in such a wonderful country, and other fundamental tales of twaddle and balderdash.

We applaud nicely as they did a good job and we’re not entirely heartless.

After this, I hunt down Mr. Pak.

“Well, that’s over. When are we headed back to the field? Soon?” I ask.

“Yes. Very soon”, Mr. Pak growls. “Tell your team to pack everything. We are leaving in 30 minutes.”

“Far out”, I reply and head off to tell the others of the good news.

The large sample bags are in the cargo hold of the bus. The smaller samples are all curated within my luggage.

Back on the bus, all our gear stowed in the cargo holds below, we’re smoking our smokeables and drinking our drinkables.

“A toast to another field day in Best Korea”, Dax offers the bus.

Mr. Pak appears unperturbed. He announces that we will be seeing some local sights today as well.

We drive on, and all is progressing as usual.

We come up to a couple of villages. We have no idea where we are. Our maps had stopped a few miles back. In fact, we didn’t even know that we had been headed south for most of the remaining morning.

“Here is Kijōng-dong”, Mr. Tak announces.

Kijōng-dong is one of two villages permitted to remain in the four-kilometer-wide (2.5 mi) DMZ set up under the 1953 armistice ending the Korean War; the other is the South Korean village of *Daeseong-dong*, 2.22 kilometers (1.38 mi) away.

Mr. Jak points out the reason for all the military appurtenances is that we are close to the DMZ, the border between North and South Korea.

We travel down a well-worn road. The sign points out that the village of Panmunjeom is only a few kilometers distant.

The road at Panmunjeom, which was known historically as Highway One in the South, was originally the only access point between the two countries on the Korean Peninsula. Both North and South Korea's roads end in the JSA joint security area; the highways do not quite join as there is a 20 cm (8 in) concrete line that divides the entire site.

The bus grinds to a halt. We are all invited to exit the bus and have a look around.

As we are doing so, our luggage is being taken out of the cargo area of the bus and rather unceremoniously stacked close to the border.

“Mr. Pak”, I ask, “What’s going on. What’s all this about?”

He replies, “People given the rare permission to cross this border must do so on foot before continuing their journey by road.”

We all swivel and see a flotilla of light-blue UN Humvees waiting on the other side of the border.

Mr. Pak shakes my hand, Dax’s, Ivan’s, and all one by one until we are properly thanked and asked to please get the flying fuck out of North Korea.

“The DPRK thanks you Western Scientists for your efforts over the last few weeks. We hope this project will continue to bear fruit. But now, with all that’s transpiring (assuming he was referring to the absent Supreme Leader and the ‘absent in Best Korea’ COVID-19 virus) your project is at an end. Thank you for your hard work and contributions to international science; and the progression of science from west to east. Now, we ask you to please depart.”

He bows to us slightly and says: “감사합니다 .[Gamsahabnida.] Thank you and goodbye.”

“Well”, I muse, “That was rather abrupt.”

With that, we grab our gear and troop unceremoniously across the border to the waiting UN officials. It was like the end scenes of Close Encounters. There was a tote board with each of our pictures attached. One by one as we came across the border, a checkmark was made with a grease pencil over our photo.

“I guess that’s that”, I say as we are hustled aboard a waiting Humvee.

They made me put out my cigar.

“Yeah, we’re back in civilization”, I grouse.

We endure the ride for an hour and a half or so as we’re headed to Seoul, South Korea. We all have reservations at the Four Seasons Hotel there. Since our project was cut off early, and we have travel restrictions to deal with, we all have reservations for suites.

After checking in, calling Esme, and letting her know of the wicked turn of events, I call Rack and Ruin. I get to listen to their howling laughter as to how we were kicked out of the worst country in history.

Fuck. We’ll never live this down.



Later, down in the Market Kitchen restaurant, we are all assembled, probably for the last time. Certainly the last time on this project.

“Rock”, Dax asked, “What the fuck did we do to deserve this?”

“I don’t know”, I said as I lifted my huge beer mug and looked around at the splendor of this 5-star hotel in which we’ve been incarcerated, “But I plan on doing it more often.”

“Nahhh...why’d they kick us out?” Viv asks.

“They had to”, Ivan interjected. “What we did, in good fun and conviviality to those poor Korean agents. They couldn’t let that pass without a response.”

“Yeah. We damn near amused them to death,” I smiled.

It became apparent that North Korean officials were set to put with a certain amount of carryings-on and shenanigans, but never expected the level of impudence and incaution that a group of international geologists could provide.

