

THE TRAVELLER

by

Duncan James

Published by Duncan James

Smashwords edition

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by

DUNCAN JAMES

**Based on a Duncan James short story
“A Bridge of Letters”**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**Cashback
Their Own Game
Motorbike Men
Spy People**

**Junk,
and other short stories**

THE CHAPTERS.

1. THE UNCLE
2. THE DINNER
3. THE VISITORS
4. THE SAS
5. THE RENDEZVOUS
6. THE NEPHEW
7. THE EXECUTION
8. THE AMERICANS
9. THE BRIDGE
10. THE TAVERN
11. THE TEACHER
12. THE MESSAGE
13. THE BRIEFING
14. THE TOURIST
15. THE STRAIGHT LINE
16. THE ESCAPE
17. THE TUNNEL
18. THE END

APPENDIX - THE PEOPLE

1.

THE UNCLE

Dr. Choi Shin did not believe, as he was constantly told, that the Americas were scheming to invade and humiliate the homeland, or that South Korea was a servant of its American master. Neither did he believe that North Korea was a great country whose brave and brilliant leaders were the envy of the world.

But he was the first to admit that he had not so far had a hard life, especially when compared with many others in his country. He knew how hard life there could be. Indeed, it was hard beyond belief for many, so he had heard.

He knew about the prisons for political enemies of the People's Republic of North Korea.

His brother was in one.

And he knew about the hard-labour camps, with their many hundreds of thousands of inmates who had really done nothing wrong by normal, civilised standards, but who were nevertheless being made to suffer horrendously. But he also understood that this was not a normal, civilised country in which he lived. He not only realised the fact, in spite of the constant brain-washing propaganda, but was also prepared to admit it, although not in public. If he did that, he too would become one of the many faceless and desperate inmates of the gulags.

So he kept his views to himself, knowing all the time that he was not alone either in his beliefs or in his fear of sharing them.

He knew the truth of the old saying that for evil to exist, good men must do nothing.

He did nothing.

Instead, he worked hard and prostrated himself at the feet of his Glorious Leader, Kim Jung-un as he was expected to do.

Which was how, in such a despotic country, he did well. He had worked hard, stuck to the rules, and kept his views to himself.

He now found himself in a position of comparative privilege, with a small apartment provided by the State, and enough income to allow him access to a few essentials which were not provided for him, and even some spare for the odd luxury now and then.

But he was not free. He had no official access to any news media apart from that provided by the State, which only contained propaganda dressed up as news about the State itself and its leader. It was a punishable offence to even try to access any foreign news, or entertainment for that matter. He was certainly not free to express his own views. The State machinery insisted that he should not have any views of his own, and he did not have any right to express anything other than the official version of events. He was not free to speak.

So he said nothing, as well as doing nothing against the State.

In spite of all, though, he had managed to learn enough to understand that there was a world outside his own, and that it was very different. And, he almost dared to believe, better.

Although he was not yet one of them, there were people in the country who had travelled, or who had met foreign visitors. So word spread about how other people lived, and the conditions in which they lived. The more he learnt, the more Shin wanted to learn. He wanted to travel to find out for himself.

Through his diligence and allegiance to the leadership, he had managed to improve his position in society. He had done well at school, progressed to University, successfully completed his studies, and was now employed on important scientific work.

He was one of the country's top nuclear physicist.

Mixing as he now did with some of the elite of the world's most secretive nation, he was still denied the basic freedoms of speech and movement. Even those who he regarded as

friends could never be totally trusted. The Government spied on its own people, and informers were infiltrated into every aspect of society. In some cases, one could not even trust one's own family. Anyone could be bribed or blackmailed into spying and informing, to curry favour from the leadership even at local level.

It was partly for that reason that, unlike his brother, he had never married. He rarely saw his brother anymore, in any case, since he had been unwise enough not to cheer sufficiently loudly when a member of the local hierarchy visited, and had thus been condemned to seventeen years of corrective training, with his wife, in one of the many prisons near the capital.

Dr. Choi Shin had been able, because of his position, to persuade the authorities to let him look after his nephew, who would otherwise have been forced to join them during his parents' incarceration. Choi and his nephew had always got on well together, and he both trusted and liked the boy.

By then, his nephew, Choi Yong, was just beginning his studies at university. Yong had decided to follow his uncle's example, and study nuclear physics and computer science. But even at that age, Yong was suspicious that all was not as it seemed in North Korea, and that there could be a better life elsewhere. He and his uncle discussed this often, when they were sure they could not be overheard.

It was about this time that Uncle Shin was selected to make a rare visit overseas. The visit was sponsored by the United Nations as part of their efforts to return North Korea to what they called 'normalisation' and eventual reunification with the South after their disastrous war. It was a rare chance to see life outside the stifling confines of his own country, and he felt privileged and honoured to have been selected.

Shin was to be accompanied by two other scientists and a government official who would be responsible for all the arrangements. He would be with them at all times. He was their minder.

They were to visit America, North Korea's sworn enemy, to inspect some of the US nuclear research facilities, like those at the Lawrence Livermore University. It was hoped they would collect information which would be of value to Pyongyang's own efforts. At the moment, they had to rely heavily on China for support, as they did in most areas of life.

On his return, Shin discussed his visit excitedly with Yong, an eager listener. What they had seen had been of great interest, although Shin was quite sure they had been briefed only at the lowest security level and had been shown nothing in anyway regarded as secret. But they had nevertheless learnt a great deal, and had also been gratified to know that much of their own research efforts were being mirrored in the States. Their minder was equally convinced that America was trying to catch up with the superior world-leading work being carried out in their own country, and had been at pains to ensure that nothing was passed on by the scientists in his delegation that could have been of any value to their American hosts.

Dr. Choi Shin had been as interested in exploring the American lifestyle as in their nuclear research. What little he had seen had convinced him that life was better there than at home, although the government official who was escorting them had forbidden them to watch television in their hotel room, or to buy newspapers, magazines, or videos – nothing, indeed, which could possibly corrupt them in any way. In the end, none of that was necessary anyway. They were all intelligent enough to use their eyes and draw their own conclusions about the American way of life.

"The American people enjoy amazing freedom," he explained to Yong on his return. "They are free to say and do what they like within the law, and the laws are not that strict or the punishments that severe compared with this country. They can travel freely, there is a vast amount of information available to them, through newspapers, magazines, seemingly hundreds of radio and TV channels, and they have unrestricted access to the internet. There is

a bewildering choice in everything they want, from food and drink, cars, houses – everything.”

“I always suspected that things were better outside this country,” said Yong, “and now you have seen it for yourself.”

“But I would not want to live there,” replied his Uncle, shaking his head. “Interesting though it was, I confess that I did not much enjoy my visit.”

“Why ever not?”

“I did not much like the people,” came the reply. “Those we met were very courteous and helpful and made us feel welcome, but others seemed noisy and brash and arrogant. I am sure not all of them are like that, but we met enough to give me that impression. And I found their life style totally confusing. Here, everything is planned for us; there, they have to make their own choices. In many ways, I tend to agree with some of the party propaganda we hear about the Americans.”

“You are comparing them with us, where we have no freedoms at all. I suppose you should expect them to be very different.”

“I suppose so,” his Uncle nodded. “But if ever you get the chance you must get away from here and see for yourself, to make up your own mind about where you would rather be.”

“I should certainly like to travel abroad, even to the South.”

“Life there is heavily influenced by the Americans,” said Uncle Shin.

“As life here is influenced by the Chinese,” responded Yong.

“True enough.”

“But what about the technical side of your visit – the real reason you went?”

“That was very interesting in many ways, although I suspect that we were shown very little of real importance. However, we already know enough to be able to guess at some of the gaps, and I shall certainly write a very detailed report. I must start that soon, or there will be trouble,” he grinned.

“As a matter of interest,” he added, “they seemed keen to know if I would perhaps be prepared to stay in America or go back there to help them, especially in respect of my specialist field of uranium enrichment. Somehow, they had got to know that I was involved in efforts to improve the present method of using centrifuges.”

“And you weren’t tempted?” asked Yong.

“Of course I was,” he replied. “But apart from a freer lifestyle, the Americans had nothing to offer. And in any case, to defect would not only have been difficult, but would also have put you and the rest of our family at grave risk.”

Shin frowned and thought hard for a few moments.

“I think what is really necessary is for the West to know about the dangerous work I am involved in, so that they may perhaps be able to prevent the nuclear war which frankly I see as inevitable.”

“How would that help, if they knew what you were doing?”

“If they knew the details of what I am doing, they would be able to develop a means of countering it.”

He sighed.

“But there is no easy way of getting the research information to them. I am certainly not prepared to live in America to achieve that, and in any case I wouldn’t trust them enough to use the information for the common good. More than likely, they would simply bomb our research facilities, and that would be the end of everything. But enough of this wishful thinking!” he said, “I must now get on with my report!”

Dr. Choi Shin took considerable care over the drafting of his report, which was eventually agreed by his fellow scientist and, of course, the civil servant who had been with them every step of the way.

Shin made sure that it was a long report, even if short on detail. He also made sure that it showed, beyond doubt, that the American nuclear research and development programme was specifically designed to produce weapons of mass destruction to attack North Korea and their other enemies, whereas the programme being followed under the benign leadership of his own beloved country was purely for civilian and defensive purposes to protect its citizens against evil countries in the West like America. He also managed to show that much of the work being carried out in the United States was flawed to the point of being dangerous to its own workers and nearby citizens, and that their reckless pursuit of their criminal aims was in stark contrast to the care and diligence being exercised within his own development programme. The report concluded with a short diatribe highlighting the appalling life style of the American people, and how it contrasted with the happy and contented existence enjoyed by the people of North Korea under the brilliant leadership of Kim Jong-un.

So Choi Shin had not only done nothing about the evil which he knew existed in his country, and said nothing because he was not free to speak, but he had now lied as well, all to save his own skin and preserve his position within the dictatorship. But he knew he had lied, and now knew the truth.

Life was better outside.

His report was, of course, warmly welcomed by the authorities as he had intended it should be and was widely quoted in the State media as proof, if any were needed, that North Korea was a shining example to the rest of the world.

He explained all this to his nephew, Yong, who understood, and became even more determined to get away from his homeland if ever the opportunity presented itself. Shin himself also longed for a different life with more freedom, but knew it was out of the question. He could not defect, and if he did make the attempt, where would he go? Certainly not to America, in spite of its many attractions.

But he was not to know that another overseas visit for him was being arranged.

In his report, Shin had given details of the research being carried out at the Lawrence Livermore laboratory into nuclear fusion. Of course, it was known that this potential new form of energy was being studied. Although no work was being carried out in North Korea, it had been reported that China was investigating the possibility of using nuclear fusion as a source of unlimited power.

The need for this in North Korea was perhaps greater than anywhere. There was a chronic shortage of power throughout the country, and even in the Pyongyang, electricity was switched off completely at nine o'clock every night. In most parts of the country, where there was any electricity supply at all, it was only available for two hours in the morning and two in the evening, and even then there were frequent power failures.

The scientists he met in America had been more forthcoming about their fusion research, since it was in no way connected with nuclear weapons, so Shin's report was also more detailed. In spite of their openness, however, it had seemed to him that the Americans were behind the game. It had often been mentioned to him that a good deal of excellent research was being carried out in this field in England, and that in many respects they had made better progress than in America. Indeed, he heard that a prominent British scientist in this field had been the target of a Russian assassination attempt to prevent further progress being made in a field which threatened the power that Russia could wield through its vast reserves of natural oil and gas. Although the scientist had recently died in Switzerland (*read 'Spy People'*), the team he had left behind was continuing his pioneering and world leading research. On an almost daily basis, he learnt, they were able to use nuclear fusion to generate electricity. What so far eluded them was the ability to sustain such generation in a controllable fashion. It was no use if you could not switch it on and off at will.

Dr. Choi Shin was a research scientist who dealt with nuclear fission, not nuclear fusion. But he was held in high regard, and his report was enough for him to be selected to visit the United Kingdom to learn more about their work.

It was an exciting prospect, but as always with these things, it took ages to arrange. Eventually, the United Nations, the British Council, the UK Government, the North Korean Foreign Ministry, the Politburo and the many other agencies involved in these things approved his visit and issued the necessary visas, currency and tickets. As with his visit to America, he had a fellow scientist as company and a Government civil servant, Moon Pak, who would arrange everything – their ‘minder’ in other words.

But his visit to England was altogether different, and proved to be a turning point in both his life, and in that of his nephew Yong, although neither of them realised it at the time.

Dr. Choi Shin was immediately made to feel welcome and at home.

He and his colleagues were met at London’s Heathrow Airport at the foot of the aircraft steps, and escorted through the customs and immigration checks by an official from the Foreign Office, called Lee Cooper.

“I know you have been to America,” Cooper explained Shin, “and I know how difficult these procedures can be, especially coming from a country such as yours. So I hope I can make things a little easier for you after your long flight.”

Shin soon got the impression that he was being singled out for special treatment, perhaps because he had travelled abroad before and his colleagues had not. But how did they know he had been to America?

The official from the North Korean Embassy who had also gone to meet them was still waiting in the baggage reclaim area when the party left the terminal. After their papers and baggage had been quickly checked, they were escorted to a waiting car, which took them to Oxford. They were to stay there, explained Cooper in the car, as it was close to the Culham Laboratory where the nuclear fusion research was being carried out.

“I have booked rooms for you all in The Old Bank Hotel in the High Street. You each have your own room with en-suite shower and so on, and I am sure you will be very comfortable.”

“We do not wish to have separate rooms,” protested their minder, who could immediately see that he would lose control of his party. “We would rather share, and be together.”

“I am afraid that is not possible,” said Cooper. “This is a very good Hotel, and you need have no fear about the bill. It will be Her Majesty’s Government’s pleasure to meet all your expenses.”

“What about security, then?” blustered Moon Pak, the Korean official.

“Each room has its own safe, and larger items can be left safely and securely with the reception desk.”

Cooper had almost been expecting this.

“What else is in these rooms?” demanded the official.

“You will find everything you need, including a small bar with wines and spirits, and of course a radio and television.”

Cooper knew this would be the last straw.

The Korean minder turned to his colleagues. “You will not drink or watch television,” he commanded, and immediately wished he hadn’t.

Cooper added salt to the wound, tongue in cheek.

“Of course, you may have the newspaper of your choice delivered to your room first thing every morning during your stay, so that you can keep up with world events.”

“No newspapers and no TV,” commanded Moon.

“I have chosen this Hotel specially as it is centrally placed in Oxford, and it will be easy for you to explore this historic University City,” said Cooper. “You are, of course, free to do whatever you like, and go anywhere you wish.”

“We will stay together in the Hotel,” decided the Korean.

“I know you all speak English,” said Cooper, “but if you would find it helpful, I could join you for dinner later when you have rested and perhaps explored a little. I could then help you with the menu in the excellent Quod restaurant, or we could visit a different bar or café if you wish. There are some excellent eating places in Oxford, including some first-class Chinese restaurants if that would make you feel more at home. Shall I meet you in the bar at, say, seven o’clock?”

Choi Shin spoke up before their civil service colleague could say anything. Although they had not previously met Moon Pak, the two scientists recognised him as a decent man, but with a job to do, which he was determined to do to the best of his ability.

“All this is most kind of you, Mr. Cooper. I am sure we shall be most comfortable, and that we shall enjoy exploring Oxford. Seven o’clock would be ideal – thank you.”

“Good! I can then outline the arrangements for the rest of your stay, and what we have in mind for your visit to Culham tomorrow. If I can arrange it, I will even invite one of our scientists from there to join us for dinner this evening.”

“That would be an excellent idea,” said Shin. “And I have a special favour to ask you while I am here.”

“What is that?” asked Cooper. “I’m sure we will be only too pleased to help if we can.”

“We are here, as you know,” said Shin, “to be briefed on your efforts to harness nuclear fusion as an unlimited source of carbon-free energy, and we know that you are leading in this field of research.”

Cooper nodded.

“As you may know, my own special field of research is to do with nuclear fission and in particular the enrichment of uranium. I wondered if it would be at all possible to visit your own research facilities in this area while I am here. At Aldermaston, I believe?”

Cooper thought for a moment.

“In fact, our main nuclear research facilities are run by the UK Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell, not far from here. Aldermaston is our Atomic Weapons Establishment.”

“Regrettably, nuclear weapons are my field, not general research, so a visit to Aldermaston would be a wonderful opportunity for me to compare notes, shall we say, with others in the same field.”

The Korean official, Moon Pak, who was acting as their guide and minder immediately saw the wisdom of this request. What a coup for his country if such a briefing could be given! Add this to the briefings they had received in America, and their beloved leader would immediately become one of the best informed of all world leaders, as he already was in so many other fields. He would make sure on his return that his lords and masters knew what a brilliant man Dr. Choi Shin was to have suggested such a thing. It crossed Pak’s mind that he might even try to claim credit for the idea himself on their return.

Cooper thought for a moment, as the car drew up to the hotel entrance.

“I am sure that such a visit could be arranged, although it is short notice. However, my scientist colleague who I shall invite to join us later will be well placed to arrange such a briefing if that is possible. I shall ring him immediately, and look forward to seeing you all again this evening.”

“Thank you Mr. Cooper,” said Shin.

“My pleasure,” replied Cooper with a wry smile.

When Lee Cooper got back to his desk in MI6, there was a note stuck to his computer screen. He slung his jacket over the back of his chair and walked to another office a short way down the corridor. He knocked on the door marked ‘James Piper. Head of Section 7’, and walked in without being asked.

“You wanted to see me, boss?” he asked as James looked up.

“I’ve had the Americans on,” announced James.

“What does Auntie want this time?”

“Dr. Choi Shin.”

“So do we.”

“They know he’s over here.”

“And we knew when he went there.”

“They want us to share any information we get from him.”

“Like they shared with us?”

“They didn’t get anything, apparently. Nothing worth sharing, anyway.”

Cooper sat down without being asked.

“What’s the deal, then.”

“They seem to think Choi is turn-able, and that we might be able to do it. They tried while he was there, but he was too afraid of the consequences back home. His brother and wife are already in one of the camps, and he doesn’t want the rest of his family to join them.”

“Who else is there?”

“A nephew, apparently, who he is looking after while his brother is inside. Sounds a bright kid – just started at their new University in Pyongyang.”

“Interesting.”

“They know Choi Shin is working with the Chinese on their nuclear programme, and want to know what the Chinese are up to.”

“So do we,” agreed Cooper. “That’s why he’s here.”

“How’s it going then?”

“Can’t say yet – they only just got here. But we left their Embassy man standing at the airport, which won’t be popular, and they’ve got the usual minder with them who could prove to be a more than usually difficult pain in the arse.”

Cooper looked at his watch.

“I’ll have to go soon. I’m meeting them for dinner in Oxford. Dr. Choi is interesting, though, and I tend to agree with our cousins – possibly turn-able. What’s interesting is that he’s already asked to visit Aldermaston, to see something of our military nuclear fission research, which is more his field than Culham. He even suggested it would be a chance for him to ‘compare notes’. Perhaps that means he is prepared to talk, at least.”

“If we are all right, and he is a candidate, can you turn him?”

“I’ll have a damned good try, but he is probably not here long enough. And that minder is going to be difficult to avoid.”

“Enjoy your dinner.”

“I’ve got to organise some help, first,” said Cooper. “I thought chums in Defence Intelligence might like to join us this evening. They know more about bombs than I do.”

THE DINNER

Lee Cooper had a lot to do before dinner that evening.

For a start, he had to organise, in double quick time, colleagues who could join him. He knew who he wanted to be there, and he also knew that they weren't so much going to be invited as going to be told to be there. James Piper would see to that.

Professor John Williams was no real problem. He was Director of the Nuclear Research Laboratory at Culham, which the party of overseas visitors was scheduled to visit, so in many ways he was the host. He lived not far from the laboratory, and was therefore not far from Oxford either.

But Cooper wanted someone in authority from the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. Choi Shin had specially asked to be allowed to visit the place, and Cooper was keen that he should, if only to meet people.

The right people. People who would be able to ask Choi the right questions, and perhaps entice him to stay. He had information everyone wanted, and had already talked about 'comparing notes'. The sooner he was given the chance to do that, the better.

The problem with Aldermaston was that AWE was a civilian organisation, run by a consortium of technical specialist companies on behalf of the Government. Paul Sheppard was one of the senior technical directors and was working there on secondment from the Ministry of Defence. Still one of us, so to speak.

That's who Cooper wanted at the dinner table.

He didn't live near Oxford, but near Reading and the AWE complex. But he knew about Choi Shin from the Americans and our own UK Intelligence sources, so he took no persuading to meet him. A son's birthday party suddenly went up in smoke.

Having fixed his dinner party hosts, Cooper thought for a minute.

There would be three of them, and three of 'us'. But an extra pair of eyes and ears would be useful, he concluded. Our team could sit one either side of Choi, isolating him from his colleagues, which was essential, but it would be useful to have someone sitting directly across from Choi. Perhaps someone from Defence Int. could do it. That would leave him to look after the 'minder' and the other scientist.

James Piper suggested Martin Davis, a weapons expert with experience of the Far East. Cooper rang him, and although they had never met, they got on well on the phone. Davis quickly got the plot, and agreed to play the part selected for him at the dinner. He'd not been to Korea, but knew Vietnam, which was close enough Cooper thought.

Cooper had booked a private room for their meal at the Hotel, and rang Piper for one more favour.

"We need the place wired up," he said.

"I'd thought of that, and already got a bloke organised. Len Ellis is one of the best technical officers there is, and he's been trying to get in touch with you on the secure mobile."

"Where is he now?" asked Cooper.

"Already on his way to the Old Bank Hotel."

"He'll do. I'll meet him there."

Ellis got there first, and was already at work with a couple of other technical colleagues in the private dining room when Cooper arrived. Another of Ellis's team was outside, keeping the hotel staff away, although they had already laid the table and done whatever else it is that hotel staff do at these times.

"The most important bloke will be sitting here," Cooper pointed.

“I’ll give him two bugs all to himself then!”

“Where will you be?”

“There’s a camper van in the car park. I’ll be there with a couple of chums making sure we don’t miss anything. I’ll have separate feeds into the van from each person, but you’ll have to identify them afterwards. I’m assuming you don’t want video as well – there’s hardly time to fix that.”

“Audio will be enough, thanks. How does that work?”

“Micro-chip wireless transceivers. Short range, but enough to get to the van.”

“Where are you putting them?”

“Mind your own business! No-one will find them; guaranteed.”

“Hope you’re right. Shit will hit fan if you’re wrong.”

“Relax. I’ve done this before.”

“You’ve been recommended.”

Ellis knew his stuff, all right. No doubt about that

“Drop in to the van when it’s all over, and have a quick listen to what we’ve got,” invited Ellis.

“I’ll bring a doggy bag.”

After the introductions and a welcome glass of Champagne before dinner, the party relaxed. Most of them, anyway. Mr. Moon Pak didn’t look as if he’d ever relaxed in his life, although that didn’t stop him having a second glass of pre-dinner Champers.

But he was plainly on edge, knowing that it would be impossible for him to monitor, let alone influence, what was said to or by his two scientist colleagues. He could only hope that they stuck to the rules. Not that they had so far. He knew that Dr Shin had already been out of the Hotel for a walk around the city centre, exposing himself to the appalling life style enjoyed by the West, and leaving himself open to be influenced by the decadence to be found in the capitalist life style of alcohol and drugs enjoyed by the youth who purported to be students in this University city.

He knew, though, that Choi Shin was a strong character, well able to resist any temptations which he might come across. As a scientist, the Doctor had an enquiring mind, and no doubt his brief excursion was in the interests of research more than anything else.

Pak could not have been more wrong.

Choi Shin’s ‘brief excursion’ had only one object – to help him decide if this life-style was better than that in North Korea, and if so whether it was worth the enormous risk involved if he should decide to defect and stay there.

He had already concluded that it was certainly better than he had witnessed in America, and that both were better than his own. He longed for the freedom enjoyed here. Living in this country, he would have access to everything he could wish for, but which was denied him at home, where he and his fellow citizens were weighed down by restrictions, suppressed by an overbearing state machine and denied the very basic of human rights. Here, he would be able to openly discuss his work with others and have access to every imaginable research tool he could wish for, not only radio and television which was independent of Government influence, but a free press producing literature and news - and comment - about every aspect of life here and abroad. He was able, as he had demonstrated quietly in his hotel room, to access the internet with its endless array of research opportunities. He had been able this afternoon to browse through scientific journals openly on display in newsagents. He had visited the Bodleian Library, with its world famous collection of books, manuscripts, learned papers, any of which he would have been able to study if he had wished in one of the many reading rooms.

And the people – freely able to meet together, to talk, to discuss, to argue, to eat and drink, to come and go as they wished. Dr Choi had been out of his hotel for only an hour or so – he lost track of time – and had not seen a single policeman or official in uniform. Yet his own country, in which he was a prominent citizen, had chosen to send with him and his colleague their own ‘policeman’, the civil servant minder Moon Pak. The British, though, were sufficiently trusting to let him come and go freely as he wished. They had not dictated what he did or where he went, and had not imposed any restrictions on him or followed him wherever he went.

He had not noticed the two men on a motorbike.

But the dinner had gone well.

Even the hotel staff thought so. They were used to visiting dignitaries from abroad, but they were usually entertained by University staff. This seemed to be a smaller party than usual, and was certainly not sponsored by one of the university colleges. It was a small reception, hosted by the Government, with people up from London, entertaining people from the Far East, it looked. Some said they were from Korea, but how can you tell? They all look the same. They enjoyed their food, were polite to the staff, and everything went well. One of the Government chaps said so afterwards and thanked them, as well as thanking the Manager, which was nice.

It was a late night, though, for the hosts. After coffee in the lounge, the two scientists and their civil servant colleague, Moon Pak, went to their rooms, while the others held a quick de-brief.

John Williams started the ball rolling.

“That man Dr. Shin is a worried scientist if ever I saw one,” he pronounced.

“In what way?” asked Cooper.

“He’s worried about what he is doing back home. Reading between the lines, he sees that his country could well be heading for some sort of nuclear disaster if their current research programme continues unchecked, and the Chinese are pushing them along at all speed. The development work he’s involved in is world-leading, so far as he can tell, but if it is successful, he has no idea how his Government will use the new weapons. He acknowledges that it is an unstable regime, which could do anything.”

“I get much the same impression,” said Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston. “He seems to understand that once they have managed to develop their revolutionary method of enriching uranium, they will be able to produce weapons far more quickly than anyone else and in greater numbers.”

“He sounded frustrated that he could do nothing about it, either. He sees no way of stopping the programme, short of military action by the West, which he considers out of the question.”

“I hope he’s right,” said Cooper. “So what can be done?”

“It seems to me,” opined Martin Davis, “that we need to know in some detail what they are doing so that we can perhaps develop some form of defensive counter measure.”

“I agree,” said Sheppard. “The man plainly has information which is vital to us, but can we persuade him to give it to us?”

“He would need to defect and stay here to do that,” said Williams. “You simply cannot pass on that sort of information over a cup of tea one afternoon. We not only need to know what it is they are doing, but how they are doing it and what the Chinese role is. That means technical information, specifications, drawings and all the rest of it.”

“Which he won’t have brought with him,” said Sheppard.

“Even if he does want to co-operate, I doubt he would want to stay over here. He’s too afraid of the consequences for his family and friends back home.”

“And it’s big ‘if’, too. He hasn’t actually said in so many words that he wants to help us has he?” Cooper asked. “It’s only an impression we’ve got.”

“I wouldn’t mind listening again to what he said over dinner,” said Williams.

“That can be arranged,” said Cooper. “I didn’t tell you beforehand, but the whole evening has been carefully monitored and recorded.”

“I’ll be damned,” exclaimed Sheppard. “I should have guessed you guys would do something like that.”

“I’ll arrange for you to have transcripts tomorrow morning.

“It’s nearly that, now,” said Davis.

“Tomorrow, we’re all due to visit your establishment John. I suggest, if you can arrange it, that we get Choi to Aldermaston, on his own, the next day, prior to the final day at Culham before they leave the UK.”

“I can arrange that,” said John Williams. “And I shall be happy to show him what I can of Aldermaston, within the bounds of security,” said Sheppard. “I can quickly adapt the tour we give to first year university students.”

“Let’s all be as nice as we can to the guy, and make him feel at home,” said Cooper. “I’ll organise a full debrief as soon as they’ve gone back to Korea.”

Jang Nam, the other scientist in the party, returned to his room totally bemused. He had to admit that he had actually enjoyed his evening, although he had not in the least been expecting to.

Quite the contrary.

Before they went to the dining room, he had been talking with Moon Pak, mostly about ideology, but also agreeing about the need to be exceptionally cautious at the event which was to follow. It was absolutely essential, Moon had reminded Jang, to say as little as possible about his own work, but to learn as much as possible about the work of their hosts. That was why they were here, and it was the least their Great Leader expected. He and Choi should ask as many technical questions as they could and be wary of being drawn into any conversations which might betray their own wonderful country.

“Where was Choi, by the way?”

“Walking in the extensive hotel gardens,” replied Jang, “preparing himself to meet our foes at dinner.”

That was all right then. Pak reminded his colleague that their hosts were really nothing better than spies, and that their intention would be to ply the visitors with quantities of alcohol in an effort to learn all they could about the pioneering and world leading work they were engaged in on behalf of the fatherland.

“And another thing,” Pak frowned. “Remember not to touch any food which is not served to them as well. If you do, you could well find it laced with drugs designed to loosen your tongue. I must remember to remind Choi.”

So Jang Nam had not really been looking forward to his dinner. He was unused to being surrounded by foreign spies, and his colleague Pak had successfully put him off his food.

He was, however, much looking forward to his visit to the Culham laboratory, where he would see work akin to his own, designed to harness nuclear fusion as a source of great power. It was not quite Choi Shin’s field of work, but he was generally acknowledged to be a brilliant scientist, and was bound to learn a great deal which would be of use to his country on their return. Choi’s brilliance had been demonstrated when he asked to be allowed to visit

the Atomic Weapons facilities. It looked as if he might just be allowed to make such a visit, as well. Certainly the British had not rejected his request out of hand. If Choi could bring that off, then they would all be hailed as national heroes on their return. Choi himself was leading a major research project with colleagues from China into the future development of nuclear weapons, and he was bound to learn a great deal that would be of immense value to their glorious country. Perhaps they would learn over dinner whether or not Choi's bold initiative had been successful.

Cooper, the man who had met them on arrival, was ready to greet them when they went to the small private room downstairs for dinner. Cooper quickly introduced them to the others present. They were all said to be scientists, but the foreign delegation from North Korea all new that they were British spies, sent specially to learn as much as possible from them. One of them was said to be from the Aldermaston weapons facility, and immediately fell into conversation with Choi Shin. *'Be very careful, dear friend,'* thought Nam.

A tall man introduced himself to Jang Nam as Professor John Williams, Director of the Culham laboratory where the UK's research into nuclear fusion was being conducted. *'Now I must be careful,'* thought Nam. They were to sit together at dinner.

"We are very much looking forward to seeing you at our Culham research laboratory tomorrow," said Cooper, by way of briefing. "We shall be able to show you our work, and hopefully give you a demonstration of our fusion experiment in operation. If not tomorrow, then certainly the day after. I am also pleased to say that we have been able to arrange, through the good offices of Paul Sheppard here, for Dr. Choi Shin to visit our facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston."

"I shall accompany him there," announced Moon Pak.

"I am afraid that will not be possible, Mr. Moon, for security reasons."

"But I insist," protested Moon. "It is my job to guide my colleagues during this visit."

"I really am sorry," said Sheppard, "but I have only been able to obtain a limited security clearance for Dr. Choi. I am sure you will understand that this is a top secret installation where it is difficult to arrange for visitors other than scientists known to us."

"I must protest most strongly," blustered Moon.

"And you must understand our position," countered Sheppard. "Dr Choi is welcome to make the visit, but he will do so on his own, or not at all."

"Very well then," said Moon, "but I shall protest most strongly to my Government."

"You may be better advised not to," said Choi bravely. "What will they think if you protest that I have been denied this chance because of your own stubbornness?"

Choi took Moon by the arm.

"Trust me," he said. "This is an opportunity which will not be available to any of us again. If I must go alone, then I shall go alone."

Martin Davis turned to Paul Sheppard.

"That was close," he muttered, with his back to the others. "You nearly didn't get him to yourself."

Jang Nam turned to Moon.

"You cannot be in two places at once, and I shall explain on our return, if anyone should query your behaviour, that you had no option. Our dear leader would not have wished you to deny our country this unique opportunity."

"Very well, then," said Moon again. "I am sure that we are most grateful to you for allowing one of our top scientists to visit your establishment at such short notice," he said to Sheppard. "We shall probably learn a great deal that will be of value to our country".

"It's our pleasure."

The humour was lost on him.

As they took their places for dinner, Choi and Sheppard were soon in earnest conversation, as were Williams and Nam. Moon Pak heard virtually nothing of either conversation, not least because of the non-stop chatter from Lee Cooper who was sitting next to him.

From Cooper's point of view it was all working out rather well after a shaky start. Moon Pak had given up.

Dr. Choi Shin was like a dog with two tails. A visit to Aldermaston agreed, and sitting next to one of its head scientists at dinner.

Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston was also delighted to be next to the one man they all really wanted, either as a defector or as an informer.

Jang Nam was seated next to the Director of the Culham Nuclear Research Laboratory, which he was to visit in the next two days.

Martin Davis was fast learning about the Chinese involvement in the North Korean nuclear development programme, and could see promotion looming once his Ministry of Defence superiors heard what he had to tell them.

Len Ellis was busy in the car park, but looking forward to his doggy bag.

As the party left, Cooper made his way across the car park to the camper van. Ellis was waiting for him.

"I heard all that, as you would expect," he announced, "and I've already put in hand the verbatim transcripts you want. You shall have them in the morning."

"Brilliant – thanks."

"Don't mention it! And while you were enjoying yourself at Her Majesty's expense, I've run taps into their Hotel rooms as well. They're live feeds into the Ops Room at HQ."

"I should have thought of that," admitted Cooper.

"You didn't need to. James Piper asked me to fix it."

"I suppose that's why he's in charge and I'm not!"

"Probably. And I suppose you forgot my doggy bag, too."

There was no doubt about it; the dinner had gone well.

There were people who needed to know what had happened at the dinner.

James Piper, for one, was under orders to de-brief his boss, 'C', as soon as possible. He had listened to the conversations as they took place during the meal, and briefly visited the Ops Room to hear some of the after-dinner chat between the Koreans, before contacting Sir Geoffrey Sefton.

Jack Salisbury, Head of the Joint intelligence Organisation thought he should know what had happened, and looked to General Sir Pearson-Jones, Chief of Defence Intelligence, to tell him.

So Martin Davis didn't get much sleep that night, either. Salisbury was adamant that Ministers should not be briefed at this stage, so went out of his way to tell the Permanent Secretaries of both the Foreign Office and the Home Office to mind their own business for the time being. That meant that the Government's Chief Scientist was also not told what was going on.

Lower down the pecking order, though, it was different. Those people who needed to know because they needed to do something, were briefed immediately.

James Piper got on to his opposite number in charge of Section 11. It was their job to keep tabs on important people, and make sure they came to no harm. Retired Colonel Bill Clayton ran that operation, and it was his two men on a motorbike who had been keeping a

close eye on Dr. Choi Shin during his stroll round Oxford that afternoon. Actually, it was yesterday afternoon now, but they were all still 'on the case' in spite of the late hour.

Clayton reported that Choi had seemed relaxed as he strolled down the High Street. He had looked in to a couple of book shops, browsed the newspaper stand, and actually been in to the Bodleian Library, although not for long. He had returned to the news stand to buy a copy of The Times, and then sat outside Jane's' Team Rooms for a cuppa while he read it. He left the paper behind when he returned to the Old Bank Hotel. Section 11 had retrieved it, and so far as they could tell from a quick examination, he had not written in it or left any messages inside. Neither did they think that he had been followed, either – except by them, of course. They were keeping watch outside the Hotel, but agreed it was not necessary to follow him on his official visits.

And so the jig-saw was being put together, and the impression gained that Dr. Choi Shin was a probable target who might talk, even if he did not defect.

They were all encouraged.

But there was also a consensus developing that Dr. Choi could be of more value to the UK if he returned to Korea, rather than stay in this country. If a means could be established to keep in touch with the man, he would be able to keep us informed of developments, both there and in China, whereas if he defected and stayed in the UK, his information would soon become dated and of increasingly reduced value.

So it was agreed, subject to further analysis based on what was said during the rest of his visit, that if Dr. Choi did decide to co-operate with us, he should return home and keep in touch from there, rather than stay in this country. The option could always be left open for him to return here 'on asylum' at a later date.

Agreed, that is, apart from a few within the defence industry. They, after all, were in charge of our nuclear deterrent, and that meant that for it to remain viable, they needed to know what it was that it had to deter. So they were desperate to know what the Chinese were doing which might in some way prejudice the effectiveness of our Trident submarines and their missiles. The Americans, for the same reasons, were also desperate to know, but had seemingly let the man slip through their fingers during his visit to the States.

The Defence Intelligence organisation had, almost within their grasp, the one man who could brief them in detail about what was happening in China, and yet those buffoons in Whitehall were intending to send him home. It beggared belief, in their mind.

Martin Davis was firmly of the view that the man should be kept here if that was an option. He discussed his views briefly over the secure phone link with his Director, General Pearson-Jones, and agreed to meet him, also secretly, later that night, with a few others from within the armed services. Paul Sheppard, the MOD man on secondment to Aldermaston, was among them.

There was a long discussion of all the pros and cons. On the one hand, if he could be persuaded to stay in this country, Choi could be offered work, a new identity and a safe haven from his fellow countrymen. On the other hand, he would be an on-going security liability, and, as someone pointed out, could well be a 'plant', sent to infiltrate our nuclear defence organisation to pass intelligence back to North Korea and China. Whatever happened, he would need to be closely monitored.

At the end of a long night, it was agreed that he should be invited to defect and stay here in relative safety to work alongside our own nuclear physicists, providing he agreed willingly to pass on what information he had about the Chinese work in which he was involved.

In spite of all the late night deliberations and discussion, one thing remained plain. Nothing could be done without Choi's agreement.

Except that, if he did return home in a couple of days, as arranged, the Defence Ministry people thought it might be worth going after him, in a final attempt to persuade him to defect.

The Special Services were to be briefed, secretly and in secret.

3.

THE VISITORS

The visit to Culham was scheduled to be over three days, except that now, Dr. Choi Shin would only be there for two. His second day would be spent at the MOD Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, leaving his colleague Jang Nam to continue the visit, with their escort and minder, Moon Pak.

The visit to Culham proved interesting and informative for both the Korean scientists, and their English hosts. Jang was the nuclear fusion expert rather than Choi, but neither of them had realised just how far ahead British scientists were in the research field.

Fusion power offered an almost limitless source of energy for the future once the formidable scientific and engineering problems surrounding its development were overcome. Because of this potential, every major nation in the world was pursuing its own research programme to some extent, in a commercially competitive effort to achieve the Holy Grail of meeting the fast-growing world-wide demand for energy. And energy was particularly at a premium in North Korea, where erratic supplies of electricity and frequent power cuts as well as imposed rationing hindered the country's already slow development. That's why Choi and Jang were at Culham.

In spite of the commercial imperatives of the research, there was also a great deal of international co-operation, particularly among scientists, even if this was not shared between politicians. Harnessing nuclear fusion would answer the world's insatiable demand for energy without contributing to global warming, and without producing massive amounts of radioactive waste. What waste there was, quickly decayed. Hydrogen was its main fuel – the most commonly available natural gas in the universe.

To make this dream of endless power a commercial reality meant engineering the fusion together of such nuclei as hydrogen isotopes so as to release energy, which was Jang's area of expertise. Choi's speciality was the rather easier technique of splitting atoms in nuclear fission, the process used for weapons.

The fusion process was similar to that which takes place in the sun and other stars, and requires similar exceptionally high temperatures. Energy-producing fusions need gas from a combination of the hydrogen isotopes deuterium and tritium to be heated to some one hundred million degrees centigrade and to be confined for about a second. During this time, the plasma of electrons and hydrogen interact to fuse into helium, and some of their mass is destroyed, releasing huge amounts of energy in the form of heat, light and radiation. Such fusions had been carried out in laboratories around the world for many years, but only for very short durations. Confinement for longer periods would result in a controllable, continuous reaction, which generated more energy than it used.

That was the goal of the scientists at Culham.

Earlier work had suggested that the use of magnetic confinement of the gas was the most promising way to achieve a continuous 'burn', and even now a top secret research

project being carried out in Nevada, at the Skunk Works of Lockheed Martin, was proceeding on that basis.

However, thanks largely to Culham's work, research to achieve the same objective using lasers was now well advanced in the UK.

This was of immediate interest to Choi, who was himself working with lasers in an attempt to develop a quicker and more productive means of enriching uranium, rather than use the present expensive and slow system of centrifuges.

The scientists at Culham told their Korean guests of their reasoning that using lasers would provide the ability to maintain a steady flow of fusion blasts, taking research closer to the continuous system needed for commercial power generation. This work had led to the formation of the High Power Laser Programme at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory at Harwell, but this aspect of their research was considered so important that very little of it was made public knowledge, even within the scientific communities of co-operating countries.

"No wonder we had never heard of this ground-breaking work," said Jang.

"Is there no more you can tell us or show us?" asked Choi. "Although fusion is not my particular field, I too am experimenting with the use of lasers to develop a uranium enrichment process that could replace the wretched centrifuges."

Jang frowned, and Choi immediately realised that he had said too much. Fortunately, their minder Moon Pak was in conversation with another scientist across the room, otherwise there would have been real trouble for Choi.

"I promise I will say nothing," whispered Jang in their native *Chosŏnŏ*, as one of the team escorting them on their visit moved across to Choi, and introduced himself as Professor Newman.

"As it happens," he said, "I am from Harwell, which as you know is the centre of the UK's nuclear research activity. It also happens, Dr. Choi that I have heard of your work in this field in collaboration with the Chinese."

"How could you possibly know?" demanded Choi. "It is a very closely guarded secret, and I should not even have mentioned it at all, but I was so excited to discover about your work with lasers. How did you know?" he repeated.

"I really can't remember the source of this information," lied Newman. "Perhaps it was from an American colleague at the Lawrence Livermore University, where they are conducting similar work."

"I have been there," responded Choi, "and your work with lasers was never even mentioned to me."

"Perhaps because they are so far behind us in their research!" joked Newman. "I realise you are from a very closed society, but I can tell you that even in the very specialised world of nuclear physics, a good deal of news gets out. Naturally, I am as keen to learn more about your work as you are to learn about ours."

"I am sworn to secrecy," replied Choi, now extremely cautious.

"So am I," replied Newman, "but I shall be with you throughout your tour, including your visit tomorrow to Aldermaston, Dr. Choi, so I will answer any of your questions if I can, within the bounds of security. But now we must move on. We have a buffet lunch arranged, and after that a demonstration of our how our work is developing."

"Shall we see an actual live fusion experiment in your laboratory?" asked Jang.

"Of course."

Choi was hugely impressed, not only by the work being carried out by the people he had met so far, but also by their openness and apparent willingness to talk about their work to a stranger from an alien and aggressive foreign power. He was becoming more and more convinced that he should help them in their work, and that they would be able to prevent the

world catastrophe which he was sure would eventually result from his own work with the Chinese.

Valuable and stimulating though his visit to Culham had been, Choi was greatly looking forward to his day at Aldermaston, not least because he would be free of the company of fellow scientist, Jang Nam, who knew little about uranium enrichment, but especially because that nuisance Moon Pak, their minder, would also be left behind. That meant that he would get the chance to be frank and open with his hosts, and perhaps finally decide whether or not he should betray his country in the interests of world peace. He was already in no doubt that, if he did so, the United Kingdom would be the recipient of his knowledge rather than America. He had not yet worked out how he would accomplish this transfer of technical data, since he certainly had no wish to defect and remain abroad. He was, however, sure that the people he had already met would be able to devise some means by which he could give them the information they wanted, if that was what he eventually decided to do. But that decision was a long way off yet, and it would not be an easy one for him to take.

He was taken to Aldermaston by Lee Cooper, and he was delighted to find on arrival that others who he had met at dinner in Oxford were also there. He had got on well with them, and was surprised at their friendly and relaxed attitude towards him. At no time had he felt himself to be under any pressure to divulge secrets or speak out of turn. Yet, on reflection afterwards, he had to admit to one or two indiscretions, shall we say, and perhaps even to have given away rather more information than he should. It was not the wine, excellent though that had been. He suspected that one or two of his hosts were well versed in the techniques of interrogation.

The same was probably true of those he had met at Culham, where he knew he had already said more than he should about his work. He was worried by the fact at the time, and yet they appeared to know about it anyway, even that he was working with the Chinese. He wondered if they realised that the Chinese were using North Korea and its people as pawns in a deadly game.

The team who would brief him and escort him at Aldermaston was also looking forward to his visit. They were keen to establish for certain several facts, not least of which was whether or not he was a possible candidate for defection. There was still the possibility that he could have been sent over simply to spy on the U.K.'s own nuclear activities and nothing else, but steps had already been taken to ensure that he learnt very little more than he would already know. The tour that he was to be given was much the same as that given quite regularly to first year university students, although the briefing could cut a few corners as he already knew much of the basic science being carried out there, and the mathematics which formed the basis of it. The team had agreed that much could be learnt about his level of knowledge from the questions he asked, and that was one area which they were keen to probe. How much did he know, and was his level of expertise sufficiently high to be of value if he could be persuaded to talk openly?

Choi immediately noticed the heightened security at Aldermaston, and the complex procedure which had to be followed to gain access to the site. He was photographed, his finger prints taken, and images of his irises were captured, so as to make access to various departments at the facility that much easier. He also noticed that he was closely escorted as well – he could not blame them for that.

It proved to be a long day, during which Choi felt free to ask as many questions as he liked, some very technical in nature. His hosts did their best to provide him with equally detailed answers, so far as their national security would allow, and on occasions even

conferred between themselves before replying to his query. They were plainly keen to be as open with him as they could be.

For their part, the UK delegation was learning a lot from his questions, which not only revealed gaps in his knowledge, but also gave valuable clues to the work he was carrying out in North Korea.

They had a working lunch, during which a few of his hosts excused themselves to check on what was happening in their offices.

In fact they met privately to discuss their guest.

Their conclusion was that Dr Choi undoubtedly had information about the North Korean and Chinese nuclear research programmes which they would find of vital national and international importance if they could only gain access to the detail.

The problem was how to get it.

By the end of the day, Choi was bemused by the wealth of information he had been given and the facilities which he had been shown, as well as the openness of friendliness of his hosts. He could not help but draw comparisons with his visit to America, which had been so different.

He wished he could stay longer, and said so.

“You are more than welcome to stay for as long as you wish,” said Paul Sheppard, the MOD man from Aldermaston.

He realised that the longer Choi stayed, the more they would learn.

“Given time,” he said, “we could even arrange for you to visit the Clyde Naval Base in Scotland, commonly known as Faslane, which is home to the core of the Royal Navy’s Submarine Service, including the nation’s nuclear deterrent. No doubt while you’re there, a visit could also be arranged to the nearby Royal Naval Armaments Depot at Coulport, which is responsible for the storage and maintenance of our Trident Deterrent Missile System.”

They could see that Choi was tempted by the bait, but he shook his head.

“I cannot stay,” he said sadly.

He thought for a moment.

“There is much of your work which I greatly admire, even after so short a visit, and there is much more that I would wish to discover, perhaps during our final day at Culham tomorrow. If I dare also say so, there is much more I could – perhaps even should - tell you about our own programmes, without the presence of my two colleagues here, but I dare not.”

“We would also be equally interested to learn more of your work,” said Martin Davis, one of the escorts, who worked in Defence Intelligence. “Your colleagues are still at Culham today, so feel free to brief us further if you wish, while you are here and away from them.”

“I dare not,” repeated Choi, looking anxious. “But there is much which I think you should know, if I had the courage to tell you.”

“Why? What should we know?”

“Before I answer that, let me ask one further question.”

“Of course.”

“You are signatories to the nuclear test ban treaty, and we are not? How do you manage to keep your weapons up to date and modify them to make them more effective without these test?”

“Simple, really,” replied Sheppard. “We carry out computer simulations, and check our results using complex mathematical algorithms which we have developed.”

“In Korea, we use real-time tests on every development.” Choi looked embarrassed. “Our bombs are dirty bombs, and so are our tests. No doubt you have a means of checking the extent of the nuclear radiation which we release into the atmosphere when we carry out tests. I am ashamed of the effects which are being caused, especially on innocent people in my own country, never mind the atmospheric pollution.”

“We are certainly able to monitor such things,” replied Sheppard, guardedly.

Choi looked around at his hosts.

“You should know that, in my view, the work in which I am involved poses a real and present threat to international security, and I believe it should at least be stopped or countered. I can say no more.”

He shrugged.

“I hope you know you can trust us,” said Sheppard.

“I am sure,” replied Choi. “But there is too much at stake personally for me to talk more openly. I have already said too much – enough to send me and all friends and my family, even distant relations, to one of our notorious penal camps. I cannot risk that, for their sake.”

“If you wish to stay in this country, we could arrange asylum for you in such a way that your authorities would not suspect any betrayal on your part,” suggested Davis.

Sheppard thought Davis had gone too far, and shook his head, frowning. Davis got the message.

“I will not stay,” replied Choi with an air of finality.

Members of the Defence team, desperate to know more, had other ideas.

In the car back to his Hotel in Oxford with Lee Cooper, Choi was silent.

Thoughtful.

Cooper left him to think.

On the outskirts of Oxford, Choi turned to Cooper.

“Are you a member of the security services here?” Choi asked, out of the blue.

Cooper was taken by surprise. He had no time to think, except that he could not immediately think of any reason to deny it.

“Yes. I work for the Foreign Office in their intelligence section.”

Choi did not respond at once.

Eventually, he said, “That is how you knew about my visit to America?”

“Yes.”

“And my work with the Chinese?”

“Yes.”

“And my work with centrifuges?”

“Yes.”

“And lasers?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause.

“Did you know that the Americans wanted me to stay?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad I didn’t.”

“So are we.”

“Are you exchanging information with them about me?”

“No. They know you are here, and have asked us to share with them any information you may give us about your work. We have so far declined, not least because they did not share with us anything that they may have learnt during your visit to them.”

“Good. But they learnt nothing. I told them nothing.”

“They nevertheless believed you may have wished to talk more openly. Perhaps even to defect.”

“Defect to America? Never!”

Choi lapsed into silence again.

“Do you know about my nephew?” he asked as they drew up outside the Hotel.

“Choi Yong?”

“Good. You do know.”

“I know nothing about him.”

“He plans to follow in my footsteps and has joined our new Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. We are very close to one another, and we share similar views about the work I am doing. I have encouraged him to travel if he ever can, but like me, he is reluctant to attempt anything. His parents, including my brother, are already in one of our prisons, and we may never see them again.”

“I understand,” replied Cooper.

“I hope you do,” Dr. Choi almost whispered.

He grinned as he left the car.

Lee Cooper switched off his recorder.

The Ministry of Defence members of the party escorting Dr. Choi were in a bit of a flap if they were honest, when he left Aldermaston.

It was plain to all of them now that Dr. Choi was not prepared to defect, but they knew enough from what he had said during the day to know that he had vital information which they were desperate to have.

Soon. The sooner the better, in fact. The problem was how to get it at all, if ever.

They knew they had to do something in double-quick time, but had no idea what. They needed a contingency plan, and only had a day to draw it up and put it into operation. The great difficulty was that they had no real idea what it was that they had to plan to achieve.

Should they plan to prevent his return in some way?

Should they plan to keep him here against his will and interrogate him to get the technical information they wanted about the Chinese role in North Korea's nuclear research programme?

Should they let him go in peace, and plan to go after him? And if they did, then what?

Follow him into North Korea? That could be very dodgy. On the other hand, it would be the last thing anyone over there would expect.

‘Dodgy’ had never bothered them before. ‘Who dares, wins’ it said on the badge.

They decided they needed a meeting at the Ministry of Defence to discuss the options, and that the meeting should be chaired by General Sir Pearson-Jones, Chief of Defence Intelligence.

He wasn't too pleased when he was told that he had been selected to take the inevitable buck, when it eventually stopped. For a start he was already dressed in his Mess-kit, complete with medals, ready to attend a dinner at the Athenaeum Club. But a meeting was nevertheless hurriedly arranged for later that evening. Martin Davis and Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston were both there, together with Colonel Seb Owen, Commander of the Special Air Service, and a couple of his colleagues.

Paul Sheppard opened the proceedings, since he had been with Dr. Choi from the outset. He set about briefing the General, inviting the others to fill in any gaps as he went.

Finally, he turned to the General.

“We are of the view that Dr. Choi has information which is vital to our understanding of what is happening in both China and North Korea in relation to their nuclear weapons programmes, and in particular into their research into uranium enrichment. We need that information if we are to plan to counter it.

“We are also firmly of the view that Choi is sufficiently disillusioned with the real purpose of his work in collaboration with the Chinese, and with life in general in his country to be prepared to help us. He seems to be suspicious that the Chinese are using North Korea and its down-trodden people in a deadly nuclear game, rather than carry out the experiments using their own people on their own soil. For various reasons, which we understand, he is not at the moment prepared to defect – to come over to our side and stay here. Also for reasons which we understand, he is not prepared while he is here to brief us fully. Not least this is because he has another scientist colleague with him, who we believe is still totally committed to his country’s ideology, and also because they have with them an official Government minder, whose sole job is to ensure that both the scientists stick to the rules. That makes it impossible for Choi to speak openly to us, even if we could get him away from his colleagues for long enough for him to do so, as we did briefly at Aldermaston today.”

“Did he open up while he was there?” asked Pearson-Jones.

“He certainly began to, but was too afraid to say too much. But it was enough to convince us all that, given the opportunity, he would tell us more. In fact, he as good as admitted it.”

“So why are we here?”

“We are here to decide what our next steps should be. The delegation returns to North Korea later tomorrow after their final day at Culham, and colleagues in MI6 are inclined to let Choi go. Our inclination is to prevent him from leaving, so that we can question him in depth. It seems criminal to us to let such a valuable source of crucially important information simply slip through our fingers, in order to avoid any sort of diplomatic fuss. It seems to us that detailed knowledge of Choi’s work is vital to our national security.”

“So there are two things to decide, then,” said the General. “First of all whether or not to prevent Choi from returning home, and secondly, if we do, how we do it. Right?”

“Correct.”

“There is always the possibility of course that if we prevent him from returning home, he will turn against us and refuse to talk anyway.”

“He is certainly very afraid of the dictatorship within which he lives, and is obviously finding it very difficult to overcome the relentless brainwashing to which all citizens are constantly subjected, so I suspect you could be right, General. An imposed defection could well turn him against us and be counterproductive.”

“And we don’t have long enough to talk him into staying,” mused the General. “Are there any incentives we can offer which might persuade him?”

“If we could guarantee the safety of all his family, then perhaps. But plainly we can’t do that. It is fear for their well-being as much as for his own that prevents him from co-operating. It is fear which is driving him home.”

“And fear of the consequences of his research work into nuclear weapons, on the other hand, which is driving him towards us,” concluded the General.

He thought for a moment.

“Kidnapping the man is obviously out of the question, in my view, and any attempt to do so would not only be counter-productive in achieving our objective, but also do long term harm. My decision, therefore, is that we let the man go home in peace. There may be no harm, however, in letting him know that we had considered the other option, and rejected it.”

“Why tell him?” asked Davis.

“To reassure him that we are a decent civilised society, unlike his own,” replied the General. “This may well help any future thoughts he may have about coming over.”

The Chief of Defence Intelligence considered the options. It seemed to him that there weren’t all that many open to them, especially given the need to act urgently.

“So now what, then? Did I hear a suggestion that we should follow him?”

“It had crossed our mind,” admitted Sheppard.

“With what object in view?” asked Pearson-Jones.

“If not to persuade him to leave voluntarily once he is back in his own familiar surroundings, then, at least to keep in touch with the man. In that way, we may, in time, either be able to give him sanctuary in this country, or perhaps collect other useful information from him about his work.”

“How would you keep in touch?” asked the General. “Since you know the man, do you propose to go to North Korea yourself, Sheppard?”

“No, sir.”

“Who then? Who else do you suggest could just turn up in North Korea, follow Dr. Choi around as he goes about his business in their top secret nuclear research facility and test site, get valuable information from him, and send it back to us? And what had you in mind - a post card, or a telephone call?”

“This obviously needs further thought and planning, General,” said Col. Seb Owen, “but as to who should go, we have two members of 22 Squadron who are fluent Korean speakers. One is a South Korean citizen, and the other a North Korean defector. And I am told that there is already in place in the country a small network of disaffected informers and helpers with whom MI6 is in touch on a regular basis. So anyone we sent would not be operating altogether alone.”

“But they would not know Dr. Choi from Adam, any more than he would know them. And knowing a little of the background to that country and how it operates, I would never be surprised if Choi immediately suspected that your two people were agents of his own dictatorship, sent to keep watch over him. Again, counterproductive.”

“Point taken,” admitted Sheppard.

“It seems to me that none of this has been properly thought through,” said the General, annoyed.

“With respect, sir, we called this meeting so that things could be properly thought through, given that we have so little time to do any planning.”

The General turned to the SAS Commanding Officer.

“How quickly can your chaps move?”

“Immediately.”

“Where are they?”

“In barracks at Hereford.”

“Visas? What about visas – they take up to six months to get hold of, I’m told.”

“They don’t need visas. They both have valid North Korean passports, and papers to get them in and out of China.”

After a moment’s thought, the General said, “Right! Send them over. Get them to Oxford ASAP so that they can at least get a look at Choi before they go, but that doesn’t mean introducing themselves to him outside the Hotel or at Heathrow. They must see but not be seen. We can decide how they should operate once they’re in place over there, and they have assessed the situation. Will communications be any problem?”

“No sir.”

“Good. How soon can you get them to Oxford?”

“Probably two hours.”

“How will you insert them into North Korea?”

“Getting them in is the easy bit, General. Getting them out will be difficult – if not impossible.”

“Do they understand that risk?”

“They will by the time they have been briefed, sir.”

“They will need to make immediate contact with our existing network over there,” said Pearson-Jones, stating the obvious. “Which means I must tell Jack Salisbury, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Organisation, and I suppose our own Permanent Secretary as well. They can both be trusted not to tell other civil servants or Ministers, although I guess Jack will want to bring ‘C’ into the equation as it’s his people already over there. I’ll leave that to him. This whole operation needs to be treated with the utmost secrecy, so only those who need to know should be told. And nothing in writing – we’ll sweep up the paper work later.”

As the meeting broke up, Pearson-Jones called over a junior officer who was with Colonel Owen.

“You’ve been making a lot of notes,” he said accusingly. “Hand them over.”

“General?”

“Hand them over,” he repeated. “If you haven’t brain enough to remember what’s been going on this evening, then you shouldn’t be where you are. ‘No paper, no leaks’, I always say. These will go through the shredder when I get back to the office.”

4.

THE SAS

Moon and Jang were in the hotel lobby waiting for Choi when he returned, and were anxious to hear about his day.

“Come to my room.” Choi invited them. “I am equally keen to know what further you learnt at Culham. By the way, what time are we having dinner this evening?”

“Nothing formal has been arranged,” replied Moon, as they made their way across the lobby to the lift, “but we are to have an informal farewell lunch tomorrow when we return from Culham, before we leave for the airport.”

“Good. So we have a free evening. I shall need to write notes ready for preparing my report when we return home. Since I was not at Culham today, perhaps you would be good enough to draft the report on that aspect of our visit,” he suggested to Jang Nam.

“Of course,” Nam replied. “I shall also make some notes myself this evening, perhaps after we have had dinner together. It was another most interesting day, don’t you agree, Pak, but I really doubt if we shall learn anything new if we return there tomorrow.”

“I agree,” said Moon. “In fact they more or less told us that there was nothing further they could show us that we had not already seen, but that we were welcome to return if we wished.”

“In that case,” suggested Choi, “Perhaps I could go on my own to catch up on some of the briefing you had during this morning’s tour. I shall then know better how to meld our two reports together.”

“I agree,” said Jang Nam, and Moon nodded.

“You and I” said Nam to Moon, “could have a leisurely tour of this lovely city together, before meeting everybody again for our farewell lunch.”

Again, Moon nodded. He did not like the thought of his charges splitting up once again, but he could not be in two places at once, and he was sure his superiors would realise that if ever it became known that Choi had twice been out on his own. Three times, actually, although Moon Pak did not know about Choi’s first outing on his own.

“We should tell them of our change of plan,” said Choi. “How can we do that? Is there anyway of contacting Mr. Cooper?”

“He said he would look in this evening, perhaps for a drink in the bar, especially to see if there was anything further we needed, so we can tell him then.”

“Excellent. In that case, I suggest we freshen up a bit, and meet again downstairs in the bar before dinner.”

Lee Cooper was already there, nursing a warm beer.

He was greeted like a long lost friend. He offered them a drink – they chose wine – but insisted that he would not join them for dinner.

“No, this is a free evening for you to do what you like before you return home tomorrow. I simply came to see if there was anything I could do for you.”

“You are most kind,” said Pak. “In fact, we were hoping to see you this evening because we wish to change our plans for tomorrow.”

“In what way?”

“You were not at Culham today, but they suggested there was nothing much new for them to show us tomorrow,” reported Pak. “However, Dr. Choi was not there, so we thought that he could perhaps go alone tomorrow to catch up on what he missed, while we started drafting our report, and if time permits, have a quiet tour of this lovely city.”

“That’s not a problem at all. I will tell Culham that Dr. Choi will be on his own.”

“That’s most kind of you,” said Choi. “In our country, I fear such a last minute change of plans would not be acceptable.”

Cooper immediately realised that he had work to do this evening.

“If you would like,” he suggested, “I could arrange for you to have a car and an official guide for your tour of Oxford.”

“Kind of you, but no thank you. We are in the centre of Oxford and so can easily walk. There are maps and guide books in the hotel lobby, so we shall be able to get around without any difficulty,” said Nam.

“In that case, if there is nothing further I can do for you this evening, Dr. Choi, I shall get on to my colleagues to tell them that only you will be visiting them at Culham in the morning.”

Cooper took his leave, but did not immediately contact Culham. He got on to Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston instead.

“Your lucky day, tomorrow,” he announced.

“It’s my day off,” replied Sheppard.

“Not any more it isn’t. You’ve got Choi to yourself at Culham tomorrow if you want him. The other two have decided they’ve had enough, but Choi wants to catch up, as he wasn’t there today.”

“Or perhaps he just wants a day with us on his own,” said Sheppard thoughtfully.

“You decide,” said Cooper. “I must tell John Williams at Culham.”

“Tell him I’ll be there,” said Sheppard. “Will you go?”

“Of course. It could be our last chance to persuade the man to stay here.”

“We’ll be lucky!”

“I think you’re right, but we can’t give up yet.”

“I’ll get on to Martin Davis as well, and get him there.”

“By the way,” said Cooper, “Although I wasn’t invited to attend, I gather you guys had a meeting earlier and drew up some sort of contingency plan if the man decides to go home – as he will.”

“Can’t keep anything secret from you lot, can we.”

“That’s why we’re here.”

Kang Soo and Park Yon were both in the SAS Barracks in Hereford when the call came. Like all Special Forces personnel not actually engaged on operations, they were getting bored with the constant training to which they were subjected, although even that was better than doing nothing at all.

It seems this operation could just be a bit different from others they had been involved in recently, in Kandahar and Iraq. This time, they were going 'home', and would be operating largely on their own, although they had been told that there was likely to be some limited support already in place, if they could make contact.

They were briefed in the air, on the Special Forces standby helicopter which had been scrambled to take them from Hereford to Oxford.

Without being told, they were acutely aware of the special dangers involved in a clandestine operation in such a hostile environment. They knew what their fate was likely to be at the hands of the fanatical dictatorship if they were caught or betrayed.

There was apparently no rush for them to get to North Korea, but an urgent need for them to familiarise themselves with their target, who was due to return to Pyongyang later tomorrow. He was one of three visitors, who had been given the VIP treatment by the UK. They were handed photographs of the man they were interested in so that they could recognise him both in Oxford and at Heathrow tomorrow and later in Korea itself, but the pictures were to be handed in as soon as the North Korean delegation had left. To be caught with those in their possession would be certain death.

They felt more exposed in Oxford than they probably would do in Korea, where they would meld more easily into the background, but so far as they could tell their target, Dr. Choi Shin had not spotted them as he strolled with his driver from the car park. If he had, he took no notice.

There was a lot going on.

Len Ellis and his team in the camper van at the back of the car park at The Old Bank Hotel, were busy downloading the material from their various 'taps' around the hotel, and getting it to people who could transfer it onto a computer.

Another team was doing the same with various recordings made by Cooper and others who had been in conversation with Dr. Choi.

All that material went to a team of translators, analysts and researchers who would pick the meat from the bones, and provide some sort of intelligent background briefing which summarised what had been going on and what was now known about the Korean nuclear scientists and their work.

And it was still going on. The visitors hadn't returned to North Korea yet, and there would be more material to be dealt with in this way before they did so. But it was essential for everyone in the country who was in any way involved to have a broad picture of what was being said, to assess attitudes, and to get an idea of the sort of information that could be within their grasp if they played their cards right.

Briefing material like this, and a proper analysis of it, was a vital ingredient in the decision making process now beginning. Those involved needed to be able to interpret what had been said by the Korean visitors, so as to be able to make sensible decisions about what they should do next.

In particular, Professor John Williams, Culham's Director, and Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston, needed to get a feel for how best to deal with Dr. Choi during their final meeting with him. An accurate analysis of all that had been said, inferred and hinted at would

help them determine how to deal with the nuclear scientist during his remaining few hours in the UK.