We all smoked, we drank, we swore. We didn’t listen, we thought for ourselves and we eschewed prohibition. We did what we thought was necessary to accomplish the tasks set before us. They had no experience with audacity and impertinence on this level; they simply had no experience with this degree of effrontery, they did not know how to react.

So, we got the collective boot.

They thought they kept all the rock samples, but we didn’t let on that we had a duplicate set. They thought they kept all the maps, but we didn’t let on that we had a duplicate set. They thought they kept all the seismic data, but we didn’t let on that we had a duplicate set.

They didn’t even want to see our notes, phones, or cameras. They just wanted us gone.

So, fuck it, we left.

After several of our European counterparts had departed for Scandinavia, Great Britain, and the Iberian Peninsula; Dax, Ivan, Morse, and I were left to discuss the situation.

“It’s really too bad they tossed us out”, I said, “All that work, and we never even got to the point where we could present conclusions.”

Dax agreed, “All that work, down the tubes. They don’t know what to do with the data much less interpret it. All they have to do is ask, but I guarantee that will never happen. They’re too damned ‘proud’.”

Dr. Academician Ivan replies, “Is true. However, I doubt they would like our conclusions, even with additional fieldwork. All indications are that there is virtually no recoverable hydrocarbons in either northern basin. Tectonics all wrong, structural setting the same.”

Dr. Morse adds, “Yes, it is not a good place to hunt for oil and gas. We all felt that going in, and with the work we’ve done, we were finding more negative indications. Perhaps is good thing we leave. We tell them there’s no use to bother looking for oil and gas in their country, they might be sore wrought.”

I continue with, “However, Comrades, there is great potential there for alternative energy sources. They have the perfect set-up geologically to exploit ‘hot, dry rock’. Drill a few deep water injector wells in those Late Paleozoic and Early Mesozoic massifs. Then inject water into fissures and produce live steam at 25,000 psi through producer wells. A project-site power plant at the surface uses the produced steam heat energy to drive turbines through a generator; boom, instant rural electrification It’d be a bird's nest on the ground for them. But, they didn’t want to listen, and well...”

The waiter arrives and we all order another round. Drs. Ivan and Morse tell us they must be off after this drink. They are leaving very early in the morning for Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, then catch a connecting flight to Moscow. We finish the round, shake hands, exchange business cards and it just me and the goofy Canuck left in the restaurant.

“Dax, let us relocate. It’s too airish here”, I say.

Dax agrees and we retire to the Charles H. Baker bar in the hotel’s lower level.

“Ah”, I note, “This is more like it. Just like Pyongyang.” I say and fire up a newly-purchased cigar.

Dax has finally had enough and bums one off of me.

“Why, Dr. Dax, I never...” I joked.

“I gotta know”, he smiled back, “What is so fucking fascinating with these things.”

I offer him a clip and a light. After his color returns, I tell him “Puff. Don’t inhale.”

Dax will be leaving for Calgary the next night. I’m stuck until I hear from Rack and Ruin, though I don’t tell Dax that. The Middle East is still under lockdown. They will try in the next couple of days to get me as far as Dubai. After that, they suggest I walk or rent a camel.

Agents Rack and Ruin are just loving this.

“So, Rock. When you headed back?” Dax asks.

“Couple-three days, I fear. I’ll be stuck here, on someone else’s nickel, in this tawdry 5-star dump until then”, I snicker.

“Then what? Dax asks, “I hear you’re between contracts.”

“Well...Doctor CanaDax. There’s going to be some changes in the Rocknocker abode and address.” I say.

“How so?” he asks.

“Well, after long deliberation and multiple conferences with my prime marital unit, we’ve decided to leave the Middle East once and for all.”

“Hell. You’ve been there...damn, forever. What is it? 15-16 years?” Dax asks.

“More like the shy side of 20,” I reply.

“Damn, that’s a near forever. Then what?” he continues.

“Sell up. Get rid of a lot of accumulated shit. We’re going to sell our place in New Mexico; in fact, that’s a done deal. Then, I’m going back to school.”

“What? For what? You’re already Dr. Rock.” Dax protests.

“Going to be Dr. of Science Rock. Going back for a DSC. Then, academia. A full tenured professorship with research at a top-notch northern university. That’s it, and a few other odds and bobs, but that’s the skinny. We’re going back to the states, I go back to school for a year or so, then it’s *Professor Dr. Rocknocker BSc, MSc, Ph.D., D.Sc.* Impressed?”

“Yes, I am.” He replied.

“Fuckin-A, Bubba. You should be...” I smile back between sips of some fine Russian vodka. “You should be...”

*END*