A typed summary would be with them in the morning, as well as being on the desks of others who were directly interested and who could also influence future events.

Choi's morning visit to Culham proved to be of mutual benefit, both to him and the small UK delegation looking after him. Although nuclear fusion was not his particular field of interest, the science and the mathematics which went into the research being carried out was of great interest. He learnt a lot, and said so.

By the same token, the UK scientists with him learnt a lot about Choi and his work, not least from the questions he asked, which revealed gaps in his knowledge, but also from many of the comments he made. Many of these were no doubt un-guarded because his two colleagues were not with him, but he nevertheless seemed at ease and confident in the company of fellow scientists. International barriers appeared to have fallen away, as often they do when politics are removed from scientific research.

Based on the briefing they had received that morning, summarising all that had been learnt about Choi from this week's visit and from earlier intelligence reports, Williams and Sheppard had agreed that they would not in any way pressurise Choi during his morning at Culham. They needed him to be totally relaxed, and to be made to feel 'at home' within the UK's nuclear scientific community.

It had also been agreed between them, rather reluctantly it has to be said, that Lee Cooper would drive him back to Oxford on his own: just the two of them in the car, without even an official driver. Choi was now well used to Cooper, who had been the first to greet the Korean delegation on its arrival, and they got on well together, each relaxed in the other's company.

The drive back to the Hotel for their farewell lunch would probably be the last chance to turn Choi and perhaps persuade him to stay.

Choi sat silent for a while in the passenger seat at the front of the car, deep in thought.

"You know," he said eventually, "I have so enjoyed my visit here, I feel relaxed for the first time in many years. I have not felt spied upon or under threat, which are things one gets used to feeling in my country; a constant fear of the authorities, and what they might do next."

He sighed.

"I am almost not looking forward to returning home," he said.

"Stay, then."

Cooper could hardly believe what he was hearing.

Choi looked across to Cooper.

"No, no, no, I cannot. I must not. I am sure you understand."

"Of course I do," replied Cooper, sympathetically. "But if ever you should change your mind, you only have to get word to us. If ever you feel that the work you are doing really does pose an imminent threat to world peace and a catastrophic nuclear conflict, then we may be able to prevent that if we know what it is your work involves."

"If I'm honest, I already do believe that," replied Choi.

He sat thoughtfully for a moment.

"How would I get word to you? How would it ever be possible for us to keep in touch? If ever I felt strongly enough, how would I manage to get technical information to you? All this seems impossible."

"Dr. Choi, my friend," replied Cooper, "if that is what you want, then we shall arrange it."

"If you can do that, my friend, without in any way endangering your people or mine," Choi paused for thought. "Then do it."

“Consider it done,” replied Cooper. “I shall arrange for one of our people to make contact with you after your return. It may be some time after your return, but you will know. And we shall wait until you are ready, if ever you should decide to help us in any way.”

“I shall also be helping my own people if I do, and possibly many millions of others.”

“You must be careful,” insisted Cooper.

“So must your people,” replied Choi. “My country is not a safe place for its own citizens, let alone strangers.”

“We know where you work.”

“My real work is at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre, which is about 90km north of Pyongyang. I have an apartment near there. But I work more and more on detachment at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, where I also have accommodation, although it is somewhat austere. That is where my research is carried out, with Chinese ‘colleagues’, if I may call them that.”

“We shall find you, wherever you are.”

Choi looked across at Cooper.

“You are so confident,” he said. “Quietly confident – no fuss.”

They were nearing the Hotel in Central Oxford.

“I’ll drop you off at the door, and then find somewhere to park the car,” said Cooper.

“If I may, I’ll come with you, and walk back with you. I shall enjoy my last moments of freedom. Three days of freedom!” he exclaimed. “I did not even feel so relaxed in America.”

He looked across at Lee Cooper.

“You know, I almost feared I would be kidnapped and kept here for questioning.”

“The thought had crossed our mind, if I’m honest, but we do not do that sort of thing in this country, however desperate we may be to get hold of information.”

“The authorities in my country would not have thought twice about it,” responded Choi sadly. “They have developed barbaric ways for making people talk.”

“That is not the way we do things,” responded Cooper. “You are free to return home, or you are free to stay here if you wish. It’s your decision.”

“I cannot imagine living in such freedom and in such a civilised country compared with my own. But I shall not stay. I know you understand the reasons,” he said.

Cooper nodded.

“I know what you are thinking,” Choi said. “But I shall not stay.”

Cooper felt almost guilty as he switched off his recorder.

Jack Salisbury, Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation, wasn’t at all sure about this. He had read the briefs thoroughly – twice in fact – but wasn’t at all sure that what was being proposed was the best thing to do.

Not sure at all.

Suddenly, it was his decision, so he had to be sure. There was no one else to ask – no one that mattered, anyway. He certainly wasn’t about to approach Ministers or civil servants who didn’t understand these things, or even his ultimate boss, the Cabinet Secretary. He was a civil servant with too much else to worry about, and who was prone to ‘consult wider’. That was the last thing Salisbury wanted. The fewer the people who knew about this, the better. In the old days, there would have been the Head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, and the Head of Intelligence Analysis, to offer a view.

But now he held all three jobs.

So it was his decision.

"I hope you haven't told your Permanent Secretary," he said to General Pearson-Jones, who was at the meeting he had called.

"Not yet, but it had crossed my mind," replied the General.

"Don't then."

"We may need to tell more people when we have decided what to do," said Sir Geoffrey Sefton, Head of MI6, who was also there, "but for the time being, the fewer the people who know about this, the better."

"Absolutely," said Salisbury.

He scratched his balding head, as if for inspiration.

"There seems to be no doubt whatsoever that we need as much information as we can get about this collaborative project between the North Koreans and the Chinese. So far, we have picked up very little, apart from satellite images of increased activity. We now have, however, in this country, the one man who could tell us everything, and who, um, on the face of it, seems half prepared to talk."

"But not to stay," Sefton reminded him.

"Exactly."

Salisbury leant back in his chair, eyes closed.

"This may seem to be, er, shall we say, perverse," said Salisbury, almost apologetically, "but I believe the option of forcing Dr. Choi to stay, which I understand your people favoured," he glowered at Pearson-Jones, "to be quite the wrong option."

"I agree it could be counter-productive," admitted the General, "but it is – was – an option."

"I gather you also discussed sending Special Forces after him?"

"They are on stand-by."

"With what object in view?" asked Salisbury

"Our thinking was that once Choi had returned to his own oppressive environment, he may become even more inclined to get away from it and to join us. Our chaps would have been there to aid his defection and return."

"Your men who are on stand-by," quizzed Salisbury. "Are they nuclear scientists or diplomats or trained negotiators, or, um, I mean no offence, just simply soldiers?"

"They are both fluent Korean speakers, one himself a defector; but only soldiers."

"But they do know what Choi looks like?"

"Certainly they do. They have photographs, they have watched video footage of him, and they have seen him in the flesh in Oxford," the General looked at his watch, "and now at Heathrow."

Salisbury shook his head, and turned to 'C'.

"I don't know about you, Geoffrey, but my view is that Choi could well be of more use to us within Korea, rather than out of it."

"My view exactly. If he stayed here we would undoubtedly learn a lot about the work so far carried out, and perhaps about future plans, but then we would learn nothing further. He would soon be out of touch and out of date."

"Quite so," agreed Jack Salisbury. "And it would all be from memory. Not much in the way of figures, or data in any great detail, no plans, no technical drawings, etc. etc."

Salisbury clasped his hands behind his head.

"If, on the other hand, he can be persuaded to help us from within, shall we say, he can keep us up to date with progress as well."

"And he has already indicated that he might well be prepared to help us, as you put it, 'from within'," said 'C'. "He asked my chap Lee Cooper how he could get word to us if he needed to, as you will have seen from the briefing."

"And Cooper said that contact could be arranged."

Salisbury shuffled his papers.

“Ah!” he said. “Here it is. ‘If that is what you want, then we shall arrange it’ is what Cooper said.”

“And Choi said, ‘Then do it.’

Jack Salisbury stood up, stretched, and looked at his feet in thought.

“Good man, your Cooper?”

“Excellent,” replied Geoffrey Sefton. “He quickly developed a good rapport with Choi, to the extent that they almost became friends.”

“Pity we can’t send him into North Korea then, really.”

Salisbury grinned.

“But I understand that you already have a small band of – shall we say – ‘helpers’ in the country?” he asked Sefton.

“Some. Loosely organised, but in touch.”

“With one another and with us?”

“Yes.”

Salisbury ambled across to look out of his Cabinet Office window at the night-time lights of Whitehall. After a moment, he turned to face the other two men.

“Here’s what I suggest then, General.”

Pearson-Jones knew that this was no suggestion – it was a decision.

“If you agree, of course, Geoffrey.”

‘There you are’, thought Pearson-Jones. ‘A decision to be agreed, not a suggestion.’

“What I suggest,” he repeated, “is that you send in your chaps at some time – no great rush – when they are fully trained and briefed. I suggest that you, Geoffrey, and your man Cooper, do the briefing. Their mission,” he turned to the Head of Defence Intelligence, “will NOT be to persuade the man to return here as a defector. It will be to make the contact promised by Cooper, and to keep in touch discretely. If he should decide to return, they will be there to facilitate those arrangements. Similarly, if he wishes simply to pass on information in some form or other, they will be able to put him in touch with others who can act as a conduit between him and us.”

He turned to Sir Geoffrey Sefton.

“They will also need to be in contact with your group already over there. I leave that to you to arrange. In the event that such a person should be needed, do you have – how shall I put this? – an agent, shall we say, who can speak their language and who would be able to collect any – um – briefing material.”

“Yes. I do. As it happens, one of my best men is a Far East specialist, and fluent in the Korean language.”

“Available?”

“In a few weeks, perhaps.”

“Name?”

“Maurice Northcot.”

“Where is he now?”

“Officially, in Warsaw.”

“Unofficially?”

“Jakarta.”

“In that case, I also suggest that he is present at the briefing with our two – er – soldiers.”

Head of MI6 nodded.

“And is my suggestion acceptable to you, General?”

“An excellent idea, if I may say so. I believe, though, that the men’s Commanding Officer should also be present.”

Salisbury grinned. He turned to 'C'.

"And your Head of Section 7, too. What's his name again – James Piper?"

Sir Geoffrey Sefton nodded.

"Agreed, then. Get on with it, good luck, and keep me in touch. We need what Choi has to offer, so let's go and get it."

As the meeting broke up, Salisbury turned to Sefton.

"A moment, if you would. Something else I wanted to discuss with you, if you can spare the time."

He turned to the others as they left.

"A different topic," he assured them, with a smile.

As the door closed behind them, he looked at Sefton.

"Perhaps not quite true," he said. "Same topic, but a different approach."

He walked across to his bookcase.

"Scotch?" he asked, taking out the decanter and two glasses.

He poured two generous helpings.

"Good malt, this," he commented. "You need more than one sip, especially at this time of night."

He returned to his desk, and sat down heavily, with a sigh, before raising his glass in salute.

"Brave chaps, those in the SAS," he said. "But this is not exactly what they're trained to do."

He savoured the Scotch.

"More the sort of thing your chaps do, Geoffrey. It's the sort of thing they're good at."

Sefton nodded, and Salisbury leant forward.

"Brave chaps," he repeated, "but they will fail."

Sefton nodded again. "I'm afraid you're right."

"So let's talk about plan 'B'."

He sipped his malt whiskey.

"You already have people on the ground? In North Korea?" he asked, seeking confirmation.

"We do. Not many, but a start."

"Any one working over there – in that country above all others – is also brave. Who are they?"

"Mostly local people who are disaffected. One or two of our own, who we have inserted."

"Inserted! But not in the dark by dinghy launched from a submarine, I would guess, which is what the Army will probably do."

"No. We can be more subtle than that."

Salisbury leant back and looked at the ceiling.

"I wonder now, y' know, if we should stop them going."

"To be blunt," said Sefton, "I would rather risk new people than my existing network, fragile though it is."

"If they are caught? The new chaps?"

"At best, death by firing squad."

"Newly arrived chaps would probably be at most risk, do you think?"

"Probably."

"Would it make much difference if they were civilians, rather than military?"

“Probably not, except in terms of regime’s propaganda machine. What had you in mind?”

“Perhaps leaving the Army and joining the Foreign Office as diplomats. Temporarily, that is – until they got back.”

“Spies are spies.”

“True.”

“Frankly, Jack, I would rather not risk my organisation already in place.”

“What is their role?”

“Watchers and listeners, couriers, people smugglers.”

“Across the border?”

Sefton nodded.

“So they could help any new chaps get out when the time came?”

“Yes.”

“Without submarines or drama of that sort.”

Sir Geoffrey Sefton nodded again.

After another sip of his Scotch, Jack Salisbury said,

“Right. We’ll let them go, and hope for the best, for their sakes. We promised Choi we would keep in touch, so let them at least do that if only to build confidence. But Choi is not going to come back here with the information which we so desperately need, so we shall have to go and get it and bring it back ourselves.”

He turned to the Head of MI6. “And that means your people, Geoffrey, so let’s talk about plan ‘B’.”

5.

THE RENDEZVOUS

Lee Cooper went with them to the airport to see them off. He had been there to meet them when they arrived, and had spent a lot of time with them since. Especially, when he could, with Dr. Choi Shin. So it was obvious that he would be there to see them off.

Once again, he was able to short-cut the usual system. The party arrived well after the obligatory check-in time, went quickly through passport control, immigration and baggage checks, and all the other tiresome administrative and security requirements which go into the business of getting from land-side to air-side at any airport. Eventually, they went directly on to the parked aircraft on the apron, and the North Korean scientists, after their final farewells at the foot of the aircraft steps, were the last to board the waiting plane. They had already exchanged gifts – small souvenirs of one kind or another – during their lunch earlier in the day.

Before they left, the scientists had hinted that they might prefer to travel by British Airways, or even by KLM, or Lufthansa, or SAS as far as Beijing, but their Embassy had decided that, as they had to go via Beijing and change on to an Air China flight anyway, they may as well go all the way from London by Air China.

There were no direct flights to Pyongyang from anywhere except Beijing, which is the major transport hub for entering North Korea, even by train or bus. There are a few connecting flights from Vladivostok in Russia, and Shenyang in Northern China, but nobody in their right mind changed at Beijing to make the onward flight by Air Koryo, which was the only alternative Korean operator from there into Pyongyang. Their aged Russian Tupolev and Ilyushin aircraft had a notorious safety record, especially in bad weather into Pyongyang’s

Sunan International Airport, which did not even have a basic instrument landing system installed.

So it was not only safer, but also cheaper and quicker to go direct by Air China from London via Beijing— only 14 hours, or thereabouts.

That meant no more European food or French wine for the visitors.

Choi and Cooper had no chance for a last minute private conversation, either on the way to Heathrow or before they boarded the aircraft, but it was not really necessary. They understood each other.

For his part, Dr. Choi was almost convinced that he should share his secrets with the West in order to avoid a nuclear holocaust. Cooper and his colleagues in the British scientific and intelligence community, on the other hand, were equally confident that Choi would eventually be willing to pass on vital information about the North Korean and Chinese nuclear weapons programmes.

The problem for one of them was delivering it, for the other getting it.

Kang Soo and Park Yon, the two Special Services soldiers selected for the mission into North Korea, and had already started preparations for it. They soon realised that it could well be a one-way trip for both of them.

They were at Bourleywood House in the Cotswolds. It was used for that sort of thing, even though parts of it were open to the public. It was, after all, owned by the National Trust, so it said on the notice board outside. At least, those parts that the public could visit were.

The rest was owned and managed by the Government, and used by the Foreign Office, the Police, the armed services, and other parts of the establishment which needed somewhere secret to work. There was a language school, where you could learn anything, there was a medical facility which helped give people who needed it a new look and a new identity, an interrogation centre, where one could learn not just how to interrogate others, but also how to resist interrogation in the event of capture by, shall we say, those less civilised than ourselves, - and so on. It was that sort of place, which also operated as a safe house for those who needed safety and protection.

Kang and Park did not need new identities, although they were given a Kim Jung-un haircut, in the style of the 'Supreme Leader'. The interrogation resistance training was not just essential, but unpleasant. They were briefed in detail about some of the techniques used by the paranoid regime they were about to enter, many of which horrified them. The skilful application of a hot iron can induce anybody to say anything.

It was obviously best not to be caught, so they were given an intensive spell of escape and evasion training away from their Hereford barracks. Not even the Welsh mountains or the harshest terrain that Scotland or Bavaria could offer would properly prepare them for the mountainous countryside of North Korea. Not that being caught by German paratroopers was in any way pleasant, even though it was only training.

So far, in spite of all the intense training, they still had no clear idea of where in North Korea they would be operating.

Neither, at that time, had anybody else to be honest.

The SAS intelligence team was working flat out, pouring over satellite images, maps and photographs, with their colleagues from MI6.

The problem was that Dr Choi Shin had two addresses. Not that they had either of them as it happened, but they knew he had an apartment which he shared with his nephew, within the Yongbyon nuclear research facility, which was his main base, and that he also had

what he had described as ‘somewhat austere’ accommodation at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. The two places were about as far apart as you could get. The Nuclear Scientific Research Centre which was his real home was to the south of the country, about 90km north of the capital Pyongyang, while the nuclear test site was in a desolate, mountainous region in the north east.

This posed several difficulties for those planning the operation. They had to decide where they were most likely to be able to track down the Doctor, which was the safest area for the two men to operate in, and, perhaps equally important, which was the easiest to get them to. They also had to bear in mind how easy it might be to get them out, if and when they needed to.

It was one thing getting them in to the country – there were several options in fact – but quite a different problem getting them out again. It may, indeed, prove impossible to do so, in which case Soo and Yon would be on their own, and probably for a very long time.

It was debated whether to send one soldier to each location, but eventually it was decided that their chances of success, and indeed survival, would be greater if they worked together, at least initially.

Another major factor was that they could achieve little if anything unless they were able to make contact with the existing small and, it had to be said somewhat shaky, organisation already in place. And that organisation was at its strongest the further south you went, especially near the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) which ran along the 38th parallel border with South Korea.

So it began to look as if the shorter odds were on the more southerly site at Yongbyon, itself a small city to the north of the nuclear facilities. Wherever they ended up, they would need to get embedded into the local community as quickly as possible. Strangers wandering about would easily and quickly be spotted, with possible dire consequences. And travelling about was by no means easy. There is no freedom of movement in the country, and all citizens need special permission to leave their town of residence.

Park Yon was used to this. He had lived in the country until he defected several years ago, but Kang Soo was a native of South Korea, and had never visited the North.

Not that this put them off their assignment. They were both looking forward to a slice of action and the challenges they would face, which looked like being entirely different from their previous missions together, mainly in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, but also in Indonesia.

They had completed several weeks of intensive and specialised training when a high-level meeting was held to discuss their mission and their readiness for it.

Jack Salisbury was still far from convinced that the mission was worth mounting at all, and said so. Geoffrey Sefton, ‘C’, looked across to General Pearson-Jones, the Head of Defence Intelligence, sitting next to Colonel Seb Owen, the men’s Commanding Officer.

“We four,” began Salisbury, “know all the background to this little – um – venture. But nobody else does, and nor should they. We will brief others when the time is right, but not before.”

He looked at the others, who nodded their agreement.

“I have to tell you that I am still not entirely convinced about the necessity for this operation, or its likely success.” He glowered at them.

“Convince me. Tell me about the men who you have chosen. Do they realise that they face almost certain death?”

“If I may say so, sir,” replied Seb Owen, “Members of my Service do so every time they go on operations. They know it, accept it, and are trained to avoid it if at all possible. Operating behind enemy lines, very often on their own and without support, is what they do.

You will recall that the two men who have been specially selected are both fluent in the language, and that one of them was born and bred in the country and lived there until he defected. Escape is in itself highly dangerous. To be caught in the attempt means death by firing squad at the best. The other man is from South Korea and in my view more likely not to survive this mission than his colleague. He knows this, and accepts it.”

“Why is he at greater risk?”

“Because he is not a native of the country, because he has never been there before, because he speaks the language with a slight accent, and because of where he was born. If he is caught, he will immediately be suspected of being an American spy.”

“Does he know this?”

“Of course. Both men are fully aware of what they are going into and the sort of regime they will be living in.”

“And both men are prepared to accept the risk?”

“Mr. Salisbury, both men are eager to get on with it, and get out there. They have more than once been given the opportunity to step down, and have refused.”

Salisbury sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

“I am humbled,” he said.

“How has their training gone?” asked Pearson-Jones.

“Yet to be completed,” replied Owen. “It has so far been the most arduous we could devise, based on what we know of the country within which they will be operating, and physically they have come through everything we could throw at them. They have yet to be fully briefed in detail about the country and its regime, but I see no problems arising from that.”

“Support?” Salisbury turned to the Head of MI6.

“We have made contact with our existing, rather sparse network, and they are expecting our two chaps. We have already discovered where Dr. Choi lives, at both his workplaces, and have their recommendation as to where our men should be based.”

“And how shall we get them there?”

“There are several options,” replied Sefton. “Given their background and the fact that they have all the right papers, we could put them in as tourists, as part of an organised tour. This has attractions, except for the fact that they would be allocated special Korean Government minders for the duration of their so-called ‘holiday’, and that they would have to surrender their passports for the duration of their stay. These minders would in any case need to be given the slip – in itself no problem – but that would raise the alarm. So we are considering other, less conventional means.”

“Such as?”

Seb Owen looked at Pearson-Jones.

“Tell him,” said the General.

“There are two favoured option. One is a night-time free-fall parachute drop into the area we have chosen. The problem with that is that this area, near the town of Yongbyon, is heavily fortified. The town is just north of their major Magnox nuclear reactor and research facility, where Dr Choi works for most of the time, and has at least twenty-two anti-aircraft gun batteries nearby. In the light of that, we think the best option could be to put them ashore on the coast some distance away. We believe that our existing network can help them travel to the site, which is about 100 miles north of Pyongyang.”

Jack Salisbury mopped his brow.

“And how will they be put ashore?”

“The Royal Navy has a submarine operating in the area of the Yellow Sea, with a small detachment of Commandoes on board. Our men can be parachuted to within a hundred meters or so of the boat, be picked up by the marines, and put ashore later.”

“Is all this really wise?” he queried.

“In our view, it is certainly worth the risk,” replied Sefton. “We need what Choi has to offer, and to ensure we get it, we have to continue the confidence building exercise which was started during his visit. We said we would be in touch, and that’s what we have to do now he has returned home. Get in touch.”

“My chaps know that their mission is simply to make contact with Dr. Choi and stay discretely available to him if they should be wanted. We have devised a means by which they can identify themselves, once they make contact, and then all they have to do is wait.”

“And not get caught,” added Salisbury.

“That, and getting out again, is the most difficult part of the whole operation, especially as neither of them will be armed.” said Col. Owen. “Understandably, that is the one aspect of this whole operation that my men dislike the most.”

“Not even for self-defence?”

“They can be given PPWs when they get there if they feel the need.”

“Not such a dodgy network of agents after all, then.”

“We’ll see.”

“Do your people have maps of where they are going? Detailed maps?”

Sefton reached for his briefcase. He spread maps in front of Salisbury.

“They are being shown these during their briefings, but for obvious reasons, will not take them with them. Here is the site of the nuclear research facility” – he pointed – “and here are the anti-aircraft gun emplacements. This is the town of Yongbyon, and there,” he produced another map, “is the nuclear facilities site. This is the new Magnox reactor, here the research facilities, and this” – he pointed again – “the domestic accommodation where Dr. Choi has his apartment. That is their ultimate target.”

Salisbury shook his head, sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, rubbing his eyes.

“Would it not be simpler and safer for one of our existing ‘agents’, as you call them, to make contact with the Doctor?” he queried.

“They would have no means of properly identifying themselves. For a complete stranger to turn up at Choi’s apartment and declare he was from the UK would immediately frighten off Choi for ever. In that country, one cannot even trust one’s relatives for fear of being betrayed,” replied ‘C’.

“So how will he recognise our two people, neither of whom he has never met?”

“I can assure you that he will. They will identify themselves in such a way that he will eventually have no doubt about who they represent.”

Salisbury sighed, and ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

“I dare not ask,” he said, “but...”

He looked at the men before him.

“Do any of you have the slightest doubts that we can succeed?”

The Head of MI6 looked at the others.

“Given total security, we can do it, in spite of the risks,” he said.

After a pause, Salisbury said, “Get on with it then. No word of this to anyone, at whatever level, unless I specifically authorise it.”

They nodded agreement.

“When will they get there?”

“A few weeks yet. There is more to be done, and in any event, it will take Choi some time to gather the information we want, assuming he eventually decides to do so. So there is no real urgency.”

“Keep me in touch,” commanded Salisbury. “And *only* me,” he emphasised.

It was a cloudless, moonlit night when Kang Soo and Park Yon plunged into the Yellow Sea, once they had opened their parachutes after a free-fall drop of several thousand feet. They heard, but could not see, the RAF Special Services Hercules aircraft turn back towards Hong Kong, which they had left only a few hours before. The aircraft was flying the last leg of its journey without navigation lights, and with its transponder turned off. Nobody knew where it was.

Park had a location tracking beacon strapped to his wet suit. The moment he turned it on, HMS Tribune plotted his position, and surfaced. The pair was less than a mile away, and it took no time at all for the Royal Marines to get to them in their Zodiac. Immediately they were safely aboard, the submarine dived and turned away from its pick-up position.

They were greeted by the Second in Command.

“We shall stay submerged for a day or so, until we are sure your arrival has gone unnoticed,” he explained. “The Marines who picked you up will look after you, although extra bodies make it even more cramped down here. We know where to put you ashore and have already been given a provisional rendezvous date and time. You will be briefed when we have confirmation that your contacts are in place and ready for you.”

“I don’t like submarines,” complained Park. “I wish they had decided to drop us in by parachute instead of this.”

The 2 i/c glared at him.

“There are more dead aircraft at the bottom of the sea than there are dead submarines up there,” he pointed skywards. “Any questions?”

There were none.

London and Hereford received confirmation of the men’s pick-up almost at the same time. The Ops. Room at MI6 passed a message to their agent to move in to place ready to meet them. With any luck, Soo and Yon would be on dry land in North Korea within a week.

They eventually made landfall six days later.

HMS Tribune had made its way slowly, secretly and silently past the heavily defended port of Nampo, up the south west coast of the Korean Peninsula. Near the estuary of the Chiongchon River, on the coast to the west of Mundok, the boat surfaced for the Royal Marines to launch their Zodiac. Having swum the last mile or so in the dark, Kang Soo and Park Yon eventually waded ashore in a secluded cove, backed by sand-dunes, as their Marine colleagues headed back to sea to meet up with their parent boat, which once again submerged immediately.

The men stripped off their wet-suits and diligently buried them beneath the sand. They now looked much the same as anyone else who lived in the area, but nevertheless decided to hide until daybreak, when they could be sure that there was no search party looking for them. It also gave them a chance to survey the local surroundings, which they were able to recognise for the maps and photographs they had been shown at their briefings.

There was no immediate sign of any activity, and it began to look as if they had got ashore undetected. They slowly made their way inland to a small creek, which they were to follow until it reached a river. It was here they were to meet their guide, one of the shadowy agents who worked for London from time to time.

He was waiting for them, tending his battered cart, and they gave him money and cigarettes. The trio immediately set off together as if they had always been together. If challenged, their story was that they had been in the dunes looking for birds eggs to supplement their meagre diet. But they were not challenged, and eventually made their way further inland, across paddy fields, to a small village where the man lived.

Nobody took any notice of them. They were, after all, dressed, speaking and behaving just like everybody else. Why should anyone take any notice of them? They all had their own lives to lead, scraping together an existence as best they could in the harsh regime within which they lived. One thing they had all learnt was to trust no-one and keep their head down – that was the best way of avoiding trouble. And strangers were always trouble, anyway, mostly working for the police or the Korean Workers' Party or some other element of the internal security apparatus that helped the dictatorship to rule by fear.

In spite of their detailed briefings, the two men were shocked and horrified by what they saw. Even Park Yon, who used to live in the country, could hardly believe how things had worsened since his defection. Plainly the majority of the population had never recovered from the Great Famine and the devastating floods which had scoured much of the land of its fertile soil.

Soo and Yon spent the night with their guide in a derelict shed on a farm, and were given a meal of rice and thin gruel, which the farmer and his family shared with them. In the morning, they were provided with two ancient bicycles, and set off heading North East, towards Yongbyon, where, with any luck, they would make contact with another 'agent.'

But from now on, they were on their own. They estimated that it would take them about two weeks to reach Yongbyon, but it was tough going over much rough terrain, although where they could, they stuck to the river valleys and their paddy fields. They lived like the resident population, largely by their wits. What little they had to eat, they stole or dug from the fields with their bare hands. They had thought their training was tough, but their journey proved to them just how valuable it had been.

Eventually, just outside the town of Yongbyon, they reached the small village, which was to be their next rendezvous point. They could see the nuclear power station as they approached.

They were a day early.

They quickly identified the place where they were to meet their contact – a stall in a sparse street market in the village square. There was little produce on sale, although there seemed to be plenty of customers keen to buy whatever there was in an effort to enhance their diet.

The pair made no effort to hide. There was no need. They sat at a stall selling tea, and drank a thin but warm concoction, which tasted of nothing much. They said to one elderly woman who asked that they were there to visit a cousin. They even showed the woman the pass allowing them to travel from their own village where they lived. Not that she was interested. Her two ragged children took no notice either, and amused themselves chasing a mangy dog, or scavenging for food under the market stalls.

After a time, the pair trudged off into the countryside in an effort to find somewhere they could bed down for the night. They eventually settled under a bridge over a small stream, having collected a couple of duck eggs from a farm they had passed on their way. They had no means of cooking them, so ate them raw.

Returning to the village square the next morning, they soon spotted that the stall they had been told to report to was manned, whereas yesterday it had been vacant. The man had a small selection of food on offer – a few eggs, some sunflower seeds, and rice cakes, as well as a small bowl of apples.

The man watched them as they approached. There were no other customers. They asked him about the apples.

"We have no money," admitted Soo.

"How will you pay, then?" asked the man.

"We could barter."

The man looked around, and lent forward.

“Cigarettes from England, perhaps?”

“One packet or two?”

It was the agreed form of words to be used as identification and recognition.

The man beckoned to a thin youth who was nearby.

“Look after the stall,” the man commanded. “I have business to attend to.”

“My son. He can be trusted. You follow me, at a distance,” he told Soo and Yon, who pushed their battered bicycles to follow him as he wandered off down the filthy street. Eventually, he turned in to the yard of the farm where they had ‘found’ the eggs the previous night.

“My duck farm,” he announced, as he ushered them into the house after checking that they had not been followed.

“Very good eggs, they are, too,” confessed Soo, handing over the cigarettes and some money, in the way that they had paid the first ‘agent’ who had helped them.

“You are here as my cousins,” he announced. “Do you have all the permits and papers which allow you to travel and leave your own village?”

“Yes, we do,” said Park Yon, reaching for his torn back-pack.

“I don’t need to see them,” said the farmer. “But you must understand that if you are caught for incorrect behaviour or anything else, then me and my family are in trouble too.”

The two men nodded.

“Here is what has been arranged for you,” said the man. “One of you will stay here to work on this farm and the other will go to the accommodation block of the nuclear power station over there to work in the kitchen. Neither of you will have an easy time – it will be hard, back-breaking work with long hours. But you will be able to make contact with your ‘target’. You must arrange that. But I shall give you his address, and whoever stays here can work in the market as well, and deliver goods to the apartment where the man lives. The other can meet him in the canteen where he works. That will be up to you. So now you must choose between being a farm labourer, or sweeping the floor. You will be given dormitory accommodation and the bare basic food, but little else. Like everyone else in this country, you will live and survive by your wits alone.”

“I shall be happy to work here,” said Park Yon. “When I lived here, my family all worked in the paddy fields.”

“Agreed,” said Kang Soo. “I shall go to the power station.”

“Be very careful while you are there,” the farmer warned Soo. “It is a high security place. Trust no one. Tomorrow I shall arrange for you to meet an associate, who will be your contact while you are there, but only if you need to pass messages. He will not be able to help you if you are in trouble. He will deny knowing you.”

He turned to Yon.

“We shall also deny knowing you. Now, come with me. I shall introduce you to the foreman. He will show you the old barn some fields away where you can rest, and he will give you work instructions for tomorrow. Do not trust him. Trust no-one. If the authorities should question you or arrest you for any reason, we shall all deny ever having seen you before. You will be regarded as a tramp and a scavenger, like many in this area who have no work and nowhere to live.”

Yon and Soo shook hands, and parted company. They had a means of keeping in touch with one another, and with their UK headquarters.

Choi Yong was enjoying his time at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, although he had not been there long. In spite of the fact that it was run on what he thought to be very military lines, he felt more secure there than he had at school. Both were strict, but this was an enclosed society, literally as well as physically. It was surrounded by a high fence, and entry was through a gate at the guard post which was permanently manned. The grounds were patrolled by security guards – he was sure they were armed – and the students' routine was very regimented. They marched to their meals and to their lessons, signing patriotic songs, just as students did at all good schools and universities throughout the world.

In many ways, he missed living with his uncle in the apartment near the Yongbyon nuclear site. He had enjoyed a degree of freedom there which he was not allowed at the university. For instance, he could, if he wished, visit Pyongyang with his uncle, providing they had appropriate permission and written authority, whereas visiting the Capital from the university was simply not allowed in spite of it being so close. At the apartment, he also had limited access to the internet because of his uncle's position, but that was very restricted now. Even to do research for his studies, he had to use a computer in a special room, where each screen was monitored by one of the guards to ensure that none of the students watched any forbidden material from the West. The fact was that although North Korea was developing a Government controlled Intra-net system, access to the world-wide web internet was strictly forbidden except with special permission.

More than anything, he missed his uncle. They had always got on very well together, and had developed a bond between them that was rare between individuals in his country. His uncle was the only person he was absolutely sure he could trust. It was mutual trust, as well. His uncle had talked openly about his very privileged visit to America, and the huge contrast between life there and in North Korea. They had even discussed the possibility of defecting to a better life there, a conversation which they would never dare to have held with anyone else. Although defection was never a real possibility, his uncle had encouraged him to leave North Korea, even briefly, if the opportunity ever presented itself so that he could form a judgement for himself.

Now, his uncle Shin had been even more honoured to have been selected for a short technical visit to England, and Yong was eagerly looking forward to hearing all about that. His uncle had spoken of the unbelievable level of freedom enjoyed by the American people, and yet had decided that he did not wish to stay there in spite of their attempts to persuade him otherwise. He wondered if his view would change after his visit to England.

Yong knew what a privilege and honour it was to have been selected to attend the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, which he knew was a unique institution in North Korea. For a start, it was privately funded, mostly by people and institutions outside the country, particularly South Korea, China and America. It had taken years of painful negotiation to agree the project, and even longer to build it, but now it was viewed as a key contribution to the international effort to bring about re-unification between North and South Korea, by producing graduates who would be professionals and leaders in various technical disciplines. He had chosen nuclear physics as his speciality, so that he could follow the career chosen by his uncle. The tuition was good and he already felt that was learning a good deal. All the lessons were in English, apart from those for students studying a foreign language, and Yong had chosen to study English further, rather than Chinese which he had already learnt while at School. The English tutor was really good; a pleasant and helpful lady from

London called Miss Ogden. The British Council in Pyongyang had arranged for her to teach at the University. His fellow students were all from a similar background of upper-class parents in jobs held in high esteem by the hierarchy which surrounded the Supreme Leader, but he had made very few friends – certainly not close friends. He had learnt early on in his life that nobody could be trusted.

His uncle had always been a major influence on him, even before his father fell from grace and was imprisoned. If it hadn't been for his uncle, he too would have been incarcerated with his father and mother, as they were all judged to be guilty by association. And it was his uncle's influence which had gained him a place at the new university. Uncle Shin rarely spoke of his brother, although Yong knew that it was Dr. Choi Shin's powerful position that had kept him out of a labour camp, from which there would be no return. But in any prison under that regime, Yong knew that 17 years was as good as a life sentence.

He took a brave but possibly rather foolish decision, which he had not previously discussed with his Uncle. This was to be something *he* wanted to do, and which he had been thinking about for some time. He did not want to be dissuaded from it, or to upset his Uncle in any way. He would tell him afterwards.

He had decided to visit his parents while his uncle was in England.

He was rather surprised when he was granted permission, and given the appropriate paper work. Once again, his Uncle's position had influenced the decision in Yong's favour. His parents had been taken to a prison near Pyongyang, so it was not difficult for Yong to get there, by bus.

The place was filthy and smelt appalling – almost of rotting flesh. He was taken into a dimly lit room near the entrance by one of the guards, who stayed with him. Eventually, another guard shoved a man into the room.

It was his father, although he could not at first believe it.

He had changed beyond recognition. This once proud and clever man was bent and skeletal, with sunken eyes, dressed in little better than rags. The man and his son stood apart, and even if they had wanted to embrace, the guard would have prevented them and dragged the man away again. Yong could see that he was infested with lice and bugs.

It was obvious that his father had been brutally treated and tortured, not for his original offence of illegally trading in cigarettes, so he said, but because he was caught trying to bribe one of the guards to give him his freedom. Eventually, having taken all he could, the guard had told on him, to gain special treatment for himself from his own superiors.

You could trust no-one.

The man who stood before Yong could barely speak, such was the toll that the regime had taken on him since then. He cowed in front of the guard who had dragged him into the room, and was plainly afraid of him, judging by his frequent sideways glances.

Yong himself could barely speak either, such was the shock and horror of what he saw. He managed to mumble a couple of hesitant questions to his father, but each time the guard intervened and commanded that he should not reply. The two stood largely in silence, the old man looking at his feet rather than looking his son in the eye.

After a time, he blurted out, "I have not seen your mother for several months. I think she has died or been killed."

With that, the guard swung a vicious blow to his head and dragged him out of the room. "Don't come here again," his father almost shouted. The guard swung a kick at him and he sprawled onto the filthy floor as he was dragged away. Yong could only imagine with horror the fate which awaited him later.

At the same time, the other guard grabbed Yong, who for a moment almost believed he was to be incarcerated with his father. Instead he was hustled through the guardroom and out into the street.

“That despicable enemy of this great country and its people is right,” he shouted after Yong. “No matter how important your uncle thinks he is, the Supreme Leader will immediately decide that you should join his brother if ever you come here again.”

Yong looked back through his tears at the stark building, with its guards and barbed wire. Was that really his father, that ghost of a once proud man? He was so small. He spoke differently. What could they have done to him to reduce him to that barely human state? And his mother – he dared not think what could have happened to her.

Yong Shin made his way slowly towards the bus which would eventually take him back to his University. He wished he had never made this visit, and yet it had only confirmed his worst fears. Now he knew that the many rumours which circulated, in hushed tones, were right. This was a harsh and cruel regime within which he lived. There was no freedom. Nobody could be trusted.

He also knew that he had to tell his Uncle about his visit, although he dreaded the thought of how he might react. But he had to know. He had rarely spoken of his brother, Yong’s father, so perhaps he already understood what had been happening.

The more Yong thought about that dreadful place where his father was rotting away, one of the living dead he had heard about, the more he realised how much he owed his Uncle. He already knew that he would do anything for that man, who had always been a father figure. Now he really understood. Without his uncle’s intervention, he would himself be in that prison, perhaps even dead like his mother. Without his Uncle’s help and influence, he would not have received his excellent education, and would not now be studying further at the Pyongyang University.

He would do anything for his uncle. Anything to repay the debt he owed.

But first Yong must tell his uncle the truth about his father. It would be painful for both of them, but it had to be done.

Yong was still distressed and deep in thought on his return to the University. He was terrified on entering the building when one of the security guards ran towards him, shouting his name.

“Miss Ogden wants to see you,” he said. “Go to her office at once. She has good news for you.”

When he left London, Dr. Choi Shin realised that he had information which Cooper, and the whole of the Western world come to that, was desperate to have.

He also knew that Cooper could arrange to collect it in some way, if and when he finally decided to hand it over. Choi could not work out how that might happen, but he was equally determined not to defect in order to deliver it. His new colleagues in England knew that, but they could not possibly know how difficult and dangerous it would be for him to collect and then provide them, in some form or other, with the highly technical and very secret information which they wanted.

Choi’s first problem would be getting it all together.

During the flight to Pyongyang, he began to wonder how he might do so. He had to assemble all the relevant and important aspects of the work into an easily transportable format. That would mean taking photographs, copying documents, plans, algorithms and so on. Without a doubt, difficult and dangerous work anywhere in the world, never mind in the paranoid dictatorship within which he lived.

Transferring it to USB memory sticks would be the best, he concluded, and probably the easiest and safest. They were small and easy to handle. He knew they had plenty at his research headquarters, and that he could get access to them without arousing suspicion. Indeed, they had the most modern newly developed examples, which would take several terabytes of information each. Made in China, of course.

The more he thought about it, the more tired Choi felt. In fact, he wasn't feeling all that well. He put his seat back, to the annoyance of the passenger behind him, and dozed. Probably too much good food and wine, which he wasn't used to, he concluded. He would go without the meal on the aircraft. Boiled rice and prawns, he noticed, probably both lukewarm at best. He noticed that Moon Pak was reading last week's *Pyongyang Times* English language newspaper, full of propaganda about the exploits of their great leader, while his colleague Jang Nam was busily making notes, not doubt for his contribution to their joint report.

Of course, nobody at home who had sponsored their rare visit overseas had any idea that he, Dr. Choi Shin, had managed to visit the UK's nuclear weapons facility at Aldermaston. That was a piece of initiative on his part which he knew would be warmly welcomed, and would help to secure his future within the country's elite scientific community.

A community he was probably about to betray, if his friends in England played their part. The fact that it would be for his countryman's own good in the long term did not make it any easier.

He was looking forward to seeing his nephew Yong again. He had plenty to tell him, but would decide later whether or not to reveal his planned treachery.

He was happy and relieved that Yong was at their apartment in Yongbyon when he got there. But he had no gifts for his nephew. Western trash had no part to play in the glorious culture of North Korea, and imports of anything were strictly banned.

"I was so hoping you would be here," said Shin, "but I feared you may not be able to get away from the University, knowing how severe they are."

"I pleaded with them," admitted Yong, "and because of your importance and where you had been, they relented. But I have to be back on the last bus this evening."

"I have a lot to tell you," said his father, "so we shall have a late night I suspect!"

"And I have news for you, too, although I fear not all good news. But first tell me about your visit."

Choi Yong had been much impressed by his uncle's account of his earlier visit to America, a country with a life style in stark contrast to his own, and was eager to know how England compared. His uncle, though, was already adjusting to the harshness of his own country compared with his few days of comparative freedom.

"Did you say," he asked his nephew, "that the authorities at your University allowed you home because of my importance and where I had been?"

"That's exactly what they said. Indeed, they were almost keen that I should be here to welcome you home."

Dr Choi was immediately suspicious.

"Tell you what!" he exclaimed, "Let me have a quick wash and tidy up, and then we can go for a walk in the town, and I shall buy you tea. Then we can talk freely all the time."

So that's what they did.

"I am surprised," said Yong, "that you did not want to stay at home and relax after your arduous journey."

"I'll tell you why," replied his Uncle. "Of course I should have preferred to relax at our apartment. But I was suspicious of the fact that the authorities were so keen for you to be there with me on my return."

in the canteen, sweeping the floor or whatever else they found for him to do, but all strangers were treated with suspicion anywhere in the country. If either of them acted suspiciously, or were thought to be officials from the Workers Party sent to spy on the others, they would be shunned and learn nothing of any value.

It was unusual for them to be working together and yet so far apart. They were more used, in Afghanistan for instance, to working as a pair, and sticking together for support. Here, it was different. They had the same objective, to establish contact with Dr. Choi Shin and to offer him help and support if he decided he needed it, with the secondary objective of gathering as much intelligence as they could. This was particularly important for Kang Soo, who was within the security boundary of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Facility, although only on menial tasks in the accommodation complex. Nevertheless, he was well placed to pick up idle chatter and gossip about what was going on.

The pair was able to keep in touch with one another discreetly, through a miniaturised satellite communications system, which they could also use to keep in touch with their Headquarters in Hereford. So far as anyone knew, it was far more sophisticated than anything available in North Korea, but they still had to take special precautions to avoid the equipment being found, tiny though it was. The digitally encrypted messages were transmitted by agile variable frequency signals on a bandwidth not normally used for any form of communications network, so it was reasonably secure.

Both men knew who they were looking for – they had seen him in Oxford and at the airport when he left for home.

Kang was the first to spot him, one lunchtime, sitting with colleagues, a week or so after they had arrived. He was able to get quite close as he cleared tables in the senior canteen – there was no doubt about who it was.

For Park it was a more difficult job to spot the target, since his job as a labourer on the farm meant that his movements were quite restricted, initially at least. After a week or so, the farmer sent him in to town to the market to deliver produce to the stall which he ran with his son. He went on his old bicycle. Nobody took any notice of him. His task completed, he set off again, but instead of heading straight back to the farm, he decided to find the apartment block where Dr. Choi lived. It was not far; walking distance in fact and he found it quite easily. Choi was no doubt at work, he thought; there was no sign of him at the flat.

The people of North Korea were expected to work long hours for six days of the week, so Sunday was a day off for most people, and a day for relaxing, seeing friends and so on. Park decided he would need to come in to town again on Sunday if he was ever to make contact with the Doctor. The farmer's son and perhaps even the farmer himself would be at the market stall – Sunday was a good trading day. It could be his first chance to catch a glimpse of his target, so Park volunteered to help on the stall.

At the end of the day, there had been no sign of Choi Shin. Park told the farmer he would take some of the produce from the stall and try to sell it on his way back to the farm. He climbed on to his ramshackle bicycle, and made for Choi's apartment. He called at a few flats in the block on his way, but made no sales.

Choi Shin opened the door when he knocked, but went to close it almost immediately when he saw a stranger standing there.

"I have fresh produce," said Park Yon, almost putting his foot in the door.

He offered a small package of eggs and fruit.

"Mr. Lee Cooper said you liked fresh eggs."

Dr. Choi looked at him suspiciously, through the half closed door. How could this total stranger know about Lee Cooper?

It must be a trap, he thought immediately.

"Very cheap," said Park.

“How much?”

“Only 50 won, but I will take Euros if you prefer.”

Choi reached for his wallet in his hip pocket, and extracted a 50 won note.

“I will call again in case you need anything, or if I can help in any way.”

Choi took the package, and the man left.

Choi was worried and perplexed as he shut the door behind the man. How would a perfect stranger be able to help, even if he needed any? What sort of help? He watched the man as he called at the flat next door, but left without making a sale.

Could this man possibly be the contact Lee had promised, when he left England? Is that what he meant by ‘help’? Help in defecting? Or help in getting information back to England?

Surely not! He was a local man, who spoke perfect Korean. This was plainly some kind of trap being set by the authorities, he concluded. If only nephew Yong was here to ask about it. Perhaps the goods had been stolen and he should not have bought them. And yet the man had mentioned Lee Cooper. How could he possibly know that he had met and befriended Cooper while in England?

He went into the kitchen deep in thought, and idly unpacked his purchases.

The eggs were wrapped in a crumpled photograph of himself and Lee Cooper taken during his visit to Aldermaston.

It was a few days later.

Kang Soo was sweeping the canteen floor, and once again spotted Dr. Choi. This time, he had been eating alone. Soo made his way carefully towards the table, bending occasionally to sweep litter into his dustpan. He did so again when he reached the Doctor.

“Excuse me,” he said, as he bent to sweep beneath Choi’s feet. As he did so, Soo slipped a piece of paper into Choi’s shoe, and unhurriedly moved to the next table to clear the floor beneath that.

Choi looked at the man. He had seen him working in the canteen before, but had taken no notice. Once again, he was bewildered and not a little frightened. He bent to retrieve the piece of paper, and slipped it in to his pocket as he rose to leave the table. If anyone had noticed this extraordinary behaviour, both men would be asked for an explanation.

Choi did not have one.

When he had returned to his laboratory, he opened the piece of paper.

It was another photograph of him with Cooper at Aldermaston. On the back was a scribbled note, written in Korean Chōsongūl script – *‘If you need to renew contact, let me know.’*

Two men had now made contact with him, using the same means of identification; the Aldermaston photo.

Ingenious.

But had they really been sent by London; by Cooper? Or was this some form of trap set for him by the authorities, to test his loyalty?

He needed time to think – to try to work things out. Who were these men? How had they found him? If they were from London, how had they got in to the country? Choi knew it was virtually impossible for visitors to get in without official sponsorship, even as tourists and they all needed official guides to escort them all the time. And how had they got work, one at the centre of the country’s nuclear power complex?

Nothing made sense, except that they had been sent to spy on him by a paranoid government. They obviously needed reassurance that his recent visits to the West had not in any way affected his loyalty to the state.

Choi Shin was happy there. He had a good life, with a nice, if small apartment, and enjoyed his fascinating work at the research complex, developing nuclear energy for peaceful uses.

Punggye-ri could not be more different.

Shin did not enjoy visiting Punggye-ri, any more than he enjoyed the work he was involved in while he was there. Strictly, that wasn't true – he enjoyed the challenging research he was doing, but dreaded the thought of what the end result could be. That's what he didn't like. That, and the place itself.

The nuclear test site was in a remote and mountainous area in the north of the country. It had borders on the Sea of Japan to the east, or East Sea of Korea as his country chose to call it, as well as China to the north, and a small border with Russia.

Beautiful though the mountainous countryside was, including the seven-thousand feet high peak of Mantapsan, the place itself was ugly; and dirty; and evil; and dangerous.

Shin did not know everything that went on there, but he knew that there was a vast complex of tunnels under the mountains. He had seen at least three tunnel entrances in different parts of the extensive site, and knew that a fourth was being excavated. Three test explosions of nuclear weapons had already taken place deep beneath the mountains.

There was no town as such, although there was a railway station, and he had been told that there was extensive development work taking place to upgrade the line. It had occurred to him that the work must be related to the project in which he was involved. If it went as planned, there would be a need for extensive building work and heavy industrial machinery to be installed in the months ahead.

It was a miserable place to work, not least because it was so remote and desolate. Shin knew that there was a rocket launching site not that far away – he had seen missiles arching in to the sky. Even more depressing was the fact that the Hwasong concentration camp was a little over a mile away. He had been told that thousands of the political prisoners from what was officially known as 'Penal Labour Colony No.16' had been used in the construction of the tunnel complexes and underground facilities, and he knew that many of them must have been exposed to lethal levels of radioactivity. It was no consolation either that these political prisoners never had any chance of being released from the camp, and that they and their families, who were deemed guilty by association, were there until they died.

He realised that he was lucky not to be in one of these places himself, with his brother and nephew. But he had been too valuable to the State for them to lock him away, so he had escaped the ultimate penalty, and managed to save Yong at the same time. They were both lucky.

Until now, he had accepted all this as a normal part of life. The state propaganda machine made sure of that. Now though, since his glimpse of freedom, he was beginning to have doubts.

His work at the nuclear test site did not help. It was a fascinating venture which was putting all his skills to the test, but he knew that in reality it was a Chinese research project which was extremely dangerous. He knew that there had already been several disasters surrounding the work within China, which was why they had now moved the development and construction of the revolutionary new uranium enrichment experiment to North Korea, where labour was freely available and life was cheap.

Choi Shin knew that the successful conclusion of the work would have deadly consequences, possibly with world-wide repercussions, but he could do nothing about it. Until now, he had barely given it a thought, but since meeting fellow research scientists overseas, he had begun to realise the true nature of what he was helping to create.

He was not a happy man, as he sat in his room in the accommodation block which was part of the research centre. He worried about his brother, who he now knew he would

never see again, and he was sad to think that he would soon be without his beloved nephew for four months.

He also now knew that he was a sick man.

He had been diagnosed with radiation sickness, which he knew was often fatal.

He had been exposed to too much nuclear radiation for too long during his career, and there had plainly been too little monitoring of the levels to which he had been exposed and too little protection provided for individuals at the establishments where he worked. He reflected that, at almost any level in the country, life was cheap.

As he sat in his room, pondering his future, he was idly watching the only channel on the state-run TV network, with its never-ending flow of propaganda. At the beginning of the news programme however, was a story which caught his attention, not least because of the flood of vitriol which it had aroused and which was being directed at America, but also because the news-reader had mentioned Yongbyon. Not that anti-American propaganda was anything new, but this looked different. The story alleged that an American spy had been caught red-handed in the town which was the home of North Korea's major nuclear installation. He was apparently intent on trying to infiltrate the site, to provide America with secrets surrounding the nuclear development work which was the envy of the western world, thanks to the brilliant and enlightened guidance of the Supreme Leader.

Suddenly, Choi was interested. An American spy caught trying to infiltrate the place where he worked? Now that *was* news. It took time for all the facts to emerge from the news item, if that's what it really was, as there was so much anti-American propaganda contained in it, as well as attacks on the West in general. There was the usual high praise for the Great Leader who had uncovered this traitor, and for the brave and brilliant men who he had led, and who had eventually caught and trapped him.

It did seem as if the man was a traitor, too, if the news was to be believed. He was apparently a defector from North Korea who had been sent back to the country by the Americans with the sole intention of spying on it. Thanks to the diligence of our security police however, he had been caught before he could do any harm. His papers had been badly forged by the Americans, and he had been found with large sums of Dollars and Euros in his back-pack.

Through all the endless stream of vitriol directed at America, Choi eventually gathered that the man had initially aroused suspicion, and then been arrested, for illegal trading. He had been seen going from door to door in Yongbyon selling fruit and eggs without a licence. In North Korea, it was illegal to buy and sell for private gain, and the man was plainly a traitor to the Korean people, whatever his intentions.

Dr. Choi Shin was immediately alert and horrified.

Surely not the man who had called on him a week ago? The man with the photograph of himself at Aldermaston with Lee Cooper?

Choi's mind was in a whirl. What if it was the same man? What if he had after all been sent as a contact between him and London? Worse still, what if he had been caught with more photographs of Cooper and Choi together?

Choi himself could now be in mortal danger. In the past, he had largely ignored this kind of event, accepting them as part of life. Things were different this time. He had been to the West and knew that this was anything but normal in a civilised society. It was also far too close to home for his comfort. For the first time he could remember, Dr. Choi was frightened.

And what about the man in the canteen?

He anxiously watched the television all that evening, a thing he had never done in his life before, waiting for further developments. But there was nothing new by the time the TV station closed down, when the electricity supply to the transmitter was cut off.

It was not until the following evening that his worse fears were realised.

The TV newsreader was almost hysterical, as instructed by her superiors, in describing the American acolytes who had sent this defector back to spy on the hard working and innocent people of the Republic. He was an enemy of the Korean People who must be punished, in the same way that the people of America would also be punished by the Supreme Leader. He had already decreed that the retribution would be terrible but totally justified, and there was even talk of war between the two countries, starting with an attack on the treacherous people of South Korea who were such devoted allies of the western filth who lived there.

It was claimed that the traitor had been stealing the produce he had been seen selling from a local farm, without the knowledge of the farmer or any of the hard-working and loyal men who laboured there. They had never seen him before, so they said, and this was further evidence of his guilt – he had hidden away to avoid being punished for his anti-state behaviour.

The farmer and his son who ran their stall, as well as everyone who worked on the farm, were among those who were forced to attend a rally in the market square. It served as an example to all decent people in the country that the Supreme Leader must be obeyed without question.

The battered and bloodied man was dragged to the front of the Hall of the Korean People's Working Party. This was not the first event of its kind in this suburban village square, and neither would it be the last.

The traitor was forced against a wall, already pocked with bullet marks from similar previous events.

The shouting and cheering crowd, gathered together and marshalled by the authorities, was baying for blood and waving portraits of their Great Leader.

The traitor and enemy of the Korean people was publicly executed by firing squad in front of them all.

Dr. Choi Shin was horrified by the scenes on the small TV screen.

He knew the place well. It was not far from where he and nephew Yong had enjoyed tea only the other afternoon. Even then, Shin had watched ragged children scavenging scraps of discarded food from the gutters beneath the stalls, as he had done so often before. He had never taken much notice. It was a fact of life, and he knew no other.

Until his recent visits abroad, that is.

Now he knew that he could no longer accept this as normal. Now he knew that there were better ways, better lives, and better places.

What he had seen on his TV screen at Punggye-ri proved to be a huge distraction to his work on the project there. He was desperate to get back to his apartment in Yongbyon where this tragedy had unfolded and to talk to nephew Yong again before he went to London. He needed to find out whether the man in the canteen at the nuclear plant was still there, or whether his last chance of maintaining contact with his fellow scientists in London had gone for ever. For the man's sake, he hoped he had gone before he too was caught, but for his own sake, Choi Shin hoped beyond hope that he was still there and that he could pass a message to Lee Cooper.

Dr. Choi Shin had finally decided that he must help to prevent even further tragedy and misery being inflicted on his country, and possibly on others around the world. The civilised world had to know what his work involved.

He needed to get information about his project to his new-found friends,. Even during his last few days at the nuclear test site project, before he returned to the relative comfort of

his apartment at Yongbyon, he had started to collect and copy sensitive information in the hope that he would somehow be able to get it to Lee Cooper before it was too late.

Not just too late for humanity, but too late for him.

He did not have long to gather together all the information they would need.

He now knew that he had little time to live. It was not just radiation sickness any more.

He had cancer.

On his return to the plant at Yongbyon, Choi Shin went straight to the canteen for tea. There was no sign of the man who swept the floor and who had slipped the crumpled photograph into his shoe.

He was not there at supper, either, or at breakfast the next morning, or lunch.

Choi could not ask.

He had gone.

So had Choi's last chance of ever making contact again with the people in London. They were unlikely to send anyone else – ever. He had twice ignored their approaches, and indirectly been responsible for the capture and death of one of the brave men who had been sent by London to help him.

They would not send anyone else.

He now had no means of making contact again, but the more he thought about it, the more he resolved to keep collecting the information which he knew they wanted.

Just in case.

He cursed the fact that he had trusted no-one, not even the people who had been sent specially to keep him in touch with Cooper and his colleagues in London. But it could just as well have been a trap, as he suspected. He was not to know. Even now he could not be sure.

But now he had started, he would continue to copy the secret information he had at his disposal. If he was caught, so what? He was dying anyway, and did not know how long he had to complete his project.

But he no longer had any means of getting his secrets to London. He could not take them himself, any more than he could go to the compound at Munsu-Dong in Pyongyang, and simply hand them over to the people at the British Embassy.

He soon realised, however, that there was only one, but dangerous, option.

The more he thought about it, the more risky it became, but it was his one and only chance.

He eventually concluded that it was risk worth taking.

Choi Shin and Choi Yong were having a special supper in the town square, not far from where the American traitor had been executed. It was Yong's last night before he departed for London.

The place had more or less returned to normal, although the State TV channel was still pouring out the vitriol against America, and threatening dire consequences for their action. The latest threat had been a missile attack against the American lackey State of South Korea, and indeed Shin wondered if such an event had already taken place. He had seen missiles being launched from the site near Punggye-ri just before he left there.

There was no longer any doubt that the paranoid leadership was capable of doing anything.

“I must get on to ‘C’. I gather Sir Geoffrey has been busy today as well.”
“I’ll bet his Jack Daniels isn’t as old as ours, either.”

9. THE BRIDGE

Maurice Northcot regarded himself as being lucky, really. He was certainly luckier than most of the people he worked with, he thought. And luckier than most of his neighbours, as well.

For a start, he had met, and eventually married, Marjorie.

For a second thing, they now lived in rather a nice house in North London. Southgate.

For a third thing, he had been left the house by his father, who had died a couple of years ago. His father had been quite well off, which, for a fourth thing, meant that he was now quite well off, too. So he didn’t have a mortgage

And another thing; he had a good job. Foreign Office. The Civil Service wasn’t exactly generous in its pay, but he had been promoted a couple of times, so he was actually paid quite well. And the job promised an excellent pension when he retired. Inflation proofed.

So he was a bit better off than some of his neighbours, although they all thought they were doing well. Indeed, some of them were; in property, solicitors, one was something in the City – that sort of thing. A couple, who neither of them knew well but whose children went to the same school as Peter, were bankers. They had bonuses. Civil Servants didn’t get bonuses.

But his neighbours all tended to be a bit stuck in their ways. Not that Maurice had anything against being in a rut. You know where you are in a rut. You don’t have to think too much, because you know what’s going to happen, because it always does, and, with any luck, because it always will, more or less.

That was another thing. Maurice wasn’t in a rut. He travelled. Quite often. At Her Majesty’s expense. Indeed, he and Marjory had lived abroad more than once, and had actually first met while they were abroad. Both were there on Her Majesty’s business.

Now some people would find that unsettling, leaving the comfy rut, sometimes without much notice, and often for quite a long time. Two week’s holiday in Spain was one thing. You could plan for that. It was almost part of the rut. But Maurice never quite knew when he was next going to be on the move, and more often than not when he ‘travelled’, Marjorie had no idea where he’d gone or how long he would be away.

Neighbour’s wives thought that must be *terrible*. Poor Marjorie! However did she manage, living a life like that? And if I was Maurice, they thought, I’d resign and find something else to do. Something more settled. With more of a rut attached to it.

And then there was poor little Peter.

Boys *needed* a father. Peter had one, of course, but he wasn’t always around, like other fathers seemed to be. Always there, to play football; help with the homework; go out somewhere nice – that sort of thing.

On the other hand, Peter was always pleased when Dad was around, and looked forward to seeing him again when he came home. Other chaps at school had their Dad at home all the time, so there was nothing much to look forward to, where their Dads were concerned at least. Their Dads were part of the rut. But neighbours and parents of his school friends tut-tutted. They thought Peter needed more of a father than he’d got.

But it hadn't always been like that. Although he was too young to remember, Peter had once lived abroad, when his father was posted to serve there. Germany, as a matter of fact, but Peter was too young to remember much about it. Young though he was, though, he had managed to pick up quite a bit of German, and still remembered it. His parents were encouraged. Like his father, he turned out to be good at languages.

In spite of not being in a rut, Maurice was very happy with life and the way it was going.

He had done well enough at school to get into University, from where he had graduated with a first in applied mathematics. Cambridge had something of a reputation for being a breeding ground for spies, but he had gone to Oxford. When he left university, he was recruited into the Foreign Office, and promptly became a spy anyway, working for MI6. Which was why he travelled a lot, and where he met Marjorie. She was a researcher, sifting through all the information delivered by the field officers, trying to make something of it.

In spite of his work, Maurice could talk about it when he got home in the evening. Knowing that Marjorie could be trusted and would understand and be genuinely interested was another good reason for him to be content with life. He wondered how many of his neighbours could do that, whatever their work.

Most mothers who had been on two trips to the school that day, a coffee morning and then shopping, probably did not want to know about the latest commodities price fluctuations or the value of the pound against the dollar and why wasn't the government doing something about the shocking state of the economy. Marjorie, on the other hand, was keen to know when Maurice got home about developments at the Russian embassy in Helsinki, or how they were getting on trying to 'turn' that man at the Iranian Trade Mission.

She was also doing a pretty good job bringing up Peter. He could read and write earlier than most of his peer group, was energetic on the playing field and attentive during lessons. Because he already spoke a bit of German, they gave him extra language tuition after school, when he wasn't playing rugby or cricket, and had begun to teach him French as well. Peter enjoyed it all, but never more so than when his father was at home.

So it was a great shock to everybody when Marjorie Northcot died, quite suddenly.

It turned out to be a heart attack, but it was an appalling tragedy because nobody was expecting it at all. There were no real signs, early on. At first, her friends and few relatives did not know what to do – where to start.

There is never a good time to die, but, although she had no real say in the matter, this was about the worst time she could have picked.

Her husband, Maurice, was abroad, so it was said, and couldn't be contacted immediately. They all knew he was 'something' at the Foreign Office, although no-one, not even Marjorie, was ever *quite* sure what, in spite of her background. Neither was anyone quite sure what he did or where he was. One thing soon became clear, though. He was not 'abroad' in the sense of 'gone to a conference' or anything like that.

He was *travelling* abroad.

One official at his office thought he had flown to Singapore, while another thought it had been Hong Kong. One chap, a clerk of some sort, even suggested he had gone to Korea, but nobody took much notice. Not that Maurice had a proper office either, really. Not the sort one commutes to every day, because that is something Maurice never did. Commute every day.

His 'office' was home to the people who sent him overseas on operations. He did not have a desk of his own there.

In the end, when they did eventually track him down, it turned out that they were all wrong, as he had intended.

He had gone to Helsinki, but only a couple of senior people knew. They'd sent him there.

So it took some time to find him, and even longer, since he was *travelling*, for him to get home for what, in the end, turned out to be a much delayed funeral for Marjorie.

Not that it made much difference to her, of course. The one who really suffered was son Peter.

He was only ten at the time, and devoted to his mother, as well as to his father. She was gentle and kind and loving, but strict just the same. She spent as much time as she could with Peter, and realised that what he really needed was a father who was with him more often. Peter realised this too, but he never saw much of him because he was always travelling. When he was home, though, they got on like a house on fire. Football, fishing, long walks with the dog, playing with the train set – everything. But recently, only ever for a day or so at a time - never for long enough. His mother was useless at fishing, didn't play football or enjoy watching it, and didn't understand about railways, real or toy.

Suddenly, Peter was a very lonely, small boy. No mother at all, and not much of a father either.

He had no time to wonder what might happen to him, because it happened anyway, and immediately.

Aunt Elizabeth moved in, for the time being, especially to look after him. After the funeral, when they had finished packing all his stuff, like toys and books and clothes and so on, they took him back to their place. He ended up staying there for ever, with Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Norman. His old home was put up for sale, and his Dad bought a small cottage somewhere else.

Now; there was nothing wrong with Aunt Elizabeth, or her husband, Uncle Norman, who was OK, too. But they were no substitute for a real Mum and Dad, and they had no children of their own, so he still had no-one at home to play with. However, it was as strange for them to have Peter staying there as it was for Peter to be staying with them. It soon became obvious that he was not just staying there, either – he was living there. This was his new home. Uncle Norman and Aunt Liz had a nice house, in a sort of rural area, and they had a dog, and they had a decent sized garden where you could kick a ball about without annoying the neighbours, who were also OK by the way, and the nearby school he was sent to was, in many ways, better than the one he had started at and just left.

But somehow it wasn't home, and never would be. No Mum and a Dad who wasn't there much.

Peter and the dog got on really well; he made a lot of new friends there, at school, and, for some reason, seemed to be learning a lot. He was probably quite happy, given the stress and upheaval and sadness he had recently gone through. But he longed for the rare visits his father was able to make. He knew his father couldn't visit more often, but, for a few months, actually saw him now more often than he had when his mother was alive. But it wasn't half often enough, and the visits quickly became less and less frequent.

One day, not long after Peter had moved to his new home, his father sent him a letter. There was not a lot of news in it, and his father didn't say where he was, but the envelope had a London postmark, so Peter guessed he was not 'travelling'.

My Dear Peter,

I thought I would drop you a line just to see if you are all right, and to send you my love. It was wonderful to see you again the other day, and I wish I could see you more often, but you know my work keeps me away from home quite a bit now. I'm afraid I shall be away quite a long time this trip. Auntie and Uncle tell me that you are well, and I hope you are starting to settle in with them OK. They are good people and are very fond of you so I am sure you

will be all right staying there. But I know it is not the same as being at home, and perhaps one day we shall be able to live together again in another home of our own. That will be really nice, and it is something I shall look forward to. They say you are doing well at school, which is good news, so keep working hard. If you get the time, it would be nice to get a letter from you to hear your news. The address at the top will always get to me.

With much love,

Dad.

The address at the top was just 'Dept. OS 19, The Foreign Office, London, SW1.'

Peter wrote back, almost at once, thinking his Dad would do the same.

Dear Dad,

Thank you for your letter. I hope you are well. I am alright and getting used to things. But I miss you and Mum of course. School is OK and I am playing football. We have started French which I like and am good at. Please write again soon.

Love Peter, xxxx

But he didn't write soon. In fact, he didn't write for a month or so, during which time Peter had sent at least two more letters. Eventually, they managed to keep up a pretty regular flow of correspondence, which, in time, became the only contact between them, as Maurice spent more and more time away. Their letters became a bridge between them.

But Maurice's letters to Peter never contained much news, and always seemed to be posted in London. "*I never have much news, as nothing much ever happens for me to tell you about. I just seem to work all the time*", he once explained. In fact, he had plenty to talk about, but dared not.

Peter, on the other hand, always had lots to talk about, and the older he grew, the more he enjoyed writing about his life. It was obvious to his father that he was doing well at school, and that he was particularly good at languages. He eventually started talking about his own future, and even thought he might one day join the Army, if he could get to university first. Maurice was delighted to read this, and was full of encouragement, both when he wrote and on the rare occasions when he was at home and they could meet. That was best of all, for both of them.

It was some years since Peter and his father had met, and yet through all this time, their exchange of letters was maintained to the point that they both felt that they knew one another quite well. But Peter was curious to know more about what his father did, and where he was, to the point that he once even phoned the Foreign Office. He didn't really know where to begin, so asked to be put through to the mysterious "Dept. OS 19".

"I'd like to know the whereabouts of Mr Maurice Northcot, please," he asked the man who answered the phone.

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to tell you that," replied the man.

"Why not?"

"I'm just not allowed to, that's all. But I could pass a message if it's urgent."

"But you must know where he is, because I write to him at your address all the time," protested Peter.

"That's the point," said the man. "We're just a sort of post office here, passing messages to and fro."

"But I'd like to know where he is so that I can talk to him for a change."

"We don't do telephones," said the man, "just letters and messages. We send them on via the Diplomatic Bag service."

“But he’s my father, and I want to talk to him. He wouldn’t mind – he writes quite often. In fact I’m sure he’d be pleased and surprised if I rang him up. Why can’t you give me his number?”

“I’m not allowed to, that’s why,” said the man, irritably. “You’ll just have to keep writing, but you could ask him to ring you or give you his number.”

“I have asked him, but he says he’s never in the same place long enough.”

“There you are, then.”

“So how do my letters get to him?”

“Well, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, but one of the Queen’s Messengers takes it to the nearest British Embassy, which passes it on to him. The same thing happens in reverse when he writes you,” explained the man.

“And you get it and post it on to me, do you?”

“Exactly.”

“At least I know now why his letters are always posted in London. For a long time I thought he worked there,” said Peter.

“I’m sure sometimes he does,” said the man.

Maurice was very amused by Peter’s account of this, and not a little proud of the fact that his son had shown such initiative. For the first time ever, he rang the boy for a chat, but even then wouldn’t say where he was. Thrilled though he had been to talk to his father after so long, it turned out to be a unique event, and the regular exchange of letters was maintained afterwards.

His father only ever rang Peter on three other occasions during that regular exchange of letters.

The first was to congratulate him on getting into university to study languages, the second was to congratulate him on being accepted for Army training at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and the third, a year later, was to say how pleased he was that he had graduated and joined the Intelligence Corp.

Peter Northcot was 23 when he graduated from Sandhurst. It had been a year’s really hard work, both physically and mentally, but he had done well, narrowly missing being awarded the Sword of Honour. As always, the Sovereign’s Parade on graduation was a splendid and colourful affair. The Salute was taken by the Duke of Cambridge, himself a previous graduate. Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge was there too, and all his fellow students on parade had their wives, girlfriends, or parents in the grandstand to proudly witness the spectacle.

Peter had nobody.

His Aunt and Uncle were too frail to attend, and everyone knew his father was in Warsaw. Travelling. His father had made sure that everyone knew he was abroad, but only a few knew where.

Suddenly, Peter felt quite lonely.

So did his father, Maurice, sitting alone in the grandstand.

He had not dared to tell his son Peter that he would be there. Even today, of all days, he simply had to maintain his cover.

One day, Peter would be told he had been there, and would understand. He was, after all, joining the Intelligence Corps. One day, perhaps even he would need to deceive those close to him to maintain secrecy.

But today was special, and Maurice had yearned to be close to his son Peter, to sit with him at the graduation lunch, to be taken by him on a tour of the grand college buildings

and splendid Sandhurst estate. He wanted Peter to know how proud he was, and how much he cared.

Maurice wept quietly, and disappeared into the dispersing crowd of spectators. He made his way to his car, parked outside Churchill Hall, and left the Royal Military Academy, to the A30 and eventually to Heathrow.

Nobody knew he'd been to Sandhurst, or even to England. Everyone knew he was in Warsaw.

In fact, his return flight took him to Indonesia, where he was secretly working, unknown to all but a very few.

He dozed fitfully in his business class seat, a half-finished glass of malt whiskey on the seat-back tray in front of him.

Maurice had always loved being based in London while spending his time working abroad – he knew no other life.

But the more he tried to concentrate on what he had to do tomorrow, the more he began to think he'd had enough.

He had lived the lie for too long.

It must have been something he'd said.

For the life of him, though, he couldn't remember what, or to whom, or when, or where, or why he had said it, whatever it was.

But here he was, in James Piper's office.

"I hear on the grapevine, that you'd like a break from overseas work," said his boss, the Head of Section 7.

"Whatever makes you think that?" asked Maurice, playing for time.

He hadn't been expecting this; a new assignment abroad, perhaps, but not this.

"A little bird told me that you were beginning to think you'd had enough."

"Who?"

"Can't remember," James lied.

"When?"

"Shortly after your visit to Sandhurst."

"You weren't supposed to know about that," said Maurice. "Nobody was."

James Piper, stood up from behind his desk, and went to his bookcase.

"Scotch?"

"Thanks."

"Let's stop playing around," he said. "We both know you're the best field operator we've got, and have been for years. We both know, too, that life's not been any easier for you since Marjory died. Shocking blow that was, for you and for Peter. So I'm not surprised if you feel like a change for a bit. Something quieter – less stressful."

Maurice sipped his glass of malt.

"And you shouldn't be surprised either, that word got back that you had been to the Royal Military Academy to see Peter graduate. I can't blame you for that. Anyone else would have done the same. Anyone else, though, would have asked."

"And been refused."

"Anyone else, perhaps. But not you, Maurice."

James grinned.

"It was a bloody good effort, if I may say so, and you almost got away with it."

"I knew it was risky, going to the heart of the military establishment like that. But I simply had to be there. I just hoped nobody would spot me."

"Nobody did."

“So how do you know?”

“You were looking through the Sovereign’s Parade programme on the return aircraft out east. One of the crew noticed, and mentioned it to our Military Attaché in Singapore, who just happened to be on the same flight.”

“I didn’t know Alastair Carter was on the aircraft.”

“He recognised you.”

“I hadn’t had time to look through it properly until then. I should have thought that someone might notice. I must be slipping.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m not sure I want to jack it in just yet, though.”

“We don’t want you to, either. But when you do want to, you only have to say. We can’t afford to have people like you filling a vital role when their mind isn’t on the job.”

“Total commitment.”

“That’s what we want. And that’s what you’ve always provided.”

“Things are a bit different, now.”

“Since Marjorie died, you mean?”

“Yes. Twenty-four years ago, that was. That, and the fact that Peter is doing his own thing now. The Army and all that.”

“No roots any more.”

“I suppose that’s it, in a way.”

“You’ve got your place in Hampshire.”

“But I never get there. It isn’t home, somehow. Nothing is, until you’ve lived there a bit.”

“Good fishing though.”

“What I’ve always wanted. A quiet place on the river, with my own trout fishing when I want it.”

“But you never get there.”

“Peter uses it more than I do. Sometimes we get there together, for the odd day. But not often.”

“Not often enough.”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps it is often enough,” said Maurice thoughtfully. “Could I really settle there, after everything?”

“It would certainly be a change of lifestyle. Very different,” agreed James.

“Nothing to do all day? Doesn’t sound like me, somehow, and yet sometimes I wonder.”

“Better than ‘travelling’, perhaps.”

“But I really enjoy that. The challenges keep me going. I’m not sure I could manage without the adventure of working overseas.”

“Keep going then, for a bit longer.”

Maurice sipped his whiskey.

“Perhaps I will then. Just for a bit longer.”

“Finish the job you’re on?” asked James.

“Of course.”

“Going well, I hear.”

“I’m happy with progress so far. I think we shall pull it off in the end.”

“You will, you mean. How long?”

“Four months or so, with luck. Maybe sooner.”

“That would be perfect,” said James with a smile.

“Why?”

"I have something else in mind. Timing could be about right, and it would mean being based here for a bit. Give you a change. You could spend some time in Hampshire."

"With Peter."

"Depending on where he's posted by then."

"What sort of job is it?"

"Recruiting, shall we say."

"Who?"

"A guy we want on our side. With any luck, he'll be in London about then. If you can turn him for us, you would well end up working overseas again, with him when he gets back home."

"Where's that?"

"Never mind. Later will do, if the job's still on."

"Important chap?"

"Very. Could be a major coup for us, which would have the Americans begging at our doorstep. If we can pull it off."

"A few months based back here might help me to decide, I suppose."

"If you do decide to keep going, there will always be work for you somewhere overseas if you want it. Or you could stay here in London. It's up to you."

"Thanks."

"That's agreed, then."

Maurice stood to leave.

"There's one other thing to bear in mind," said James.

"What's that?"

"No promises or anything." James put his finger to his lips. "But I shall be retiring in a year or so, and 'C' will want a safe pair of hands to sit here when I go. When you do get back from Jakarta, you can sit next door. As Deputy Head."

Maurice looked around the office.

"No promises or anything."

So Maurice went back to Jakarta, although most people thought he'd gone to Warsaw, where they all knew he was working. Or thought they knew.

He wasn't able to make contact with Peter before he returned. For a start, Peter didn't know he'd been in London, or even to Sandhurst, and for a second thing Maurice wasn't sure where Peter was, either.

It was some time since they'd exchanged letters, what with the graduation parade and everything.

It was only their letters that kept them in touch, really.

They were a bridge between them, and always had been, since Marjorie died.

Suddenly, though, the Jakarta job stopped going as well as it had been. It nearly stopped altogether.

It was as if they knew what he was up to. Somebody somewhere had got suspicious, or talked or something.

It was an ambush, of sorts.

His car was rammed on an isolated road, miles from anywhere, and he ended up in the ditch. He recognised the car that had forced him off the road, and guessed who was driving it.

He saw the car stop, and the driver and passenger get out. It was them, all right. They ran towards his smashed car.

He played dead. He nearly was anyway. But his trusted contact and driver, lying on top of him, was still alive enough to try to get out of the wrecked car. Maurice could do nothing to stop him.

A bullet in the head did that.

Somehow, Maurice survived. It flashed through his mind that it was 24 years since Marjorie died. She hadn't been to Sandhurst, like he had. He just wished that Peter had known he had been there. One day he'd tell him, perhaps. If he survived a bit longer.

One more time.

He watched the assassin's car drive off at speed. He drifted off, sure he was dying.

Eventually, the police turned up, and called the para-medics.

He was in the hospital for a couple of weeks, and knew he was running out of time to complete his mission.

He was getting much better now.

Recovering quite quickly now, he thought, and when he pulled the drips and wires and everything away one night and nothing much happened, he made for the door.

Still nothing much happened, so he had decided he was better enough.

He kept going.

He knew who had been responsible. They could be sorted later. Meanwhile, he had a job to finish. At least the opposition thought he was dead. Otherwise, he'd have collected a bullet in the head as well. In the end, it took him longer to finish the operation than he had planned. Five months since his chat with James Piper, not the four he had forecast. But at last he was able to send a 'mission accomplished' message to the Head of Section 7.

He eventually got home, wanting a few days with Peter at the cottage.

But Peter had been posted to Hong Kong.

The bridge had collapsed.

10.

THE TAVERN

There were three of them. Always together, but never seen outside the limits of their college, where they had been sent by North Korea's 'Supreme Leader' for some very special training.

They were very special students, because only very special people ever got sent anywhere overseas. These students, the sons of senior officials who had found favour with the ruling elite in their country, were also among the few people there who spoke reasonably good English. It was for this reason, among others, that they had been selected for a term away from their Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, to continue their studies at Westminster University in London.

They were not like any other students, anywhere. For one thing, they were smartly dressed. For another, they devoted themselves to their studies to the exclusion of everything else, because they believed that this is what Kim Jong-un wanted them to do. The only time they left the confines of the Science and Technology Faculty in New Cavendish Street was to get to their nearby private lodgings. They had so far not explored London at all, but had stayed within the confines of the campus. It was plain to everyone who came across them there that they were totally brainwashed by the regime from which they had come. It was also

plain that one of them had been sent as a 'minder', to ensure that the other two abided by the rules.

Which is why it was so very unusual to find them having lunch in the Fitzroy Tavern in Charlotte Street.

The Fitzrovia district of Central London had once been a highly fashionable area, inhabited by the great and the good and the wealthy. Part of it still was, but other parts have become - shall we say - less fashionable, with the university campus and its multifarious student population that goes with it. The Fitzroy Tavern, owned by the brewing family of Samuel Smith, was a typical London pub of the old sort. It was always a centre for the literati. George Orwell and Dylan Thomas both drank there, and it still attracted authors, musicians, actors and artists as it always did, together with the new mix of business and university clients.

So the three students had plenty of fellow scholars as company, as well as a few tutors.

The North Korean Embassy, however, based in its semi-detached house in Ealing, had taken much persuading before it eventually gave the students authority to investigate the rowdy drunkenness and decadence to be found in this underground hell-hole so typical of the capitalist life style of alcohol and drugs in England's capital city, just a few hundred yards from their university home.

When they arrived, they were therefore rather surprised to find a quite civilised gathering of students, tutors and well-dressed and well behaved office workers enjoying good food and drink during their lunch break. They were made welcome, shown to a table and offered the menu. Two of them were anxious to learn more by entering into conversation with other diners, some of whom they recognised as being from their faculty, but their fellow minder soon warned them off. There was to be no fraternising without incurring the wrath of their supreme leader, Kim Jong-un. And they all knew what that meant, for themselves and their families.

Nevertheless, this was far from what they had been led to expect. No doubt if they returned at some other time, or even explored a different establishment of a similar nature, they would discover that their briefing had been absolutely accurate.

But they were nevertheless not comfortable in this strange environment, and their discomfiture was made the more acute when one of the customers who had been at the bar, came across to sit with them at their table, which was set for four people.

"Do you mind?" he asked politely. "I don't want to interrupt, but it is always so crowded here, and this seems to be the only available seat."

Off hand, they could think of no reason why the man should not share their table, so they nodded, with a smile. Apart from anything else, they were waiting for the food they had ordered.

"Thank you," said the man, looking at the menu. "Most kind of you."

"What have you ordered?" he asked, as the waiter approached.

"The steak and kidney pudding," replied one of them. "We want to sample your traditional food."

"An excellent choice," said the man. "It's always good here. I think I'll join you." He nodded to the girl waiting to take his order. "And a pint of best bitter, please." he added.

"When they have it, the liver and onions is very good, too," he told the students.

The trio smiled, but said nothing.

"Have you been here before?" asked the man.

"Never before," replied one of them eagerly. "We have special permission to make this visit."

"Special permission?" queried the man.

“Special permission,” he repeated. “We are students from North Korea. We need special permission to leave our studies.”

“Ah,” said the man. “What an interesting country yours is! I would love to visit it myself sometime.”

“Visitors are made very welcome by our supreme leader,” said one.

“But because of the vile efforts of America to cripple our country, not many do people visit except from China, and they are mostly on day trips. Because of their hostile policy towards us, the US will not let others visit our wonderful homeland,” said the ‘minder’.

The man decided not to argue.

“How do you like England,” he asked. “Where else have you been?”

“Nowhere else.”

“Where else in London?”

“Nowhere else, except the University. Until today.”

“How long have you been here then?”

“Nearly three weeks,” replied the talkative student.

“And until today, you have been nowhere at all?”

“We are here to study for the benefit of our country, not to behave as tourists.”

“But are you not curious to learn more about this country – about London, even?”

“There is nothing here we need to learn about, that we do not already have in our own glorious country. You could learn a lot from us, in spite of what the imperialist Americans may think of us.”

“Apart from our studies,” said the ‘minder’, “we are also here to improve our English, so that we can defend our leader against the lying and traitorous propaganda spread by the wretched scum in America.”

The food arrived. “*Just in time,*” *the man thought.*

They ate in silence.

After a short time, the ‘minder’ said something to his colleagues in *Chosŏnŏ*.

He asked the man, “Where is the toilet, please?”

“At the back,” he pointed towards the far end of the bar.

As he left the table, he muttered something else to his two fellow students.

“Is he in charge of you?” asked the man with a smile.

“Almost,” replied one of them. “Apart from furthering his studies with us, his main duty is to make sure we both abide by the rules which govern our visit here, and do not stray from the wishes of our dear leader.”

“These rules forbid us from conversation with strangers, although we may extol the virtues of our own wonderful country,” said the other.

“And I would certainly like to learn more about your country and its people,” replied the man.

“And we would also wish to learn more about yours, but regrettably this is not allowed except from our tutors at the University.”

“So we do not meet ordinary citizens,” concluded the other.

“We should meet again,” suggested the man. “Would that be possible?”

The two students glanced at one another, and towards the toilets, beyond the far end of the bar.

“It might be possible, if we are careful.”

“We would welcome the chance to correct all the false information propagated by our enemies the Americans.”

“As well as learning more about life here,” added the other.

“We had not imagined a place like this, for instance.”

“And yet it is full of our fellow students and a few of our tutors,” responded the other.

The man pulled out a small wallet from his pocket and extracted three visiting cards. "Take these," he said, offering them one each. "My name and phone number is on them. You can see I work and live near here, so this would be a good place to meet again if you want. Please write your names on this one for me."

He gave them the third card.

As one wrote his name, they looked carefully to make sure their fellow student was not in sight. The other then wrote his name hurriedly on the back. He glanced around, just as their 'minder' emerged from the Gents, and quickly added a note in *Chōsongŭl* script.

The man took the card and without a word slipped it into his pocket.

The students' minder paid the bill at the bar on his way back to the table, and ushered them to their feet.

"We must go," he demanded. "We have been in this place long enough and should return to our studies."

Without a word, the other two students stood and left, giving the man a courteous nod of the head as they made their way towards the stairs and the fresh air of Charlotte Street.

One of them winked.

Maurice Northcot was feeling quite pleased with himself.

He had successfully completed his assignment in Jakarta, which had been more taxing than he would have wished, and was now back in London for a break. He needed a bit of a rest from service abroad – 'travelling' as it was known.

But it was not quite the break he had been hoping for.

He had wanted to spend some time at his cottage in Hampshire, doing a bit of work about the place, and getting to know the river a bit better. He had hardly spent any time there since he had bought the place a year or so after his wife had died.

He had been too busy.

Travelling.

But his lords and masters in MI6 knew that he was beginning to feel the strain of almost constant work abroad. He absolutely loved the life, but was the first to admit that the strain was beginning to tell. Not that he wanted to retire or anything like that – heaven forbid. Neither did he want to give up working abroad. The challenges which that represented were huge, but at the same time invigorating, and he still yearned for the adventure of operations overseas, even though it gave him no real chance to settle, or enjoy his cottage and its trout stream.

Nevertheless, things had gone well this morning. Rather better than he had hoped, in fact, in spite of the fact that he and his colleagues had been working on this for the best part of three months. Just the same, he had no real idea how things would pan out, and could only hope for the best when he had set out earlier today.

He allowed himself a wry grin. In the end, a quite unexpected outcome.

He waved to a passing waiter as he watched the students disappear up the stairs, without a backward glance.

"Another pint of best, please."

He thought he deserved it.

He had given each of the students one of his many different business cards to keep. Although different, each version had his name and one of his phone numbers on them. This one purported to show that he worked as a Junior Manager for a company called Aspect Management Consultants, with an office in Fitzrovia. He had chosen Aspect Management because that warranted the largest of his visiting cards. He wanted plenty of room for them to

write on the reverse of the one which they had returned to him. He took the card from his pocket and read it carefully.

The first name was Lee Kwang-Sun.

Maurice remembered the order in which they had written their names on his card. Kwang-Sun was the rather earnest looking man in rimless spectacles. He took life seriously, it seemed, but was forever looking about him, as if eager to learn from this new experience.

The second was Choi Yong.

He was the one they were looking for.

He had tended to take the lead in the brief conversation that had taken place during lunch, and had more than once received a quite stern look from their 'minder', as if he was talking too much and showing too much enthusiasm. It was he who had appeared to be most keen to meet again. "*It might be possible, if we are careful,*" he had said.

And it was Yong who had winked on his way out.

Maurice looked again at the card. Yong had found the time to write a brief message beneath his name.

It was not in English, but in *Chōsongŭl* script.

Northcot was puzzled. Why had he done that? Maurice had read it quite easily. He both read and spoke Korean, among several other languages. Apart from Betty Ogden and a couple others, nobody else in the section spoke Korean or knew that he did.

But Choi Yong could not possibly have known that Maurice was fluent.

Could he?

Did he know?

Or was he perhaps testing Northcot. To see whether Choi Yong's recent fellow-diner would react, or simply believe it to be some form of Korean art, added for decoration?

So few people knew that Northcot had Korean as one of his languages that it was impossible to believe that this student, who he had only just met, could possibly have known unless he had been told. And there was only one person who could have done that.

The message read; "*Here tomorrow.*"

Northcot decided that he had to ring Betty Ogden as soon as possible. She had helped to arrange today's 'impromptu' meeting.

They had actually been planning it for weeks.

When Maurice got back to his MI6 office in Lambeth, he tried to get hold of Betty on the secure phone.

She didn't answer.

He wandered down the corridor to see James Piper, Section 7's boss.

"I could do with a chat with Betty Ogden," he said. "Any idea where she is?"

"Teaching foreigners English, so far as I know."

"It's one of her students I want to talk to her about."

James scrolled through his computer.

"Hasn't been in touch for days," he announced.

"I've tried her Satcom phone a couple of times, but there's never an answer," said Maurice.

"Out and about somewhere, I expect."

"Probably," replied Maurice. "But I don't want to go through the University switchboard and have her paged or anything."

James knew Maurice well enough to know that this was not an ordinary social chat he wanted with his colleague Betty, and that he wouldn't be there in James's office if it wasn't

important. Maurice usually got on with things on his own, and only got hold of his Section head when he really needed to.

“One of her students, you say?”

“Right. The one from North Korea with an Uncle said to be working on their nuclear weapons programme.”

“He’s special.”

“There’s three of them, actually. But one’s a minder of some sort.”

“Have you met them?”

“Today. A chance meeting over lunch, which Betty arranged.”

“And?”

“One of them left me a note. Wants to meet again. Tomorrow.”

“So why don’t you?”

“The note was written in Korean script - *Chōsongŭl* - not in English.”

“So?”

“So how does he know I speak and read Korean, or is he just guessing, or checking me out in some way? And if he is, why?”

“Betty told him,” suggested James Piper.

“That’s why I need to speak to her. The guy doesn’t know he was set up. He has no way of connecting me with Betty. I just fetched up at his table in a pub, looking for somewhere to sit for lunch.”

“We need to speak to Betty,” said James, reaching for his secure phone.

She did not answer.

“Leave it me, then,” said Northcot, as he made to leave the office.

“Before you go,” James called after him, “how’s life back at the blunt end?”

“Not the same.”

“But you thought you’d probably had enough, if I remember.”

“You didn’t agree.”

“I still don’t. But if you’d rather not serve overseas again, the offer of a desk here is still open.”

“I’ve got one, thanks to you.”

“And time to relax a bit? Visit Hampshire, fishing and all that?”

“Peter’s still in Hong Kong.”

“Still trout in the river, though.”

“I’m fishing for men at the moment.”

“Better than just sitting in an office, don’t you think?”

“The RAF always used to say that mahogany bombers aren’t the same.”

“Safer than being up-side-down in a ditch, with a native pumping bullets into your driver.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Find Betty,” commanded James. “We need that Korean nuclear scientist.”

“Leave it me, then,” said Northcot again, as he finally left the office.

Betty Ogden seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth. Maurice had tried a dozen times to get hold of her, and she was simply not replying to her phone. He left no messages, in case it had been nicked. It was supposed to be secure, but you couldn’t be too careful.

He turned up at the Fitzroy Tavern anyway, and hoped for the best, not knowing whether or not he had been set up or whether this was a genuine attempt to keep in contact.

It was not too crowded for a change. Just to be sure, he put his newspaper and phone on the place setting next to him, and his coat over the chair.

He hadn't been there long when Choi Yong turned up, looking about him nervously. He appeared to be on his own, but Maurice pretended not to have spotted him.

Yong hurried over to the table.

"Ah! You got my message then?"

"Message? What message? Nice to see you again, though. Have a seat, or are your friends with you?"

Maurice cleared away his paper and coat.

"I am alone, but can't stay long."

Yong sat down, looking round the bar.

"You understood my message?" he asked.

"What message?" repeated Maurice.

"I wrote on the card you gave me," replied Yong.

"I didn't notice, but I have the card here."

He fished it out of his pocket.

"There's no message here," he said, looking at it closely.

"There." Yong pointed to the *Chösongül* script he had added to his name. "That is a message."

"Really," said Maurice. "How interesting. I thought it was some form of decoration you had added."

"No. A message."

"What does it say, then?"

"In my language, it says 'here tomorrow'".

"Well I never!" exclaimed Maurice.

"If you could not read it, why are you here?" demanded Yong.

"I often lunch here," replied Maurice. "You will see from my card that I work nearby. I often lunch here. I live nearby, too. This is my pub."

"Aha!" said Yong.

"What a bit of luck," said Maurice. "But what made you think I would understand your message anyway?"

"You said you were interested in my country, so I thought you might understand."

"No way!" replied Maurice. "Lucky I came here for lunch again today, then."

"Very lucky."

The girl came over to take their order.

"I must not stay long," said an agitated Yong.

"How about a sandwich and glass of wine then? That'll be quick."

"Good. You order please."

"Why did you want to meet up again, anyway?" asked Maurice after he had ordered.

"I need your help."

"In what way?"

Yong looked about him anxiously.

"I shall be killed if I cannot trust you, and so will all my family."

"You'd better trust me, then."

Choi Yong was obviously very agitated.

"Your card says you are a management consultant."

"True."

"So you must know many people."

"Also true."

"One of them may be able to help me if you cannot."

“What help do you need? Is it money you want? I can arrange a loan is that’s it.”

“No, no. More than that.”

“Are you in trouble with the law, then? I know a chap in the police who I could talk to. And we have a lawyer working for us in my consultancy.”

“No, no. Much more difficult than that, especially for me.”

“You’d better tell me then.”

Yong leant forward, and almost whispered.

“I trust you with my life, and the lives on all my family.”

“Tell me what you want.”

One more fearful glance around him.

“I do not want to return to my home. I do not want to go home to North Korea. I want to stay here, in your country.” he whispered.

It was loud enough for the hidden receiver in Northcot’s micro-digital recorder to pick up his every word.

Maurice looked about him cautiously, to instil a little confidence in his companion.

“That would be very dangerous for you,” he said.

“Can you help?”

“Are you quite sure you want this?”

“Absolutely – no question.”

Maurice thought for a moment.

“It is possible I could help in some way perhaps.”

“Please help me,” Yong implored. “And my friend Kwang-Sun. He also wishes to stay here.”

“Both of you?”

“Both of us.”

Maurice frowned, for effect.

“This could be very difficult to arrange.”

“Please.”

“For two of you?”

Maurice pondered.

“Why is Kwang-Sun not here?”

“He and our other fellow student, Cheong Sung, are with our tutor and others on a cultural visit. To Stratford-upon-Avon.”

“Cheong Sung is the one who keeps an eye you, right?”

“Right. He must know nothing of this.”

Well done Betty, thought Maurice with a grin.

“OK.” said Maurice eventually. “I will do what I can to help you. I know people who can be of assistance, and who I trust.”

Yong sat back, with a sigh of relief.

“You are very kind to help a stranger,” he said. “But my country is not good, like this one. I know it, and my Uncle has told me.”

“There will be much to discuss,” said Maurice, stating the obvious. “We shall need to meet again, often, and must agree how to arrange our meetings.”

“That will be difficult. You cannot just phone me like anyone else.”

“I’ll think of something,” promised Northcot. “Can we meet again here this evening, when I will have had time to think and perhaps contact a couple of my friends?”

“We can. My tutor and her party are staying away tonight. They are to watch a play this evening, and return tomorrow.”

“Good,” said Maurice. “I shall have many questions to ask you before I do anything positive. I need to know more about you.”

“I will tell you everything you want to know. Anything at all.”
They arranged a time, and Yong left.

Working for the Special Intelligence Service, or MI6 as it is known by most people, sounds very glamorous. But it isn't, so most of those who are involved keep quiet about it, while those who boast about working for them probably do not; a true case of empty vessels making the most noise.

Modern spies work at high risk. They face very real dangers, and their work can have deadly consequences. Most who are involved in that field are lonely characters. Only their immediate families can know what their true role is in life, and then probably not all of them can be let into the secret. For the rest, it is a case of living a lie. Maintaining one's cover is one of the most difficult parts of the job, not least when dealing with contacts and sources of valuable information. Once established, a source is a priceless asset and cannot be put at risk.

Recruiting foreign sources is especially difficult.

Take Choi Yong, for example. He and his colleague Lee Kwang-Sun seemed, on the face of it, keen to collaborate. One had to ask, however, whether they may not have been set up by their Government to infiltrate the UK to work on behalf of their Great Leader, or whether they were genuinely acting on their own behalf, of their own free will. Free will is not a common attribute of the people of North Korea.

And what about Uncle Dr. Choi Shin? He was a nuclear scientist and working on the North Korean weapons project. He had actually paid a visit to the UK not long ago, so people already knew quite a lot about him. He appeared to be a potential defector, or at least ready to talk, but would he really be prepared to help the UK and its allies, perhaps through his nephew? MI6 was about to target a seemingly valuable source within a largely impenetrable country, knowing full well the dangers of recruiting abroad. They needed to know more about Yong's connections; more about his motivation, and in particular, more about his possible access to valuable information.

There was more to it than meeting Yong for a beer.

When Northcot returned to Lambeth, he went straight to James Piper's office.

“I know where Betty is,” he announced.

“Oh?”

“Skiving off with a party of students in Stratford, on a cultural visit.”

“I hope they like Shakespeare better than I do,” said James.

“Who cares. She's taken two of the Korean students with her, including the ‘minder’.”

“Clever.”

“Very. I've met our man again, and am seeing him again later tonight.”

“Getting on all right, then are you?”

Maurice handed over the tiny recorder.

“Listen to this. He wants to come over.”

James grinned broadly.

“Got him, then.”

“If we're careful.”

“It's his uncle we really need. He is actually working on their nuclear programme as you know. We've established that beyond a doubt. He's been over here.”

“A fellow student friend of his also wants to defect.”

"Two of them?"

"I hope we're not being set up."

"Does he have an uncle as well?"

"One at a time!" said Maurice.

He frowned.

"But I need to see the Ogden lady more urgently than ever now."

"Why?"

"There are questions I need to ask."

"Such as?"

"Just niggles, really."

"Share them," demanded James.

"You may already know the answers, I suppose, since you're in charge."

"Try me."

"Well – for a start, why did one of the students think I spoke and could read Korean?"

"Go on."

"For a second thing, how did she know I was going to meet him again, tonight?"

"What makes you think she did?"

"The visit to Stratford can't have been a coincidence, surely. She got the other two out of the way for me specially."

"So you not only think we could be on the end of a sting, being set up by our Korean friends, but also don't trust Ogden anymore."

"I don't know what to think."

Head of Section 7 sat back in his chair and looked at Maurice carefully.

"I wish you wouldn't do things like this to me," he sighed.

Maurice shrugged.

"I agree, though. It makes you think," said James, now equally puzzled. "But I don't have any answers for you."

"I think we need to be doubly careful about this one," said Maurice.

"And I think you need to talk to the lovely Miss Ogden. Soonest."

"I've got another meeting with our target before that can happen."

"It almost seems he wants to talk to you more than you want to talk to him."

"If we're being set-up, he would."

"Perhaps he's just desperate to get away, and sees you as his only chance."

"Or he sees this as his only chance to set us up."

"And his friend."

"Two to worry about."

"Three, with Betty."

"I'm sure she's OK. She's worked for us for years. There must be a simple explanation."

"I hope so."

Maurice Northcot stood to leave. As he reached the door, James called after him.

"Keep in touch, and deal with me direct."

Maurice nodded.

"And Maurice."

He turned.

"Be careful until we know what's going on."

Choi was already there when Maurice returned to the pub that evening. He really wished he'd been able to speak to Betty first. He would just have to be doubly careful, that's all.

Choi had two beers on the table in front of him. He must have been very confident that Maurice would turn up.

"You're late," said Choi.

"Sorry," replied Maurice, who had deliberately kept the student waiting, to make him sweat a bit.

"I thought you weren't coming."

"There's no real reason why I should have come at all, from my point of view," Maurice pointed out. "You want me to help you, but why should I? What do I get out of it?"

"I can understand that," replied Choi. "But I have to assure you that your country will benefit greatly if you can help us both to stay here, and you will gain the credit for that."

"How can that be? You are only students."

Choi nervously sipped his beer.

"I have an uncle who is a nuclear scientist," replied Choi. "He also wants to leave our country, but that is impossible for him."

"But you are not a nuclear scientist, so what good will that be if you stay here?"

"I can bring you valuable information."

"Why can't your Uncle bring it?"

"He cannot visit here again."

"Again?"

"Again. He came with others as a guest of your Government not long ago. He also visited America, but did not like it or its people. Which is why he would like to return here."

"So why doesn't he?"

"There is no such thing as freedom of movement in our country, and it is almost impossible to leave it."

"You have."

"But I am also on a sponsored visit, as my Uncle was."

"Who has sponsored you, then?"

"I am a student at Pyongyang University, where we have an English teacher. She arranged it for the three of us, and is back here herself as a tutor at Westminster University where we are now studying. That is how it was arranged."

"I see," said Maurice thoughtfully.

"So if you stay here, and your Uncle, if he exists, cannot leave, how will you get hold of this 'valuable information'?" asked Northcot.

"I will arrange it, do not worry."

"Why do you think we would find it valuable, anyway? We have our own nuclear power stations. We know all about it – or someone does, I suppose."

"My Uncle is working on our nuclear weapons programme, which is very dangerous for many countries. That is why the information which I can supply will be so valuable."

"I'm not sure I believe any of this, if I'm honest," said Maurice.

"But you must – you simply must," implored Choi.

Maurice stood up.

"Please don't go! Let us talk more," pleaded to student.

"I talk better with a full glass," replied Maurice. "Will you have another?"

He looked closely at Choi when he returned from the bar.

"I'm still not sure I can help you and your friend even if I wanted to and believed you," he said.

“But you really must,” Choi insisted. “If you help me you will be helping your country.”

“Now listen to me,” demanded Maurice. “If you are here, and your Uncle is still in Korea, how will you contact him? How will you get hold of this information? How do you know he will give it to you if you ask? Will he ring you up, or send you a letter or something? If he’s that important, he could not possibly do any such thing, and you know it better than I do.”

“There are ways.”

“Rubbish,” snorted Maurice.

“I am telling the truth,” insisted Choi, getting worried. “My Uncle wants our weapons programme stopped, because he knows how dangerous it is. There have already been tests, and he knows that if ever our country’s leaders should be so foolish and arrogant as to launch an attack on America or one of its allies, we would all be wiped out and our country destroyed. He knows that, but cannot stop it happening. Our dictators are too stupid to understand.”

“So if we had all this information you are talking about, how would that help?”

“Your scientists and your military would be able to stop the development programme.”

“Based on the information your Uncle will send you on a postcard or something? Do me a favour.”

“You must try to understand, please.”

“I think I understand that you and your friend just want to escape your country for some reason or other, and want me to arrange for you to get political asylum or something.”

“If that was all we wanted, there are proper procedures for applying and we could do that.”

Maurice looked at his watch.

“Please don’t go yet. We must talk more.”

Maurice sighed.

“I’ll finish my beer, and then go.”

“I must try to convince you that we are honest and want to stay here for good reasons, which I have explained.”

“What about your families, then, if you don’t go home? What will happen to them?”

“If we simply defect, they will all suffer terribly and perhaps be killed. All of them, including distant relations. Such is the way in my barbaric country.”

“So how can you stay here without defecting? That’s not possible.”

“We had in mind a tragic but fictitious accident, in which we are both killed. That way, our families would be spared.”

“And you really expect me to arrange all this? Even if I believed half of what you have told me, there’s no way I could fix all this.”

“But you said you have friends. Perhaps one of them could arrange for us to meet one of your secret agents or a Government official who could help.”

“But look again at the visiting card I gave you. I am a junior manager in a small local company, not the King of England or anything. What makes you think any of my friends are in a position to help you?”

“Please let us meet again, perhaps somewhere different, to discuss this more.”

Maurice thought for a moment.

“OK then, if you can get away safely, we’ll talk some more. Ring me when you think you can get away, and I will suggest somewhere different, away from here.”

“Thank you a thousand times. I knew I could trust you, but please do not repeat anything I have told you. There are spies everywhere.”

'If only you knew,' thought Maurice.
They shook hands, and Choi Yong left.

As he did so, Maurice Northcot turned off his recorder, and made his way back to MI6 Headquarters in Lambeth.

11.

THE TEACHER

Betty Ogden came from Yorkshire, grand-daughter of one of the last owners of a wool-combing mill in Bradford, where her father had worked. When Grandpa decided to sell up, her father moved to Ireland to work in synthetics. She had decided to stay at home. She liked Yorkshire, and wasn't at all sure she would like County Kildare. A small flat on the outskirts of York, initially funded by her father was better, in her view, than a few acres in rain-filled Naas which is where her parents had settled.

There was no explaining it, but she had a natural aptitude for languages. Learning them, speaking them, reading them and writing them. It didn't run in the family. Her father was an engineer by background and degree, a fighter pilot while on a short-term commission in the RAF, who now loved nothing better than fiddling with clocks.

Her first holiday abroad with her parents was great, but when asked afterwards, she said she hadn't really enjoyed it. Sure, the beach and the weather were super, but she hadn't enjoyed it. She had no idea what the people were talking about.

Next time a holiday abroad was mentioned, she got the books out of the library, and by the time they arrived, was all-but fluent in French. She enjoyed the holiday much more this time, because she felt more like being at home.

From then on, she studied languages.

Betty Ogden had always worked for the Foreign Office, since the time she had graduated. They were always looking for brilliant linguists, and that's what she was. Not only that, she had qualified as a teacher, as well.

She had many different jobs after she started at the F.O., as they tried to find the right permanent role for her. Not that she minded that. It gave her a feel for what she might eventually want to do with her career as well. So far, she had enjoyed it in all the departments she'd been put in.

They had tried her out as a translator at first. Attending conferences abroad was her favourite – she discovered that she enjoyed travelling, and meeting people. The subjects were often boring though, as well as some of the speakers, who tended to drone on without ever really coming to the point. Meetings about technical issues were often the most difficult. They really tested your vocabulary, as well as your understanding of the subject being discussed.

Translating documents was often interesting, too. She had quite good keyboard skills, but it was something of an art reading in one language and typing in another. She was quite sure much of the information she handled was not supposed to be in our hands. Documents secretly copied at embassies or by spies out in the field. Highly classified, a lot of that, but she had a top level security clearance.

Which was why she had ended up at Bourleywood House.

It was one of those secret Government locations that nobody knew about. A grand house hidden away in the Cotswold countryside, it was owned by the National Trust. The grounds were open to the public, and so were parts of the house at certain times of the year.

Other parts of it never were.

They were the parts used by several Government departments for all sorts of undercover operations. Betty Ogden never quite knew the extent of the activities which went on there, but she did know it was often operated as a safe house. It was used as a secret hiding place for those who needed to be kept out of the public view, like defecting foreign spies, and others whose lives might be under threat for one reason or another. Some people even went there to be given a completely new identity.

Its main use was for training. Top Secret briefings were held there, in special secure lecture rooms where it was impossible for anyone to overhear or see what was going on. The military, and particularly the Special Forces, used it often. Anti-terrorist training, escape and evasion, interrogation techniques, and things like that.

And there was a language school there, too.

That's where Betty Ogden went.

It always surprised her how many people working for the Government needed to speak and/or read a foreign language who couldn't just be sent to a technical college or go to night school. They were usually people who ended up being where they weren't supposed to be, she decided.

Sometimes, even, they were people who had ended up in this country who weren't supposed to be here, but who needed to speak the language fluently to be of any use to us. All sorts of people; military, diplomatic, business – it didn't matter. They were foreigners who had decided they would rather be here than there, and who we had decided we would rather keep than send home. They had been 'turned', as the idiom had it.

Betty Ogden had two main roles. She taught English to foreigners, and, more interestingly, taught a foreign language to individuals sponsored by the Government, who were due to serve abroad. Usually under-cover.

She specialised in languages of the Far East, including Cantonese and Korean, but not Japanese. A girl from Japan did that.

She had not been at Bourleywood for long before someone decided that she should travel a bit. So she was given a special vetting, and eventually recruited into MI6.

They had in mind a special assignment for her, and there weren't that many people around in the Foreign Office who they thought would be capable of successfully completing it.

They wanted someone to go to North Korea, as a specialist teacher working for the British Council, which had managed to install five teachers from England in various institutions. She was destined to serve at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology.

Students were always a good source of information, and could even be persuaded to work for British intelligence sometimes, if they were judged to be worth the effort. As Burgess and Maclean had shown while at Cambridge, universities and colleges were fertile recruiting grounds.

In the end, she served there for just over a year, and it was while she was there that she had met Choi Yong.

In fact, it was why she had been sent there – to meet Choi Yong.

It seemed that Yong and his close friend Lee Kwang-Sun were both very keen to visit England – not America – and to learn more about the country as well as improving their grasp of the language. Their main subjects were nuclear physics and computer science, but they were also regular students at her English classes.

It was Yong they were after, but Lee Kwang-Sun was also the sort of person she had been sent to ferret out. It was difficult, though, for her to speak privately to individual students. The university authorities frowned upon it, and tutorials on a one-to-one basis were banned in the case of 'foreign' lecturers. Nevertheless, Yong and Kwang-Sun had frequently

sought her out for a quiet chat, and they had managed to have some quite 'useful' conversations before one of the university security people inevitably noticed, and moved them on with a sharp admonition.

The whole place was run on military lines. The university buildings were surrounded by a high fence, and entrance to the compound was through a guarded security gate. Uniformed guards patrolled the inside of the campus, and there were 'minders' everywhere, keeping watch on both students and tutors alike. There was always one with Betty Ogden during her lessons, to ensure that she did not in any way stray from her central remit of teaching the English language, and nothing more.

There were no female students at Pyongyang University. The parents of all the students were high ranking officials, who were nearly all servants of the government in one form or another, either from local or national administrations, or from the military. It was an honour for their sons to be selected to attend the University, as it meant they had been picked out for similar high ranks in the future.

The family of Choi Yong had all been scientists or engineers, which is why he was following in their footsteps with his nuclear physics studies. Two of his relations had actually been abroad in connection with their work, but they were among a privileged few.

One, Uncle Dr. Choi Shin had even been to America. He did not enjoy his visit, and on his return tended to agree with the party propaganda. It did not seem to him to be a good place, and he disliked the arrogance of its people.

He had also been to England, however, which he had found altogether more agreeable. Indeed, he had almost concluded that it would not be a bad country to live in, and had encouraged his nephew Yong to make a visit if ever he had the opportunity.

Yong's uncle knew that escape from North Korea was virtually impossible and was not to be contemplated. He would never be allowed even the opportunity because of the importance of his work, and if he tried to defect and was caught, he knew that every last member of his family, even distant relatives, would be executed or severely punished in a barbaric labour camp. But that did not stop him secretly yearning for the opportunity to present itself.

What had convinced him even more strongly than ever that the country in which he lived and worked was not the wonderful and peace-loving place he had always been led to believe, was the very work in which he was involved. He realised how incredibly dangerous it was if his country was ever to become more successful in his field of science, as a nuclear physicist working on weapons development.

Thanks largely to the massive support given by their Chinese neighbours, the North Koreans had already been able to test three rather crude and dirty nuclear weapons, and were pushing ahead at all speed to make improved warheads. He was able to see through the smokescreen of the official propaganda, and realise the horrifying consequences to his country if the dictatorship ever managed to launch an attack on America or any of its allies. He knew that the nearest of these was in South Korea, and that the North already had missiles capable of reaching Seoul. He had a feeling that the Chinese were using his country as a tool to carry out some of their research for them in return for food and other aid, and that the Great Leader Kim Jung-un was too blind to realize what was going on. If only half of what he had heard about America was true, then it was inevitable that his country was already targeted by the vastly superior weapons in the US armoury.

He had discussed all this several times, discretely, with his nephew Yong.

"I shall never be able to leave this country again," Uncle Shin had told Yong, "but you could, and should, if you get the chance. I'm not saying you should leave for ever, to enjoy a better life, but you should at least see what better there is to be had away from this place."

All this explained why Choi Yong had been so keen to befriend Betty Ogden. Who better to arrange, if such a thing was ever to be possible, for him to visit England?

All this also explained why London had so conveniently planned for Betty Ogden to return there as an English specialist at Westminster University, home as it was to so many visiting foreign students from around the world.

It had not, after that, been too difficult to arrange for Choi Yong and two of his colleagues to follow her there to further their studies in London.

With a disaffected Uncle working on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, Yong would be a good catch if he could be landed.

Because Betty's job at the University was full-time, it was the weekend before they could all get together. Not that weekends were ever anything special to people in the intelligence world. One day was much the same as any other. The only real difference today was that they were in casual dress. That meant that James Piper was not wearing a tie for a change, but it was his office after all.

"Thanks for coming in," he said, as his secretary brought in mugs of coffee. "There are questions to ask about our three students from North Korea, so we hope you can help with some answers, Betty."

"If I can, of course. Things seem to be moving forward at last," she said. It was almost a question rather than a statement. "I'm interested to know how things are going from your point of view, after so much effort trying to get you to meet them," she said to Maurice Northcot, the only other person present.

"Thanks to you," Maurice replied, "I've met all three of them once, and since then had two further meetings with Choi Yong while you were at Stratford."

"Good move, that, getting the other two away," commented James. "But communicating with you is proving a problem which we need to address today, among other things."

Betty nodded. "I can appreciate that," she said. "But I can't use normal methods, like personal mobile phones. I dare not risk blowing my cover."

"Quite. But now this operation at last appears to be underway, it's important that we can keep in touch, and get hold of you when we need to."

"Agreed; and I may need to contact you, too, although the whole thing could be complicated by the fact that I spend so much of my time in a classroom or doing tutorials."

"Do you have any sort of timetable for your work at the University?" asked Maurice. "Are there times when you can be contacted more easily than others?"

"Yes, there are, although always subject to change of course. It's that sort of job, unlike a normal school with a regular curriculum. I'll email a work schedule to both of you," promised Betty.

"That's helpful. And you have the secure mobile phone, which we shall use from now on. If for some reason you can't speak, say so and ring us back as soon as possible."

"Weekends and evenings are probably the best times for us to make contact, and for me to talk quietly to our two targets. But ring any time, and hope for the best."

"Good. Keep the Satcom with you and live at all times from now on, then," ordered James. "Now, there were a couple of things earlier on which puzzled us, and we still don't properly understand."

"For a start," said Maurice, "Yong left me a message to 'meet again', written in his native script. How could he possibly know I could read *Chōsongŭl*, or was he just guessing? It put me in a difficult situation, not knowing whether or not you had told him."

“He doesn’t know. I have certainly never mentioned you to him at all. He has no idea that we are in any way connected, or that between us we engineered your first meeting. As for his message, I think he was just flying a kite. After all, you did tell them you were interested in North Korea and would like to learn more about it from them. Perhaps he suspected that he and his colleagues were being set up and was just checking you out. He’s very bright young man, is Yong.”

“Why would he suspect the meeting was anything other than a coincidence? I was just a complete stranger who happened to sit at their table to eat my lunch.”

“It was their first time out of the confines of the University, don’t forget. They were all bound to be a bit on edge, especially as they had their minder Cheong Sung with them.”

“He could prove to be a bit of a handicap, that fellow,” said James. “We’ll talk about him later.”

“I’d like to know how you found out about our second meeting, and managed to get the others out of the way to Stratford,” said Maurice.

Betty looked at James, her Head of Section.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, “but I arranged for their room at the lodgings where they are staying to be bugged. Perhaps I should have asked you first.”

“Who did it?” demanded James.

“Len Ellis,” she replied.

“Another smart move,” replied James with a grin. “He’s one of our best technical officers, as I’m sure you know.”

“He got proper authority, since he had to break in to do it,” said Betty. “It’s just that we didn’t ask you first.”

“Forget it,” said James.

“It would be useful to have a feed off that, so that I know what’s being discussed,” said Maurice. “It would save you having to pass on anything interesting.”

“I’ll get Len to fix that.”

“To my office will be fine. Is it audio or video as well?”

“Just audio. Len didn’t have time to do both, and there didn’t seem to be any point anyway.”

“What’s been the tone of their general chat recently,” asked James. “Anything interesting?”

“Yong and his buddy Lee Kwang-sun find it difficult to talk privately between themselves since Cheong Sung is always around,” reported Betty. “He is already proving a nuisance by just being there, and he is a proper zealot, utterly devoted to the Great Leader and to his country. I had the utmost difficulty in persuading them all that they really should get out to meet ordinary people. Their written English is OK, but their spoken English totally lacks idiom, which they will only ever learn by mixing with others. They don’t even mix with other students. As you know, it took Cheong ages to be convinced, and then even longer to convince their embassy people, but their movements are still very restricted.”

“By the embassy or by Cheong?” asked James.

“Cheong.”

“He’ll have to go!” Maurice was only half joking. “But you can’t help wondering why he keeps them under such close scrutiny. Does he have some reason to suspect that they might defect?”

“Always possible, I suppose,” replied James.

“I shall need to have several further meetings with Yong and Kwang-sun, together and probably separately as well, and it would be very useful to meet in different places from time to time.”

“It would help their studies, too,” said Betty. “But I doubt Cheong would ever agree, even if he joined them.”

“Him hanging around is the last thing I want. I might just as well not meet them at all if he’s there.”

Head of Section 7 nodded

“If the two of them could get away from Cheong, we could meet anywhere that gives us a bit of privacy – on a river boat down the Thames, for instance, or a stroll in St. James’s Park. That would give them a bit more confidence, too, if they didn’t think they are being followed or could be overheard.”

“I’ll need to think about this,” said James. “But tell me more about Kwang-sun. What can he bring to this party?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind,” replied Betty, “that Yong is desperate to stay in this country, and there’s no doubt either that he has an Uncle working at a senior level on their nuclear weapons programme. Yong even claims that his uncle has been to this country on an official visit.”

“He has. Such things are possible, but intensely difficult to arrange, under United Nations auspices as part of the reunification and normalisation process following the war between North and South.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Betty, surprised.

“We have the dates, and managed to learn quite a lot about the guy while he was here,” said James. “As a matter of interest, he visited America, too, but wasn’t keen on the place or the people apparently.”

“So we need Yong so that we can keep in contact with his Uncle?”

“Exactly.”

“But what about Kwang-sun?” asked Maurice “Why should we help him? Can he even be trusted?”

“Can any of them,” questioned James.

“There’s a lot more work to be done before we can answer than one,” said Betty. “But I think Kwang-sun is equally desperate to stay here, and for much the same reason as Yong – better life-style, freedom of movement and expression, and a general dislike for the way things are run back home. Like the rest of them, though, he is also frightened by the regime and what it might do to his family if he defects, so he is looking for help to achieve that in a way which won’t arouse suspicion.”

“The question still is, ‘why should we?’ Has he anything to offer in return for his freedom? Can we use him in any way?”

“Kwang-sun claims that his father works at the same nuclear facility as Yong’s Uncle – some sort of technician. Not on the same level as Yong, but another useful contact if he is to be believed.”

“Why does he not just apply for asylum?”

“That would be to put his family at risk, which he wants to avoid. He needs to simply disappear, same as Yong,” said Maurice.

“Just about impossible with Cheong hanging around,” said Betty. “Much of their chat in their room has been about that, and how it might be achieved, with or without your help, Maurice, but they are pinning their hope on you at the moment. And your friends.”

“It’s odd that they should apparently trust me, and believe that I can and will help them. I think it’s very suspicious, personally.”

“Well, I don’t agree,” said James. “Apart from their tutors, you are the only other person they have met, so they have no-one else to turn to.”

“And they must know the teaching staff would be unlikely to help them,” added Betty. “They are University lecturers, not businessmen with a wide range of contacts, which is how they see you, Maurice.”

“If we do decide to help one or both of them stay here, I shall have to admit working for the Government at some time. Probably soon, in my view, if we are to keep him interested.”

“We need to be very sure they are not trying to get in as doubles or sleepers before you do that,” said James Piper.

“I’ve done what little checking I can,” said Maurice, “and there is nothing known about either of them other than what you have reported, Betty.”

“Knowing about Yong’s uncle doesn’t help us decide about Mr. Lee, though.”

“He’s the difficult one, no doubt.”

“Would Yong stay, do you think, if we refused to help Kwang-sun?”

“Difficult to say,” replied Betty. “But he’s desperate enough so he probably would.”

“I’m not sure we can risk losing him and especially not his uncle,” said James. “It seems to me we have to plan to keep both. There’s no doubt his uncle is Yong’s trump card, and that he will play it as often as he needs to.”

He thought for a moment.

“When’s your next meeting?” he asked Maurice Northcot.

“Nothing planned,” he replied. “I’m playing hard to get at the moment and raising all sorts of doubts about them and why I should help them. But I have agreed to keep talking, and the deal is that Yong rings me at my ‘office’ when he thinks they can get away from Cheong. I’ve given them my ‘Aspect Management Consultants’ card, so that’s the number he’ll use. Any call will come through to the green phone in my office here.”

James pondered again.

“Something will have to be done about that man Cheong, otherwise they will never be able to get in touch.”

“And they can’t even get away to drop in at The Fitzroy Tavern on the off chance of catching you during your lunch break, either.”

“I shall only go there again if I know they are going to be there. It’s not my favourite pub!”

“Any thoughts about Cheong?” asked Betty.

“Let’s talk this through,” pondered James. “It seems the only way to give Yong and Kwang-Sun any freedom of action is to get rid of Cheong completely, or at least to get him out of the University. I take it he could not be replaced by another student minder, half way through their stay?”

He looked at Betty, who shook her head. “The University Board would never contemplate his replacement at this stage.”

“How is he doing, academically?” asked James. “Any chance of him being chucked off the course and sent home for lack of effort or something?”

“None. He’s doing well in all his subjects, according to colleagues, and is dedicated and hardworking, as his ‘Great Leader’ expects.”

“Why are you keen for him to be sent home, James?” asked Maurice. “There are plenty of other ways of making him disappear, I should have thought.”

“Such as?”

“Well, an accident, say. Fatal, of course, and easily arranged. Even food poisoning or a heart attack or something like that which could kill him off.”

“If he dies in this country, his body will have to be sent back to North Korea, where there’s bound to be an autopsy or post mortem or whatever they do over there, which puts us

at risk if we engineer his death in some way. I would much prefer that he went home alive and in one piece.”

“In that case,” said Maurice, “we shall have to engineer some other reason. We can’t expel him from the University on academic grounds, so we shall have to dream up some other means of getting rid of him.”

“Or locking him up here until the future of the other two is settled.”

“Now that’s an idea,” said James. “Trump up some reason to have him arrested and charged.”

“And if we could think up some offence which is serious enough, like drug dealing, we might even get him deported.”

“If he gets sent home in disgrace, he will be condemned to one of their notorious labour camps, probably along with most of his family,” said James.

“I’m not sure I could live with that,” said Betty. “He’s quite a decent chap really, like the other two, and he can’t help being from a different and alien ideological background.”

“There doesn’t seem to me to be any way of getting him out of the country other than in disgrace. Even failing the University academic standards would be seen as a disgrace and him letting down his country.”

“Accident then,” said Maurice.

“For him to have an accident which does not involve the other two seems highly unlikely, given that he is never on his own. There are always three of them, together,” observed James.

“As a matter of interest, Betty,” asked Maurice, “how was it that Yong managed to evade your trip to Stratford?”

“All three were booked to go, but Yong pulled out at the last minute saying he felt ill. And I mean last minute. We were all on the coach.”

“Any other trips planned?”

“Not by me, but other lecturers arrange technical visits from time to time. I’ll see what’s in the diary if you like, in case something comes up which we could manipulate.”

They talked around the issues for half an hour or so but made no progress.

“Divide and rule is all very well,” said Betty, “but these three seem indivisible. The only times they are apart is when they are on individual lectures or tutorials within the University, and then they are normally in the company of other fellow students.”

“How long do we have, as a matter of interest?”

“I’m due back in Pyongyang in about three months,” replied Betty, “and they are due to return with me.”

“We are going round in circles at the moment,” he said. “We could sit here for ever and never come up with anything, so I suggest we call it a day. If anyone gets any workable idea of how to settle this, share it immediately, but it seems to me that finding a solution probably rests with you Betty. You’re in contact with them all the time, and unless you can organise something, nobody ever will.”

“Thanks for nothing.”

12.

THE MESSAGE

It was about two weeks later that Maurice’s green phone rang. It was Yong.

“We can meet now if we are quick.”

“Where’s Cheong?”

“He has been called to our embassy with Kwang-Sun, and has just left by taxi.”

“Well, I could meet you in the Tavern, I suppose.”

“But it isn’t lunch time,” protested Yong.

“They’re open all day.”

“Please hurry. We may not have long.”

“I’ll get there as quickly as possible. Probably half an hour or so.”

“But you work nearby. Surely you can be quicker.”

“That’s the point. I work. And I’m not in my office at the moment, either.”

“You answered the phone.”

“Your call was diverted to my mobile.”

“Please hurry. I need to talk to you again to persuade you to help me.”

“Ok, Ok. I’ll get there as soon as I can. If you get there first, I’ll have a pint of best bitter.”

He put the phone down.

A genius has been at work, he thought. Called to the embassy? Left by taxi? One of ours, no doubt, provided by Section 11. I wonder if they’ll ever arrive. Or get back.

Betty rang on the secure line.

“You may soon get a phone call,” she announced.

“I’ve just had one.”

“You’ve got a few hours.”

“I need days, if not weeks.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She rang off.

A genius at work.

The genius got on the phone to James Piper.

“I’ve just sent Lee Kwang-sun and Cheong Sung on a wild goose chase to their Embassy, so that Maurice can have an hour or so with Choi Yong on his own,” announced Betty.

“What sort of wild goose chase?” asked James.

“I said it was a family thing they wanted to talk about.”

“Not true?”

“Pure invention. The Embassy won’t have the slightest idea why they turn up – when they do. I sent them in a Section 11 taxi, and told them to take their time.”

“So why tell me?” enquired James.

“It occurred to me after they’d gone, that we may be able to get rid of them both for ever.”

“Explain.”

“Well you know there’s been an almighty toot about North Korea crashing Sony’s web-site in the States – it’s been in all the papers, although I expect you’ve had special briefings.”

“I have actually. It was done by Bureau 21 of the Korean military’s spy agency, which happens to be staffed mainly by computer graduates.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Betty.

“So what! The States has already counter attacked, so we’re told. They have somehow ‘fried’ North Korea’s system, and they are now totally cut off from the world in terms of the web. There is also a theory going around that it could have been the Chinese, trying to cool tempers in Pyongyang, but personally I don’t believe it.”

“The point is that most of those Bureau 21 graduates are from the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, where I work when I’m over there. That’s what!”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“We had two students here from North Korea doing a full-time degree course in computer engineering, which included identifying weaknesses in computer systems that could be used by hackers. They were sent home soon after the cyber-attack on American.”

“I remember – it was it the papers.”

“Well, there are two more of them over here. Now! Still! At this University!”

“What!”

“Lee and Cheong are studying computer science back home, and continuing their studies while they’re here polishing up their English. I wondered if you thought it appropriate for this country still to be training people like that, so that they can go home and – ‘fry’, I think you said, the computer systems of our allies, not least America. We have the perfect excuse to get rid of both of them for ever, and leave the field clear for Maurice to deal with Choi Yong.”

“You’re a genius!” shouted James. “When will they arrive at their Embassy, do you think?”

“Twenty minutes, probably.”

“Get on to your contact at Section 11 and give them orders from me that their taxi is to break down in traffic, and not get fixed until I say so. I’ll brief ‘C’ immediately, and with any luck those two can go to their embassy and from there onto the next plane home.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

Section 11 was more than happy to oblige.

Within minutes, their cab had broken down on the M25. It had been taking the long way round to Hendon, anyway ‘to miss traffic’. It would sit there on the hard shoulder until another S.11 vehicle turned up. This would be a local garage breakdown truck, they said, which they just happened to have in their Clerkenwell garage.

“We can play this game for as long as you like,” Betty was told. “Just say the word when you want your passengers delivered.”

It didn’t take Sir Geoffrey Sefton long to arrange a deportation order. The UK had quite legitimate grounds for getting rid of the two students, as they had the other two.

The United States was delighted when they were told.

Maurice Northcot had reserved a table in a discrete alcove downstairs at The Tavern, and by the time of their meeting, Yong knew that his fellow students were to be immediately deported, and told Northcot about it excitedly.

“I know that other full-time student colleagues from North Korea were told to leave after the Sony hacking incident, but it never occurred to us that Lee and Cheong could also be returned home. I can’t think how anyone could have arranged that,” said Yong, puzzled, “but sad though I am to see my colleagues return so suddenly, it does now mean that I am free to meet you whenever I like.”

“Providing your Embassy doesn’t have other ideas.”

“I suppose they could cancel my visit and send me home early, but they have no reason and it would look bad.”

“Looking bad, as you put it, doesn’t often seem to bother your government, but you need to be on your guard. They didn’t arrange your visit; we did, so they can’t just send you home without a fuss. Only we could do that, as we did with your colleagues.”

Yong frowned and looked closely at Northcot.

“How could you know that my friends are being sent home? I have only just heard myself. You almost sound as if you know things that you should not know.”

Maurice shrugged.

“It’s in the evening papers,” he lied. “Anyway, tell me again why you need to stay here, even though your chums have gone.”

“I feel sorry for Kwang-sun. He really did want to stay, and his father really does work as a technician at the nuclear plant.”

“But he never said anything about his father being prepared to give us information,” Maurice reminded him.

“And I have never said anything about my Uncle, either, although I am sure he would want to help you. If I am allowed to stay, I can pass information from him to your Government. I need you to help me meet the right people.”

“Who, for instance.”

“Before I can tell you that, tell me if you would be able to contact people, say, in your Foreign Office.”

“I suppose so. Who do you want to contact in particular? Do you have the name of an official in the Foreign Office?” quizzed Northcot.

“Yes. I do. A man my uncle met while he was here, and who he trusts. My Uncle has told me to contact him specially. I have a message for him and for nobody else.”

“You’re asking a lot of me,” said Northcot. “You know I’m just an office worker who you happened to meet by accident in this pub one lunch time.”

This time, Choi Yong looked quizzically at Northcot.

“And I am not sure I entirely believe that,” said the young man. “You have been more than helpful already – more than a total stranger would be to a foreign student from a hostile country. And you seem to know more than you should.”

Northcot shrugged, and got to his feet.

“Don’t go,” pleaded Yong.

“Another beer?” asked Northcot with a grin, as he made for the bar.

“I thought you were leaving me,” said a relieved Yong when Maurice returned. “I have no one else to ask for help.”

“Only Miss Ogden,” replied Northcot.

“How do you know about her? How do you know my tutor’s name?” asked an astonished Choi Yong.

“I may have even more to tell you before long,” said Northcot mysteriously. “But first tell me the name of the man you need to see.”

“I hope I can trust you,” said Yong.

“You already have.”

Choi Yong pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, and flattened it on the table in front of them.

He tapped the photo.

“That man,” he said.

Northcot looked closely at the screwed up picture, and turned to Yong.

“Do you know who this is? His name?”

“Yes, I do. My uncle told me.”

“Tell me who your uncle thinks it is. Give me the man’s name.”

“His name is Lee Cooper. My Uncle met him at your military nuclear establishment.”

“And how did your uncle get this photograph?”

“I imagine it was given to him before he left, as a souvenir.”

“A dangerous souvenir to have, don’t you think? Did he tell you he was given it before he left?”

“As a matter of fact, he didn’t. He said someone in his village gave it to him, someone sent from England. Neither of us believed it – we both thought it was a trap. But he knew it was the man he had met and trusted, and he simply gave it to me and told me to find Mr. Cooper, and to give him a message.”

He looked closely at Choi Yong and said nothing.

Northcot sighed.

“Do you realize that your uncle has sent you on a very dangerous mission? That even now your life could be at risk?”

Yong paled.

“From now on, you must take the utmost care during the rest of your stay here. We shall do our best to see that no harm comes to you, but you must for ever be alert.”

“Why are you saying this?” whispered Yong.

“Because from now on you must trust no one, even here, as in your own country, and as your uncle has often said.”

Yong looked ashen.

“Who are you?”

“I will explain everything later, but you may trust me, as you already have,” said Maurice Northcot. “And you may trust Mr. Cooper when you meet him.”

Maurice tapped the photograph.

“That is Mr. Cooper, with your uncle at our weapons establishment at Aldermaston.”

“You know him?” gasped a disbelieving Yong.

“He’s an old friend of mine. We work closely together. We both work for the Foreign Office.”

He looked closely at Yong.

“And by the way,” he said in Chosŏnŏ, “I speak your language, and read Chŏsongŭl. I understood the message you left on the card.”

“You said you were just a clerk, but you are from the Foreign Office. You have deceived me, and I trusted you.”

“Now you just listen to me, young man,” said Northcot sternly. “As you said yourself, you are a complete stranger to me from a foreign and hostile country. We have to be sure about you before we can do anything to help you. We have to check on what you say, check on who you are, where you come from, who you know and all that. It would be too easy for you to have been an imposter and a spy sent specially to gain information from us. We had to check on you before we could trust you.”

“And now you do?”

“More than we did, shall we say.”

Northcot pointed to the photograph.

“This helped. You could only have got this from one of three sources, and the most likely one is from your uncle.”

“He gave it to me just before I left. He told me to find the man, Lee Cooper, and to give him a special message. My uncle trusted Mr. Cooper.”

“So he should. I hope now that you trust me, too.”

Yong shook his head in disbelief.

“There is so much I do not understand, and cannot explain. But if you know Mr. Cooper and work with him, then I begin to trust you as well. It is such a coincidence that we met here in the first place.”

“It was no coincidence – it was arranged. There is a lot of explaining to do, I can understand that, and I shall explain everything to you in good time. Do you now trust me enough for me to give your message to Mr. Cooper?”

Choi Yong thought for a minute.

“Frankly, no.”

“Well I can’t say I altogether blame you,” admitted Maurice. “So we had better arrange a meeting. And now you’re free of your two companions, we can arrange that at any time, can’t we.”

“I shall have to ask Miss Ogden,” protested Yong.

“Of course. How silly of me! So why don’t we arrange to meet here at lunchtime on, shall we say next Thursday – subject to Miss Ogden agreeing, of course. I’ll book a table now, and bring Mr. Cooper with me. Then you can pass on your message.”

“That’s a long time,” protested Yong. “Why not sooner?”

“For all I know, Mr. Cooper might be abroad or busy or something,” replied Northcot. He looked at Choi Yong and smiled.

“As I said, we have a lot of explaining to do. Let me start now.”

He beckoned to a couple standing at the far end of the bar.

Lee Cooper and Betty Ogden strolled across to join them.

“Now do you trust me?” asked Northcot.

“I don’t know what to believe any more,” said Yong. “I recognise you, Mr. Cooper, from the photograph, but Miss Ogden as well?”

Lee Cooper shook the student’s hand.

“Nice to meet you at last,” he said. “I believe you have a message for me?”

Choi Yong looked around him.

“I do,” he said.

He lent forward.

“My uncle Dr. Choi Shin told me to tell you that he will have all the information you want in a few weeks, but that you must arrange to collect it from him. He has already started to gather it together.”

Yong sat back.

“Thank you,” said Cooper. “It is the message I was hoping for. Your uncle is a brave man, and I was hoping and indeed half expecting that this would be his decision.”

“He thought a lot of you, Mr. Cooper, and after his visit here, almost regarded you as a friend.”

Yong looked at Cooper, Northcot and Betty Ogden in turn.

“There is one other thing you must know, which he did not ask me to tell you. And that is that he has radiation sickness and cancer. He is a dying man. I may never see him again.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Betty.

“That’s terrible news,” said Northcot.

“Quite awful,” agreed Cooper. “We got on so well together, almost from the time we met. Are you still in touch with your uncle, even now you are over here?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good news.”

“But as I just said, Yong, you too are in danger now, and must be alert,” said Northcot. “We have people who can help to protect you while you are here, and we shall get them in place immediately. You will probably not notice them – they are specially trained.

But they will be there, in the background 24 hours a day until you leave. If you do notice anyone suspicious, you must let us know immediately – I will give a means to communicate with us securely.”

“Kind of you,” replied Yong, “but I am also now concerned about my own safety.”

“Why?”

“I fear that they will send after me, and force me home – or worse. Now that Cheong Sung has left, there is no official to watch over me. The Embassy will send someone, I am sure.”

“We will take care of that, as I said. Leave it to us to make sure that you are kept safe for as long as you are here, as we made sure your Uncle was protected while he was here,” said Cooper. “Always assuming of course that you wish to remain here, perhaps to help us further. Or, if you would prefer to return home immediately, then we can arrange that too. As always in this country, you are free to choose. We shall not keep you here against your will.”

“I would prefer to stay, at least for the remainder of my visit. My uncle really wanted to stay for ever to help you, but dared not, and never told you. I can at least stay for a few weeks longer.”

“Good,” said Cooper.

He turned to Betty.

“Who did you talk to at Section 11 when you arranged the taxi?”

“The number two there – chap called Nick Marsden. Very helpful, he was.”

“Get on to him again then, and tell them about Mr. Choi here. From now on, he’s theirs – 24/7 – until further notice. They know what to do.”

“Consider it done.”

“But we now need to work out how to get this information from your uncle”, said Northcot to Choi Yong. “Perhaps you can help us with planning that if you really are happy to stay here for the rest of your planned visit, and to co-operate with us.”

Yong nodded. “But because of my uncle’s illness, you may not have much time,” he said. “On the other hand, he told me that it would take some weeks for him to get all the information together that you want.”

“We obviously need to think about this in more depth, and this is not the right time or place to do it. I suggest we go our separate ways now, and meet somewhere else later,” said Cooper.

They all agreed, finished their drinks, and left The Tavern. Betty and Yong went back to the University; Cooper and Northcot to their Lambeth office.

“It would be nice if we could meet the next time in more formal surroundings, perhaps here, in my office,” said Cooper later, after he had briefed James Piper. “But Mr. Choi wants to complete his studies here with you, Betty, as planned, and act as if nothing has happened, even though he is no longer inhibited by the presence of his two colleagues. In any case, it wouldn’t be a good idea for him to be seen going into the HQ of MI6, so perhaps we could arrange to meet this weekend at somewhere other than The Tavern. Any ideas?”

“How about the Science Museum?” suggested Northcot. “That would fit in with his studies OK, so no one would be suspicious if he was spotted by someone from his embassy in the event that Section 11 missed them. And although it’s always crowded, we could chat quite freely while looking at the exhibits, or find a table in the tea room.”

“That sounds a good idea,” said Betty. “I know the place quite well - we can easily get lost once inside.”

Cooper nodded. “Agreed, then.”

"Will it look at all out of place if you bring him, Betty?" asked Northcot. "Or should you have a whole crocodile of students with you."

"No problem," she replied. "If I'm noticed, the authorities will be impressed that I am prepared to do a bit of overtime to help one of our foreign students!"

The minute he heard, Sir Geoffrey Sefton got on the secure phone to Jack Salisbury.

"We have the message we've been waiting for from the student," he announced.

"And?"

"And Dr. Choi Shin is already collecting the information he thinks we should have and will need."

"Excellent," replied Salisbury. "Well done, 'C'. Come to my office and let's talk about it."

"We are satisfied that his nephew is with us," said Sefton when he got there. "Gave all the right answers. Ticked all the boxes, as they say."

"On our side then? And his uncle?"

"Proper identification, and all that."

"The photographs provided by our two soldier friends?"

"One of them. It has to be the only source. Choi didn't take a copy with him – he wasn't given one before he left."

"Plan 'A' wasn't such a tragic failure after all then."

"Quite."

"I must tell the General," he paused, "in good time."

"Any news of the other man, by the way?"

"The last I heard, he had got across the border into China. Should be in Shanghai in a couple of days or so, and then on the home run with any luck."

"I'm pleased about that. It would be nice to meet him sometime. A man of great courage and confidence – unlike myself."

"If you would like to meet him, it could be arranged."

"I suppose lunch at my Club wouldn't be a good idea?"

"Not really. He would feel out of place."

"I suppose you're right."

"Why not meet him at his club instead? Pay an official visit to the SAS Headquarters at Hereford. Meet them all."

"That's a good idea."

"I'll get Colonel Seb Owen to arrange it."

"I'd better tell the General about that, too."

Sefton nodded his agreement.

"However, as always in these affairs," he said, "there is a complication about North Korea."

"Which is?"

"Choi is a dying man – radiation sickness and cancer."

"How long do we have?"

"No idea. But he told his nephew that it would in any case take some time to gather the information together for us."

"How long?"

"Weeks, probably."

"It occurs to me, then, that we should perhaps get someone over there quickly, if necessary to wait for the good doctor to complete his work, until it's ready for collection."

“Might be sensible.”

“One of yours this time, Geoffrey?”

It was a statement, rather than a question.

“I have someone in mind,” replied ‘C’.

“Your man from Jakarta? Is he home yet?”

“He set up the meetings with Dr. Choi’s nephew.”

“How very convenient!”

“Good planning, I call it!”

“To be expected, of course. Is the man up to it?”

“Widely travelled. But this will not be easy. We can get him in without too much bother, but it will be a different matter getting him out again.”

“And that’s the important bit,” said Salisbury. “Getting him out with the information we need.”

“Exactly. I have every confidence, though – he’s about our most experienced field operator. But it could be his last mission, if he gets out.”

“It will be if he doesn’t,” said Salisbury. “Sorry – I shouldn’t have said that. But why his last?”

“I get the feeling that he’s had enough, and could do with a break. We have a desk lined up for him if he wants it – senior post, reporting directly to me.”

“I should meet him, too.”

“He’ll be at your briefing.”

“Ah, of course. Good.”

“I shan’t introduce him to others, though. It’s best he remains anonymous.”

Jack Salisbury thought for a moment.

“Anything more from the Americans?” he asked.

“No. One of their top CIA men is still over here, sniffing around, but we think he’s now convinced that the man they shot in North Korea wasn’t anyone special, and certainly not one of ours.”

“Just an excuse for them to be beastly to the West?”

“Exactly.”

“It’s what we’ve said all along, right.”

“Exactly.”

“As you know, the Americans are also denying that they switched off the North Korean internet, although we know they did so. We are supporting their story about the Chinese having done it, to cool the North down a bit. Most of the Pyongyang internet servers are routed through China. By the way, they were equally delighted when we chucked out two more students.”

“So we’re more or less back on an even keel, are we, so far as they’re concerned?”

“Exactly. We are both reading from the same page, as they say.”

“I suppose we shall have to share things with them one day, when we know what Choi has to offer.”

“That will be something to look forward to, almost. They were keen to turn him and failed.”

“Exactly.”

Salisbury sighed, and wandered over to his office window.

“I suppose there’s nothing for it now,” he said, looking out. “I shall have to brief people.”

‘C’ nodded.

“But no politicians.”

“Certainly not. Only those people who need to know.”

“And can be trusted not to talk.”

“No notes, no paper, no i-Pads, no phones and that sort of stuff”

“I’ll get chums from MI5 to sweep the briefing room, just to be sure, and be on duty outside to make sure nobody takes anything in that they shouldn’t.”

“Especially phones. My briefing will inevitably contain ‘strap’ intelligence which we normally only share with people at the very top who really must know, so we shall need the highest security.”

“Exactly. As a matter of interest, we have actually traced a few mobile phones recently, too close to home for comfort I have to admit, that had been converted into listening devices.”

“Exactly my point. We can trust nobody these days.”

Salisbury stretched and rubbed his eyes.

“I shall need maps, photographs and that sort of thing,” he said.

“Leave that to me,” said Sefton, reassuringly.

“Thank you Geoffrey,” replied Salisbury. “You know I don’t like doing this sort of thing. Not much good in front of people.”

“I know it’s not something you enjoy,” said Sefton. “But you always do it very well, so don’t worry.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll help with the script, too if you like.”

“You know I don’t like using notes. I prefer to learn my lines, more or less. But an outline would be very helpful.”

Salisbury rubbed his forehead.

“I shall need some science tuition, too. I need to sound knowledgeable about nuclear bombs and things, and how they work. As you know, I’m a science man, not ‘arts’, but I’m not up to speed on nuclear weapons.”

“I’ll get a briefing team together for you, and I’ll make sure it includes Lee Cooper, who was at the forefront of persuading Dr. Choi to co-operate during his visit over here. He’s at Aldermaston.”

“Good thinking. He can tell me a bit about the Doctor as well.”

“Anything else while I’m here?”

Salisbury looked at his watch.

“Only lunch,” he said. “Why don’t you join me at the Club? We can talk a bit more over a decent cut of beef or something.”

13.

THE BRIEFING

The Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation was getting a bit fidgety – nervous, almost. He should have been full of confidence, given his position, and the fact that he was used to briefing, and being briefed by, the top security, intelligence and military figures in the country. But today was a bit different. Today, they were all together, and he was the only briefer.

The Joint Intelligence Committee was there, except for a few members who did not need to know and had no interest in his briefing. People like the International Development Department and the one that dealt with Business and skills and such like – nothing to do with

them. Others, like the armed services Chiefs of Staff had been called in specially, in spite of the fact that the Chief of the Defence Intelligence Staff was there – he was a member of the JIC anyway, and they weren't, except by invitation. They had all been called in because of the gravity and importance of what he was about to tell them, and he knew that he had to be sufficiently convincing in what he said and what he proposed, to get them all behind his audacious and risky plan, without exception. Unless he was able to convince every one of them about the need for action along the lines he was about to propose, he believed there could be a considerable risk of nuclear conflict.

By nature, Jack Salisbury was not terribly self-confident. His demeanour was almost apologetic. It was obvious to listen to him that he knew what he was talking about and was on top of the job, but his manner was almost hesitant, as if he was afraid of lecturing to his betters. But in his field, there were no betters. His CBE was recognition of that, but he had no Knighthood, like most of his peer group. Offered but refused. He did not want the limelight; just to be left alone to get on with his job.

He was the first to admit that he had been a rather odd choice. Not so long ago, the Cabinet Secretary was automatically Chairman of the JIC, until that unfortunate time when they discovered that a recent incumbent was working for the Soviets (*read 'Spy People'*). That had caused a hell of a rumpus and a major re-organisation. It had also severely upset the Americans, who were now understandably not so keen to share information with us as they had been. With any luck, he could change that.

But now, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Organisation was also Head of the JIC and Professional Head of Intelligence Analysis. So he had three jobs really, all based in the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Secretary was a member of the JIC still, but no longer in charge. Jack Salisbury was. An odd choice, many had thought, but his background included years in the Secret Intelligence Service and in military intelligence, so there was no question about his professional qualifications for the post. But he was far from the polished civil servant who many would have expected to take that sort of post.

His background was in science rather than the arts, unlike most of his classical trained colleagues. That almost explained his appearance. He was not a tall, imposing figure, but a bit, shall we say, on the heavy side. He never admitted to being overweight, simply four inches too short. In a scruffy sort of way, he was always smartly dressed, but not in the pin-stripe sense of the word. Shirt and tie – yes. But an old tweed jacket was his preferred choice, and it was a long time since his trousers had been blessed with a crease. Being a bachelor probably had something to do with that.

But there he stood, before the nation's great and good and powerful, waiting for the last invited member to take his seat.

He preferred to stand. He wanted the freedom to wander around the oval conference table in one of the Cabinet Office briefing rooms, and he had to draw attention to special features on the slides he was about to show them, in any case. And he preferred to wave a pointer about rather than use one of those modern electronic gadgets that threw an illuminated arrow on to the screen.

Eventually, his audience was assembled and seated. In spite of the fact that he reported directly to the Prime Minister, no Ministers or politicians had been invited. They would panic, cause dissent and disagreement, and chatter afterwards, putting security at risk.

Salisbury looked around those at the table. Cabinet Secretary, Heads of MI5 ('M') and MI6 ('C'), Chief of the Defence Staff and Chief of the Defence Intelligence Staff, Permanent Secretaries from the Foreign Office and Home Office, and so on. The Military were in uniform. Come to that, he thought, so were the civil servants, two of whom were in identical pinstripe suits. Marks and Spencer, he had no doubt.

The Cabinet Secretary invited him to begin.

Head bowed slightly, as if in thought, he started to amble around the large table, scratching his head of thinning hair. He shoved his round spectacles back from the end of his nose. No need for introductions; he knew them and they knew him.

“First of all I must ask you, *on no account*,” he glared around the table, “to share any of the information I am about to give you with any Ministers or politicians or even civil servants outside this room, even in your own Department.”

He brushed his hand across his sparse hair.

“We cannot afford *any* breach of security by their chattering and twittering, whatever that is. After the discovery made about a recent predecessor of yours,” he looked directly at the Cabinet Secretary, “we cannot be too careful. That is why you were all – um – asked to leave your phones and other paraphernalia outside. I hope I make myself absolutely clear.”

They all signified agreement.

He turned to face his audience from one end of the table.

“Gentlemen, I am here to tell you about a very disturbing and potentially extremely dangerous series of developments which have been taking place over the past few months. As some of you will know, we in the Security and Intelligence Service have been watching these developments very closely indeed, and – um – have now decided that it is time we shared our concerns with you. I do so because most of you are in a position to do something about our – shall we say – understanding of recent events, and because we now believe that we have the ability to take appropriate action.”

He walked towards the far end of the room, where there was a large back-projection screen. He picked up his beloved pointer, and looked closely at the Chief of Defence Staff, who sat in front of him.

“Before I even begin to go into any detail, I know that there are many in this room who will say ‘*mission impossible*’ the moment I mention North Korea.”

The Chief of Defence Staff and one or two others in uniform turned to face him, frowning and nodding in agreement of his forecast of their reaction.

“I can reassure you,” he continued, “that I do not have in mind any form of military action. At least - um - not yet.”

He again scratched his head and attempted to adjust his glasses once more.

“What I have in mind initially involves civilian members of the Government,” he said, looking again at the Cabinet Secretary.

He finally reached the screen and turned to ask some dis-embodied official somewhere, “Can I have the first ...”

The first slide appeared on the screen as if by magic.

“Ah,” he said, waving his pointer at it.

“What you see here is a recent high-definition satellite picture of an area of North Korea. This,” he pointed, “is roughly the Chinese border. Pyongyang is way down here in the south,” another wave, “and this is one of the notorious concentration camps. Between the two...”

He turned to the official again.

“Could we have...”

“Ah! This enlargement shows an area between the two. This, gentlemen, is the Punggye-ri nuclear test site in Kilju County, near the town of Mantapsan, where underground tests were carried out in 2006, 2009, and again, *we think*, in February 2013. Nobody is quite sure about the 2013 - um – explosion.”

He looked about him.

“The blast,” he continued, strolling down the table behind the seated dignitaries, “was certainly large enough to have been a nuclear weapon, but it could also have been a conventional explosion designed to imitate a nuclear weapon; designed to frighten the West,

in fact, and especially the Americans. This – how shall I put it – *‘theory’* – is explained by the fact that, two days after the explosion, no nuclear radiation had been detected by either the Chinese, the Japanese or the South Koreans, or anyone else.”

He looked again at the screen at the far end of the briefing room, and waved a finger in the air.

“However,” he continued, “in April that year, South Korea reported activity at Punggye-ri suggesting that preparations were being made for a fourth underground test. Our own observations led us to the same conclusion, but in the end, no test took place. This activity has recently increased, and we have concluded that the tunnelling which we observed was for a long term development project.”

He turned to face the assembled delegates.

“*We now know what that is,*” he said, for him, slightly dramatically.

He ran his fingers through his hair, and pointed to the screen ahead of him. A new slide appeared.

“That activity has continued since it was first reported, and, as you would expect, we have been monitoring progress closely, by satellite, and – um – other means at our disposal. This is the latest satellite image. You will see the signs of recent activity. New roads,” his pointer tapped the screen, “new buildings, and what appears to be the entrances to several additional tunnels.”

He turned again, but before he could ask, a further slide appeared on the screen, showing the work in greater detail.

“Over here,” he pointed again, “we see the beginnings of a new railway line being built into the site. This will connect to the existing system near Punggye-ri station,” he again tapped the screen, “which eventually links into China. The existing infrastructure is being modernised – in many places rebuilt and upgraded – to cater for what is obviously expected to be an increase in traffic, which will probably be considerably heavier than at present. A good deal of freight, we imagine, on an otherwise lightly used passenger line. Bearing in mind the mountainous terrain, remarkable progress is already being made.”

He turned away from the screen.

“I need hardly tell you,” he paused and smoothed his hair again, “that the labour force for much of this construction work, especially the railway, comes from – um - the nearby concentration camp at Hwasong. It is a penal-labour camp.”

He moved away, head bowed slightly, as if seeking inspiration from his shoes. He had no notes.

“Camp 16, in fact. Home, if I may call it that, to some 20,000 souls, who are imprisoned for life with no chance of ever being released.”

Another thoughtful scratch.

“All this is reminiscent of the Burma-Siam railway built by prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War.”

He looked back at the screen.

“In this case, however, the bodies of those who die are taken by fellow prisoners, under guard, to be burnt. The ashes are collected, and – um – used as fertiliser.”

He looked round at his audience.

“These prisoners have committed ‘anti-revolutionary and anti-party’ crimes. They and their families, who are probably innocent of anything at all apart from being related to a prisoner, are exploited on hard, dangerous and deadly work like mining, logging and agriculture, and, according to defectors, have been forced in the past to dig tunnels and underground facilities in areas exposed to nuclear radiation. I digress, Gentlemen, only to remind you of the brutal dictatorship we are dealing with.”

He turned back to the screen, waving his pointer vaguely towards it.

"I invite you to look closely at these photographs," he said, beginning yet another circuit of the conference table. "What we believe you are seeing, Gentlemen, is one of North Korea's newest nuclear establishments, under construction, on the old test site."

Jack Salisbury turned and walked slowly back towards the end of the table, adjusting his glasses. He turned to his audience.

"Except that we don't believe."

He paused for effect.

"We know!"

He looked around the table.

"What we do believe, however, is that this new facility is specifically designed to test a new means of enriching Uranium 235, and build nuclear weapons – all on the same site."

"What makes you think that?" asked Sir Len Watkins, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence.

"Several things," he replied. "As you would expect, the place is alive with Chinese people. Not just building or construction engineers and others of that sort, or even nuclear experts, although there are plenty of both it seems. We have information, however, which suggests that many of the Chinese people at the site are also weapons experts. Reliable information, I have to say. We even have the names of a few of them."

"How on earth did you get that?" asked the Home Office man.

Salisbury looked around, fidgeting with his hair again, seemingly to assess whether or not he could trust them all. He supposed he could, or they wouldn't be there.

"We have available to us in the SIS access to some of the most modern technology in the world, especially the world of espionage. I will give you no details. Those of you who need to know about it already do so."

He looked at the Head of MI6.

"I will simply say that, for some time now, we have been able to monitor - um - several sources of communication. Around the world. Not just tapping mobile phones or e-mails. We have available to us the output from several highly sophisticated and sensitive satellites. Not all those satellites are ours, by the way, but GCHQ is getting quite good at - er - how shall I put this; cyber warfare, I believe is the popular description."

He scratched and began another circuit of the table.

He looked again at the screen, still showing the last slide.

"We have far better images than this," he waved his pointer. "And we have listened in to conversations taking place on the ground."

He looked around at his audience, sitting in stunned silence.

"So I am reasonably sure of what I am talking about."

He rested his hands on the back of the chair taken by Sir William Forsyth, Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office.

"We all know, I am sure, that North Korea is said already to possess a few viable nuclear weapons, and some short range delivery systems. We believe the weapons to be of Chinese origin, and we also believe that North Korea's allies across the border are helping with the construction, at other sites, of the facilities needed to enrich uranium. Once those facilities are complete, North Korea will be able to construct its own nuclear weapons."

He stopped at the head of the table.

"Perhaps I could briefly explain, for the benefit of those who may not know, the difficult, expensive, lengthy and technically challenging process of uranium enrichment by the use of centrifuges, which, until the advent of inexpensive, high-precision computer-controlled machining equipment, were out of the reach of most countries."

He adjusted his glasses, and, head bowed slightly, set off on another stroll behind his attentive audience.

“Uranium oxide contains two isotopes of uranium: U-235 and U-238. What you need if you want to make a bomb or fuel a nuclear power plant is U-235, but this forms only about one percent of the oxide. The rest is U-238, which is no use. So you need to increase the amount of U-235 somehow and separate it from the U-238, which is slightly heavier than the other isotope. The process of concentrating the U-235 is called enrichment, and centrifuges are a central part of that process.”

Salisbury looked around at his audience, as if to seek encouragement to continue.

“The first step is to turn the oxide in a gas called uranium hexafluoride. This is then spun at very high speed in the centrifuge, which creates a force thousands of times more powerful than the force of gravity. The heavier U-238 atoms tend to move out toward the walls of the centrifuge, and the U-235 atoms tend to stay more toward the center of it.

“Although it is only a slight difference in concentrations, when you extract the gas from the center of the centrifuge, it has slightly more U-235 than it did before. This process is repeated thousands of times, until a gas that is highly enriched in U-235 is created. At a uranium enrichment plant, thousands of centrifuges are chained together in long cascades. At the end of this, you have uranium hexafluoride gas containing a high concentration of U-235 atoms. It is a relatively simple process to turn the uranium hexafluoride gas back into uranium metal.”

“The creation of these centrifuges is a huge technological challenge, until recently, as I said, out of the reach of most countries. They must spin at a rate of 100,000 rpm, which means they must have very light, yet strong and well-balanced rotors, spinning on high-speed bearings, usually magnetic to reduce friction.”

He stood behind the Head of MI6.

“I have bored you with this technical diatribe because we all need to have some understanding of the enrichment process, if we are to understand and appreciate the importance of what I have to say next.”

He reached across the table between the Chief of Defence Staff and the Head of MI6, who were seated next to one another.

“May I?” he asked.

He took a glass of water and sipped thoughtfully.

“Centrifuges are expensive and slow,” he said. “You may be forgiven for thinking that there has to be a better way.”

He replaced the glass.

“Well. There is.”

He looked around.

“China has developed it, and means to exploit it. At Punggye-ri, in North Korea.”

He shouldered his pointer, rather like a rifle, and meandered slowly back towards the screen at the end of the conference room.

“I can no longer bore you with technical details, because we do not – as yet – have access to them. Suffice it to say that the Chinese equipment consists of large pressure vessels of some kind, encased in very high powered electro-magnets, rather like those used at CERN in Switzerland where they discovered the Higgs Boson. The flasks contain gaseous uranium hexafluoride again, which is bombarded by a concentration of high-energy fiber laser beams.

“By some combination of particle physics and nuclear chemistry, the Uranium 235 is much more quickly concentrated and more easily extracted.”

He paused and glanced at his audience.

“In very large quantities.”

By now, the panel of experts before him was looking increasingly concerned.

“The Chinese, we know, have built at least two prototypes of these – um – machines,” continued Salisbury.

“The first was tested in a remote area of the country, and exploded, killing and injuring many hundreds of workers and local villagers, and spreading radioactive waste for some hundreds of miles downwind. The second prototype was more successful, in that it did not blow up. But it seems to have failed in other ways, similarly spreading clouds of radioactive waste into the atmosphere. However, our understanding is that before doing so, it did manage to produce a limited amount of enriched U 235.”

He stabbed at the screen, still showing the view of the Punggye-ri.

“It is planned to construct a further prototype here. If it fails, the prisoners of camp 16 will suffer even more than they do at present – together, no doubt, with a few Chinese experts.”

He turned away from the screen.

“Hence the new roads, the new tunnels and the extended and modernized railway link to China, which will carry the equipment needed to build the new processor. This will not be completed in a hurry. It is mountainous and difficult terrain, as you can see,” another stab at the screen, “even for – er, um - slave labour.

“If it succeeds, however, as the Chinese confidently expect, it will be put into full productive use, to supply both the North Korean and the Chinese nuclear programs.”

He looked around at his audience.

“I leave you to judge the consequences of that, gentlemen.”

Some shook their heads. All of them looked increasingly concerned.

“Do the Americans know about this?” asked the Foreign Office man, Sir William Forsythe.

“I shall be very surprised if they do not,” replied Salisbury. “But they will not have the details of how the new system of enrichment works. They would give a King’s Ransom to find out.”

“As we would, I am sure,” said Sir William.

“If we could discover the details and brief them,” said Salisbury, looking at the Cabinet Secretary, “we could immediately undo the enormous damage done to our relationship by the - um- unfortunate behaviour of your predecessor.”

Salisbury looked around him.

“And we can get those details, gentlemen. Indeed, we almost have them already.”

“How can that be possible?” asked the Chief of the Defence Staff.

“Because,” he almost whispered as if even he could hardly believe it, “we have a man on the ground, at the site.”

“*WHAT?*” There was a murmur of disbelief

“The agent, shall I describe him, is effectively a defector, although he has declined our offer of asylum. He is an English-speaking North Korean nuclear physicist who has become so disillusioned with the state of affairs in his country, that he is willing, it seems, to put at mortal risk his own life and that of all his family to share with us the information to which he has access.”

He turned again, looking at those seated at the table in front to him, smoothing his hair as he began yet another circuit of the oval table.

“Which brings me, gentlemen,” he looked around him, “to the point of my briefing.”

He stopped and lent against the chair at which the Head of MI6 – ‘C’ – was seated.

“You will all know that there is no such thing as freedom of movement in North Korea. Our man, who is in a senior managerial cum technical position at Punggye-ri, has in his possession the plans of the site, and detailed technical drawings of the new Chinese enrichment plant which is being built. He is so fearful of the international consequences of this project should it eventually succeed and which his research is helping to develop, that he has decided to give this country the details so that we may – with our allies, of course –

produce effective counter-measures. He has started to copy this technical information in detail, mostly on to 4-terabyte USB memory sticks.

"They are for us."

He paused, and rested his hands on the back a chair opposite Sir Geoffrey Sefton.

"The problem is that he cannot get them to us," he said.

"If you all agree that they are worth having," he looked around him, "then we have to collect."

There was no dissent.

He looked directly at the Head of MI6.

"One for you then, I think, Geoffrey, as we have discussed."

"Collecting our trophy, if I may call it that, will not be an easy operation, gentlemen. As you will have gathered, both the planning and execution will be difficult, but if we do not make the effort, then the information currently available to us will be passed to another. Probably the Americans. Frankly, I believe this country should get there first if humanly possible. After all, we have a head start.

"I should tell, you, however, that we have already suffered what some colleagues regard as something of a setback. I regard it however, as a success."

He looked at 'C'.

"I took the liberty, as I hinted, of discussing this all this with Geoffrey at an earlier meeting, since the planning of our recovery operation will be down to him, and the execution also, no doubt, will fall to his people."

"I must tell you, gentlemen, that we have already made one attempt to make contact with our – um – informant. This was in an attempt to show our resolve and, shall I say, support for his endeavours. We were successful in making contact with him, but he was not sufficiently trustful of our team to pass on any information, which by then he had not even seriously started collecting for us."

Salisbury looked at those before him.

"I am sorry to tell you that we have lost contact with one of our people, although we believe the other – there were two of them – is successfully making his way home. If anything, this emphasises the difficulties which we face. We must now make a renewed effort."

"Could this be a job for our Special Forces?" asked the Chief of the General Staff. "We have had SAS people there in the past, for various reasons."

The Chief of the Defence Intelligence staff shuffled uncomfortably.

"I have to admit, General, that it was our special forces who we sent in a short time ago. It is one of them who is missing."

"But I knew nothing of this," protested CDS, enraged.

"This was a Top Secret mission," said Salisbury, "and it was on my instructions that very few people indeed knew about it. I take full responsibility for not having briefed you."

"We have discussed the possibility of sending them in again, to collect the information," said 'C', "but concluded not. I still have people there as well, in various guises, and we shall not be operating totally without local help, either. Using military resources in many ways would add to the difficulties. There are two major problems, as I see it. One is getting the team in, and the other, far more problematic, is getting them out again with the trophies, I think you called them, Jack."

Salisbury nodded.

"So we shall not be sending in a team," he said. "This will be a one-man operation."

Salisbury looked around at the people seated at the table, and briefly caught Northcot's eye, sitting with a few other officials behind the oval table. They did not acknowledge one another.

“He is our most experienced field officer, who has travelled, shall I say, far and wide on similar missions. He has been fully briefed, and absolutely understands and accepts the risks he will be taking. We are confident that he will succeed.”

“It could be a suicide mission, I hope he realises that,” said Sir William Forsyth from the Foreign Office. “The North Koreans take no prisoners.”

“He knows. He has the advantage of speaking and reading the language, and there are not too many people around who can say that,” said Sefton.

“There is one major factor in our favour,” added Salisbury, “and that is that there is no real urgency in terms of the nuclear development itself. The project, which is just starting, will take many years to complete, so we have time on our side to get the information, analyse it, and plan for whatever action we deem to be necessary.”

He paused to adjust his uncomfortable tie, looking carefully at his audience.

“On the other hand,” he continued, “we must get on with the utmost urgency. Our defector and benefactor, if I may call him that, has contracted radiation sickness, which has recently developed into cancer. He is dying.”

There was silence for a moment.

“I agree that we simply must get hold of this information while there is time and before the Americans do if that is at all possible,” said Forsyth. “It could make a real difference to the success of this mission if they ever get a whiff of what we’re doing. In that case,” he turned to Watkins, “we may very well need to call on some of your SAS people to help out. If you can do so without in any way endangering security, I suggest a bit of contingency planning might be in order, just in case.”

“Agreed,” replied Watkins, turning to the Chief of General staff, who nodded his consent.

Jack Salisbury stretched.

“Some of the planning we did to get your two fellows in there recently will be a good start.”

“But I must warn you, gentlemen,” said ‘C’, “that the Americans are already sniffing around. They sent one of their top CIA men over here only last week following the execution of what the Koreans claimed to be one of their spies.”

“We shall make sure that those of you who need to know are kept in touch with progress,” said Salisbury, winding up his briefing. “Meanwhile, Geoffrey and I will turn our attention to ways and means of retrieving the information which will soon become available to us.”

He looked again at the assembled meeting.

“Finally, please let me emphasise once again and in the strongest possible terms the importance of keeping politicians out of this loop for the time being. At some stage, I suppose I shall probably have to brief one or two Ministers, but we simply must leave that for as long as possible. In the meantime, the slightest whiff of a leak could put this whole operation into jeopardy.”

He looked around him. “Are we all quite clear about that?”

They were.

They collected their mobile phones on the way out.

Maurice Northcot went straight from the briefing to Bourleywood House, in the Cotswolds.

"It's good of you to drive me down, James," he said to Piper. "It's not often I get the boss to take me out in his car for a ride through the British countryside!"

"It's not often I get to visit The House, either," replied the Head of Section 7. "Good chance to do so, since you'll be there. We can talk for a bit, but I must get back after dinner"

"I thought the briefing went rather well, didn't you?" queried Maurice.

"Funny chap, Jack Salisbury," replied Piper. "On top of his job and on top of his subject, but never appears as if he is, somehow."

"Nobody quibbled about anything."

"More than they dared do, probably. There's nobody higher than him to complain too, apart from the PM!"

"It was a bit frightening, in a way, being there with all that lot," said Maurice. "It made me realise that I have to succeed, with all that power behind the operation. I've never been to a briefing quite like that before."

"You'll succeed," countered Piper. "You wouldn't be going if we didn't believe that."

"A couple of weeks down here will be useful though. Brush up my technical Chosõnõ, for a start."

"There's a lot more to it than that. Your whole time there is specially tailored towards you and what you have to do at the end of it. You are the sole centre of attention for those selected to help you and to run the course. There is nobody else."

"I've been on the lecturing side of courses like that before, a couple of times. Who's in charge? Anyone I know?"

"Warren Russell."

"I thought he was Director of the place?"

"He is. That's why he's in charge. Your next bit of travelling is of the utmost importance – I hope you realise that. So we are making sure as best we can that you know everything you need to know and have everything you need to have before you go."

"Sounds like a busy couple of weeks."

"Not just lectures and briefings, either. They will get you kitted out, as well. We've got some really high-tech stuff for you, which I'm interested in seeing for myself. But you'll have a whole two weeks of intensive training, including time with the SAS to get you fit, and some time with Doc Perkins to make sure you are."

"Hope all the new technology works!"

"A lot of it will work without you having to do anything, but there are a couple of new bits of communications stuff you will need to be briefed on. One of them has to be fitted."

Piper looked across at his passenger, and then had to swerve to miss a Pheasant idly crossing the road.

"You nearly caught dinner!" said Maurice.

"They get cocky when they're out of season."

Piper was pleased to see that Northcot appeared to be so relaxed about things. He'd done it all before, of course, but nothing quite like this.

"Does this operation worry you at all – just between us, of course?" asked Piper.

"Not specially." Northcot was almost casual about it. "I know what I have to do, so I shall just get on and do it. Same as always."

Piper shook his head.

“I think going in as a tourist is a neat idea, I must say,” said Northcot. “All open and above board – proper visas, tour guides and everything. Nothing to draw me to their attention. Just an ordinary guy, one of the crowd out for some sightseeing.”

“Until you disappear off their radar, of course.”

“I haven’t quite worked out how to do that yet,” admitted Northcot. “Much will depend on your back-up people already over there, and how they plan that I should collect our trophy when it’s ready. I just hope I don’t have to hang around too long before Dr. Choi gets it all together. Your guys on the ground over there are mostly disaffected locals, didn’t you say? I shall probably have to play it by ear after I’ve got the goods, unless they can lay on some sort of escape route for me.”

“Not a problem?”

“Hope not. I’ve had to do it before, not least on the last trip to Jakarta. Something will turn up. But I must take as much time as possible while I’m down here studying maps and photographs and so on. I shall need to feel that I know the place inside out, and that I’ve lived over there all my life once I get there. The only problem is that although I can speak and read and write their language, I don’t look like one of them. I shall stick out like a sore thumb, if I’m not careful, so once I have collected, I shall probably have to keep out of sight as much as possible.”

“Which means?”

“Which will mean travelling by night, probably, unless there’s a good escape route set up for me with contacts, guides and so on. And even if there is, it might not work, judging from what little I know of the people over there and the regime they live in. It will only take one weak link in the chain to break, and I shall be on my own.”

James frowned.

“My problem is that our contacts over there *are* mostly disaffected locals. They’re not people from here, working from the Embassy or Consulate as they usually are when you travel. I’m sure they will do their best to help us, but we have no direct control over most of them. Some we do. Some are ours sent in from here, and they will be trying to organise the rest, but as you say, one weak link and the whole chain breaks.”

“How will they know when Dr. Choi is ready to deliver, and how will he know that I’m on my way to collect?”

“There is a form of chain-of command, and we shall be able to get word through, but the whole show is a bit shaky, to be honest. We think the people we’re using are all trustworthy, but ...”

Piper sighed.

“Trust nobody, seems to be their own moto.”

“That’s just what I intend to do! Trust nobody! There are a couple of things I need to discuss with you, though.”

“Such as?”

“I gather the plan is that I shall collect the trophy from one of our people already over there – time and place yet to be determined of course. But what happens if we fail to meet up as planned?”

“We shall give you Dr. Choi’s address, just in case.”

“And what makes you think he’ll trust me if I just turn up and knock on his door, always assuming he’s still at home and not in hospital.”

“We shall give you photos of Lee Cooper with yourself and Choi’s nephew, Yong. That should be enough, and we’re making he sure he prepares at least two sets of ‘trophy’ material, in case one gets lost somehow. He’ll know how to recognise you if you have to

contact him direct, but if the current plan works, you'll pick up the stuff from a middle man and you won't need to."

"If I miss the 'drop' and the escape route folds up as well, then I may be away some time!"

He looked across at James Piper.

"Getting out on my own won't be too easy, thinking about it. It might not be a very good idea trying to make my way across China with a pocket full of their nuclear secrets."

"We should know where you are, and will try to arrange help if things go a bit pear-shaped. And you'll have all the documents, passports, visas and papers you could ever need."

"Even if I have to get out through Russia?"

"Even that, although I wouldn't recommend that route. It's only a short border and about as far northeast as you can get from where you'll be operating. But you'll have the right papers if you need them. Forgeries, of course, but they've never been spotted before."

"Thanks. You've no idea how vital that sort of back-up is."

"Your team here will start your briefing by telling you all about your 'holiday'. How it's booked, what the rules are for tourists and all that. It's a firm that specialises in trips to North Korea, and we've used them before a couple of times. Everything seems to work. They're based in Sweden, and used extensively by MUST and SÄPO, the Swedish intelligence agencies."

"I hope they're good at getting tourists back from there as well."

"It's a return package. There were options, but we've booked you home via South Korea, as it happens, rather than through China again."

"Why?"

"It gives you a further set of options, ending up in a friendly country. If everything goes according to plan, you should be back in Seoul in four days, having made the pick-up. We're still working on the details, but getting across from North to South is tricky if you're on your own. The Demilitarised Zone dividing the two countries is claimed to be the most dangerous place on earth."

"So how do tourists manage?"

"They go round it, rather than across it, via Beijing. But with any luck, you'll be able to do the pick-up during part of your planned tour – a brush-pass, or bag-swap or something like that. It should be seamless"

They pulled into the grounds of Bourleywood House, and drove to the tradesmen's entrance at the back of the building, rather than the imposing front entrance used by visitors to the National Trust house and grounds.

"One of your briefers will take you to your room," said Piper, "and if I may, I'll join you for dinner in the mess, with Warren. Your first briefing session is later this evening. After dinner, you'll be in the hands of Warren and the people he's gathered together here. I'll see you again when you get back from your trip, but we shall be able to keep in touch while you're over there. You'll be given a code name, by the way. Dr. Penny."

"Like '*in for a penny, in for a pound*', you mean?"

"Something like that."

"See you for dinner, then."

There was, after all, roast Pheasant on the menu.

The after-dinner session was long one, and the start of one of the most intensive briefings that Maurice had ever experienced. If it did nothing else, it made him realise that this was not a routine mission.

This was special.

And could be his last.

The details he was given about his itinerary were certainly better than any other holiday-maker on his tour would get. They would need to rely on information provided by the tour agency, supplemented by any guide books they could find.

He was given one of those as well, to help him look the part as much as anything, but the rest of his party would not have received anything like the detailed presentation of films, photographs and maps, some of them marked 'Secret', to which Maurice was subjected later that evening.

The briefing session was about the tourist part of the exercise, and he was given a crib sheet at the end of it, marked 'Secret'. It had to be returned and handed in before he left The House. It contained all the sort of details his tour company might otherwise have provided, and more besides.

Like:-

Don't drink water out of the tap, because the power supply is not up to purifying it – bottled water only.

Be nice to the two guides (minders) who will be allocated to you – they are only doing their job, but they will be with you everywhere, all the time. Don't try to lose them unless/until you have to.

Tourists are not allowed to use the local currency (Won), so if you need to buy anything, use US Dollars or Euros. You will be given plenty of cash, but you will need to account for it on your return, using form FC 17.

Keep at least one of your passports with you. You will actually be given several, each with the appropriate historic and current visas. Depending on where you are, make sure you present the right one when asked. Your North Korean visa will include two for China as well, since you will be staging via Beijing (On the way in, at least)

Unless (or until) you need to break away from the tour party, do what the itinerary says – hotels, meals, excursions and so on.

You will be given an RV for the drop. Stick to the plan.

It is best not to take photographs, so we shall not be giving you a camera. (Not the sort tourists use, anyway.)

As a tourist, you will not be able to move around the country without at least one of your allocated guides, who may be able to arrange special trips for you (not recommended). They like cigarettes, US Dollars and Chinese Yuan. Similarly, you may not leave your hotel without a guide (minder).

Your hotel will only have hot water for an hour before breakfast and an hour before dinner, because of power shortages. Your back-pack will include wet-wipes.

Your passport(s) (forgeries) will look well used, and contain a variety of visas for America, Israel, South Korea and other places adventurous tourist like you tend to visit. These visas will not cause any problems, but note that US citizens may not travel by rail in North Korea. If you need to avoid Lou Lopez or any other member of the CIA, catch the train.

And so on.

Northcot was up early next morning. He was soon to realise that the rest of his stay at The House would be no picnic. A lot of people had obviously given a lot of thought to what it was he had to do, and how he should be best prepared to do it.

For a start, he had twice-daily briefings about the situation in North Korea in terms of the support being put together, the planning for his reception, 'the drop', and his eventual escape if he was unable to return with his fellow tourists. There was little news of how

Dr. Choi was getting on, but someone over there was obviously now in regular contact with him, so he also knew what was being organised.

Everything at Bourleywood House was planned down to the last detail. He wore clothing, as he would from now on, made in Korea and China – not a Marks and Spencer label in sight.

He had a miserable 48-hours with the SAS, who made sure he knew how to get about at night in strange countryside, and to navigate as well as survive.

The roast pheasant was the last he tasted of anything approaching British food. On some days and nights, he had to eat what he could forage, or go hungry.

The technical briefings about the equipment he was to take were fascinating, to say the least. In spite of the many years he had spent in the service, he had no idea about some of the technology which he was to take with him on this mission. It was small, powerful, and virtually undetectable, but he would be very limited in his ability to communicate with HQ, or for them to get in touch with him. Personal contact with a few people on the ground would be about the best he could expect occasionally, but there was no guarantee attached to that either.

Neither had he realised how far behind he had slipped in his knowledge of the Korean language.

It was a pleasant and unexpected surprise when Betty Ogden turned up to put him through his paces and brush up his vocabulary. They spoke no English the whole time she was there, and officially, she had taken a weekend's 'sick leave' from her lectures at the Westminster University specially to be there.

But she brought unexpected news as well, when she told Maurice quietly that she would not be returning to the Pyongyang University as originally planned.

"It has been decided that I should not return," she said, "largely for my own safety they claim."

"How is that?" asked Maurice.

"They think that the authorities may well be suspicious of Choi Yong when he returns, because of what happened when his two colleagues were deported, and that some sort of finger of suspicion could point my way. To be on the safe side, they think I should not return."

"Well, if your safety is at risk, then of course you must stay," replied Maurice. "But what about Yong?"

"He will return as planned. Everything has been explained to him, and although he is tempted to defect, he has said he wants to get back to his uncle while he is still alive, and to finish his studies in Pyongyang. He has been convinced, I think, that if he really wants to help the international community, then he can best do so by staying in North Korea, completing his studies and hopefully then getting work in their nuclear industry, rather than by remaining here."

"That makes sense."

"There is also concern over the future of the British Council over there, apparently. I am told that there have already been veiled threats to close down its operation, and that is deemed too valuable to put at risk. So I am not returning," she said.

"What next, then? A desk in London?"

"Most of the time, I expect, but I shall spend some time here, in the language school."

"I shall look forward to seeing you when I get back, then," said Maurice.

"I get a flat in town as part of the job," she said. "There's a put-u-up in the sitting room if ever you're desperate."

"I might be glad of that if I can't get down to the cottage. Thanks."

"I do hope you do get back safely," said Betty, "But we must get on with your own technical tuition – we have gossiped enough!"

Another surprise was when Choi Yong turned up. Again, they spoke no English while they were together, but Choi was able to tell him the latest news about his uncle Shin; about his health and about how he was progressing with preparing the information which Maurice was to collect. Special communications links had been set up between them. Yong was obviously now well 'turned' and working for the UK without question.

It seemed to Yong that his uncle was pressing ahead with all speed, and that plenty of worthwhile material would be available 'for collection' in a couple of weeks.

"He is running a great risk, doing what he is doing," said Yong, "and it almost seems that he has thrown caution to the wind to collect the information you want as quickly as possible. I am afraid that he may no longer be taking special precautions."

"The timing could fit quite well," said Maurice. "I should be ready to leave in a couple of weeks, and there is a tour available from Stockholm at about that time on which I have been booked."

"I don't envy you your holiday," said Yong. "I shall be returning home when the time comes, but you will be in a strange land among strange people on a dangerous mission."

"I thought at one time," said Maurice, "that you wanted to stay in this country; to defect."

"At one time, I did, you are quite right," he confirmed, "but I have been persuaded by your colleagues that I would be of more use returning home. I can gain my qualifications, perhaps follow my uncle's footsteps, and be in a position to provide you with more information as time goes on. Staying here would not achieve that. I am sure it is what my uncle would want and expect of me."

"And we shall still be able to keep in touch as well," added Maurice, with a smile.

"I shall be sad though that Miss Ogden will not after all be returning with me. She has been invaluable in my studies, and in helping me since I've been here to meet people like you and Lee Cooper. But I think I understand the reason. She could well be in danger if she returns and is held responsible for the deportation of Lee and Cheong."

Later on that weekend Maurice and Yong were unexpectedly able to meet Kang Soo, the SAS soldier who had successfully escaped and made his way home after the murder of his colleague Park Yon at Yongbyon. He had immediately been sent to Bourleywood House.

What he had to tell them was invaluable. He had been given what the military had called a 'hot debrief' as soon as he reached Hereford, and people from MI6 had naturally been present at that as well, but simply chatting to Maurice about his experiences and what everyday life was like both in North Korea and rural China proved a gold-mine of useful detail which he might not otherwise have learnt.

Yong, of course, was fascinated to meet one of the two men who had been sent as emissaries to his father.

"It was the brutal execution of your colleague which finally convinced my uncle that he should help this country," said Yong. "But by then, of course, it was too late to take advantage of your bravery in getting over there to make contact with either of you."

"I could have stayed on," replied Soo, "but I was ordered home so had no real choice."

He looked at Maurice, almost pleadingly.

"However," he said, "if you need help and an escort on your visit, I will happily volunteer to come with you."

Maurice nodded and understood. After a moment's thought he said simply, "I think I might be better on my own to be honest, in spite of the fact that Dr. Choi might recognise you but has never seen me before."

This time, Soo nodded and also understood.

“But I am told to stay here for as long as you are here, and to help whenever I can with your briefing,” he said.

The longer he was at The House, the more detailed Northcot’s briefings became. They went through his itinerary with a fine toothcomb, until he knew all the details backwards. They went through his documentation more than once, and showed him literally hundreds of photographs, satellite pictures and film, especially of the really important parts of his tour. By the end of it all Northcot was confident that, if everyone else played their part as planned, he could successfully meet the objective of his mission.

Only one thing concerned him.

It was going to be difficult for him to communicate with London, or they with him.

He was not used to that.

He really would be operating on his own.

He eventually left the tranquil countryside of the Cotswolds for a short flight from Birmingham airport to Stockholm.

He was now no longer an agent of MI6.

He was a tourist.

A traveller.

But he had with him all the paraphernalia which went with both.

He stayed the night in Stockholm, which he knew well anyway, and left for Beijing the following morning after he had met up at the airport with the rest of his tour party. There, they transferred to Air Koryo flight JS152 from Terminal 2 at the Capital Airport, and flew to Pyongyang, on board a reasonably new Russian Tupolev TU-204.

They arrived more or less on time, and were greeted by their tour guides, who from now on would be with them everywhere, all the time. There would be no escaping their ‘minders’. Northcot was somewhat surprised that they were really quite pleasant people, and not the sinister individuals he had almost been expecting.

A gap in his briefing; he hoped there weren’t many others.

Not that he would see much of his escorts, as it happened.

Their bus took them on a tour of Pyongyang on the way to the Yanggakdo four-star Hotel, an extravagant-looking building on an island in the Taedong River. It was already plain to see that Pyongyang was the home of the rich and privileged members of North Korean society, developed as a sign to the outside world that the country was as prosperous as the regime’s propaganda claimed.

Before dinner, the visitors just had time to freshen up during the evening’s one hour of warm water at the Hotel.

The next day was to be the climax of Northcot’s visit.

It was the day allocated for ‘the drop’.

He and his party of tourists were scheduled to drive to Kaesong, about 10 miles from the Demilitarised Zone which separated the two Koreas. They were also scheduled to visit the DMZ itself. At the abandoned village of Panmunjom, where the 1953 Armistice was signed, the tour included a visit to the Military Museum on the 38th parallel.

Northcot was scheduled to buy a rather special souvenir there from a rather special trader.

But there was no trader and no souvenir.

The Bourleywood House plan had collapsed already.

This was not the easiest place on earth from which to make an escape, either. Their allocation of guides had been implemented by several North Korean officers who had showed them round Panmunjom.

But somehow, Northcot had to dodge the party and abandon the tour, not least because this was as close as he could get to his escape route.

The tour party was next scheduled to take a walk in Janamsan Park, noted for its panoramic views of historic Kaesong, and it was here that he managed to slip away unseen, and hide among the rather overgrown shrubs and bushes away from the main viewing points.

Thinking about it afterwards, the others had to admit that he didn't quite look like an ordinary tourist.

No sandals, no shorts, no trainers, but jeans and 'sensible' shoes.

He was not missed until the party returned to the coach for their drive into Kaesong for lunch, but by then, it was too late.

They had all left their backpacks on the coach. Northcot had kept his with him.

He was away.

He made his way deeper into cover, and decided to wait for the next tour party to arrive at the Museum, in case his souvenir seller should turn up then.

He didn't.

It was dangerous for Northcot to hang around the museum and tag on to too many coach parties. He would soon be noticed.

Indeed, he was already wondering if there weren't rather more soldiers around than there were when they arrived yesterday. He had even seen some of them in the Park.

He concluded that, having missed him on the coach, they were now looking for him.

Searching, even.

There was now only one option open to Northcot. He would have to make his way to Yongbyon, about 100 miles north of Pyongyang, and find Dr Choi.

He would be heading away from safety and possible escape, which lay south. He was going north. Not for the first time recently, he wondered if he'd perhaps done enough travelling.

Maurice realised that they were in some way able to track his movements at HQ, but he had to send a message just the same.

"No drop."

It was enough to send James Piper, and others, apoplectic.

Not just because of Maurice, but also because of what might have happened to 'the trophy' which the souvenir seller was supposed to have sold to him.

Like Maurice, the Museum trader was one of their top men in North Korea, and locally recruited. If he had been betrayed, then their whole network could be in jeopardy.

And that meant real trouble for Northcot and his mission.

Piper went straight to 'C's' office.

Something had to be done, and done quickly.

They had half talked about this before, but had made no firm contingency plans, never believing for a minute that the original scenario so carefully planned and discussed at Bourleywood House would fail so early.

It was plain that something had gone seriously wrong - the word 'treachery' sprang to mind - and that immediate action needed to be taken if the mission itself as well as the people involved in it, was to be saved.

Sir Geoffrey Sefton got hold of Jack Salisbury on the red phone, told him that the mission had failed at the first fence, and agreed to meet straight away to discuss yet another Plan B.

There were three things for them to decide as a matter of the utmost urgency. First of all, should Northcot be brought home with all speed, or left there to make one further attempt to obtain the precious information he had gone to collect. Secondly, if they did decide to press on in spite of everything, how could they now help Northcot to succeed? And thirdly, what had gone wrong so quickly into the venture. Post mortems are usually the last thing one does – in this case it was vital to quickly establish what might have caused this failure in order to decide whether it might happen again if they pressed ahead.

There was one other element to all this as well, as Piper pointed out, and which they had better all bear in mind.

Northcot himself.

Whatever they decided in London, they now had no direct control over Maurice Northcot. Knowing the man, he was as likely to press on as not, regardless of the odds or what London might think.

Indeed, it was a pretty fair assumption, that this was what he had already done.

Surprisingly, Jack Salisbury himself pondered an even higher priority.

“It’s no use us sitting here deliberating about what went wrong and what to do next,” he said, “until we know *why* things have gone wrong. Unless we know that, whatever we decide to do next could also – um – go wrong.”

“The problem is, Jack, that at present my whole admittedly rather shaky organisation in North Korea, seems to have fallen apart.”

“Quite so,” said Salisbury. “Quite so. But not because of anything they could have done.”

They looked puzzled.

“They have been betrayed, as we all have, by someone *here*.”

He scowled at them all.

“Someone *here* told them what to expect, and someone *there* was then able to stop it happening.”

He looked round at the other two in his office.

“Perhaps even someone in this very office – now.”

“Impossible!” said ‘C’.

“How do you know it wasn’t me?” said Salisbury. “How do I know it wasn’t any of you?”

He waved his hand.

“We are the great and the good in the intelligence world, but that proves nothing,” he said dramatically.

They shuffled uncomfortably, and looked around.

“You’re right, of course,” said Sefton, “but if we can’t trust one another, who the hell can we trust?”

Salisbury smiled.

“Having said what I said, rather more to alert you than to – er, um – accuse you,” he said, “Let me ask you two questions. First of all, how well vetted was Dr. Choi’s nephew, Yong I think his name is, and secondly, does it really matter a damn anyway?”

“Does it matter,” asked Piper, speaking for the first time. “Of course it damned well matters.”

“Perhaps not,” said Salisbury, standing to look out of his office window. “He’s your man, not mine, but from what little I know of Northcot, he has already set off in pursuit of his objective. What we may or may not decide sitting here probably doesn’t matter a jot.”

"I suspect you're right," said Piper after a moment's thought. "He will be on his way by now, probably in an attempt to find Dr. Choi."

"If he has set off in pursuit, as we suspect, then he will simply ignore any attempt by us to call him off. He will press on. As I said earlier, to try to call him off and get him home by some means is probably a waste of effort. So perhaps we should concentrate our efforts on deciding what we can do to help the man."

Salisbury put his hands behind his back.

"The first two of our problems seem to have been solved for us," he declared. "We do not – indeed cannot – call the mission off, and if we did, Northcot would most likely not return even if we told him to and could arrange it."

Salisbury scratched his head, and turned to Sefton.

"So how do we help the man, Geoffrey? Who do you have left on the ground out there? And can you trust them after this?"

Salisbury's PA knocked quietly, and came in with a tray of tea and a plate of biscuits. China cups, not mugs, Piper noted.

Sir Geoffrey Sefton ambled to the window, idly stirring his cup.

He looked across at James Piper.

"There is one, Jack," he said to Salisbury.

Piper nodded.

"He is almost too valuable to be put at further risk," said Sefton.

"On the other hand," countered Piper, "He is almost too valuable to the North Koreans for them to sacrifice him, if he was to be discovered."

"Tell me," demanded Salisbury.

"He is retired Royal Navy Surgeon Commander, Professor Peter Ramsay, working under the auspices of the British Council at the hospital near the Yongbyon Nuclear plant. He is one of the top Oncologists in the country, and providing a unique service to the people who live in and work near the power station and all its subsidiary institutions. He also spends a good deal of his time lecturing to their medical students, and staff. It was he who initially diagnosed Dr. Choi as having radiation sickness, and then cancer. It is also he who provides us with significant and valuable intelligence about what is going on there. The North Koreans value him highly and have threatened to close the British Council office in Pyongyang, if ever we bring him home."

"Suits us, doesn't it?"

"Exactly. And he doesn't seem to mind, either. He knows he's doing valuable work, and claims to be learning a lot as well. He couldn't get that level of experience anywhere in this country, and as well as treating people affected by their appalling safety standards at the nuclear plant, he is also lecturing their own medical students."

"How long has he been there?"

"Two years now," replied Piper.

"Are you in contact?"

"When we need to be, although it is mainly him who contacts us, when he has information."

"But he knows Dr. Choi, you said."

"Correct."

"We must make use of him now," decided Salisbury. "Get word to him somehow to expect Northcot, and tell Northcot that he is to make contact."

"If he gets that far," said Sefton.

"Quite so. But let's get down to detailed planning now, on the assumption that Northcot will eventually turn up looking for Dr. Choi."

“There is one other way in which we might be able to provide Northcot with additional support,” said Sefton.

“On the ground?”

“Yes.”

Salisbury thought for a moment, looking concerned.

“I think I’m ahead of you,” he said. “But very risky.”

“I’ll get it organised then.”

15.

THE STRAIGHT LINE

Jon Field looked around at the others, hunched over their screens. The Operations Room was never the brightest place in the building, and somehow it always seemed worse when you were on a night shift. Not that you could tell whether it was night or day. It had no windows. It was in the basement, two floors down from street level. Just banks of TV screens and computers and telephones.

Not every position in the Ops room was manned at night. Just essential staff to keep in touch with current operations around the world.

That was Jon’s problem at the moment. Keeping in touch. He wasn’t, and was getting worried.

One of his tasks was a bit special, he knew. He was the only one in the room who did know about it. A special briefing he’d had, a few weeks ago. There were others, of course, but very few. The Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation knew, of course, and his own boss the Head of MI6, ‘C’ knew about it because he gave the briefing, but knowing Jack Salisbury and Sir Geoffrey as he did, Jon doubted they had even told the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary, their own boss. At the moment, they didn’t need to know, so don’t let’s tell them. His Head of Section, James Piper, also knew about it, but Jon and a colleague watch keeper had been given only a limited briefing. Not the whole works. They had been asked to leave before it was over.

There had been a couple of others at ‘C’s’ briefing who’d sat through the whole thing, and it was a relief to know that tonight’s Duty Officer Doug Ritchie was one of them. But then it had been specially arranged so that he and Jon would always be on duty together at critical times. Tonight had been one of those critical times. It looked like becoming even more critical soon.

Jon sat back and pondered, frowning; staring at the blank screen in front of him. It was not supposed to be blank. That was the problem.

He looked at the array of international clocks along the wall above him.

The scheduled time for the transmission had come and gone. There had been no signal from the communications satellite – no audio and no spike on the sine wave. The sine wave was there, on his screen, but a straight pale green, slightly vibrating line. There had been no peak, no wave, and no sign at all to signify the receipt of the planned automatic communication. Just a straight line. And no beeps, either.

Jon knew the computer was working OK, and that the satellite was sending it signals. If not, there wouldn’t even be a straight pale green line on his screen and the distant mush in his headphones. For some reason, the transmitter on the ground had not sent anything to the satellite.

Again.

The same thing had happened yesterday. And like yesterday, he could do nothing about it. Except tell the Duty Officer. Doug Ritchie wasn't best pleased last night, and would be even more peevisish today.

Jon decided to wait a bit longer, just in case.

He knew it was a waste of time, because the whole thing was precisely programmed – day, hour, minute, second. That precise. Nothing could go wrong with the communications link at all. It was the latest. Not that he knew much about it. He only knew what he needed to know, and even then he knew more than nearly everyone else, especially among the Ops room watch-keepers. Only one other, Giles Clayton, had been at the special briefing, and they shared the secret monitoring duties. But even they didn't know who had the transmitter, or where he was.

Whoever it was had probably dropped it or trodden on it or something, Jon thought. That would explain it. It wasn't working because the bloke who had it had broken it. Even top spies can break things. No wonder it didn't work.

Eventually, he gave up waiting, and called across to one of his colleagues.

"Keep an eye on my station, will you. I'm just nipping upstairs to see Doug. Shan't be a tick."

"Why can't you ring him?"

"Because I don't want you listening in, that's why," he said with a grin. "Besides, I need a pee."

He walked up the two flights of stairs, and along the wide corridor with its tatty carpet tiled floor. Carpet tiles were better than vinyl, he supposed.

He knocked on the Duty Officer's door, and walked in without being invited.

Doug looked up from one of the familiar computer screens on the wide desk, covered in paper and telephones, and frowned, already worried.

"What's up, Jon?"

He knew Jon wouldn't be there if everything was sweetness and light in the Ops room.

Jon sat down, again without being asked.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"I somehow guessed that's why you were here."

He pulled open a drawer of his desk and brought out a bottle of Bushmills. Half empty, Jon noticed.

"Care for a swig?"

"I'm not allowed to drink on duty."

"You can if I say so, and I say so."

"Only a large one, then."

Doug poured two and passed one across.

"Having a bad night, then?" A statement, rather than a question.

"We're straight lining."

"Again?"

"Again. Same as last night."

Doug tipped back in his swivel chair and clasped his hands behind his head, frowning.

"That's twice now."

"I've checked the kit as best I can."

"And?"

"And it all seems to be working."

"But nothing came through?"

"Nothing."

"Something's very wrong somewhere," said Doug, getting more peevisish, as forecast.

"Just a straight line instead of a sine wave, and mush in the headphones. Not a beep."
Doug sighed, and almost whispered, "What the hell's going on?"

Jon shrugged.

"This is supposed to be impossible," said Doug. "You know that."

"I didn't know."

"Well it is."

"I know it's pretty modern kit, but I didn't know it was infallible."

"Well it is. This simply can't happen. It's impossible."

"Our end seems to be all right," repeated Jon, "so it must be the other end that's gone kaput."

"It can't."

"Well it has," said Jon, getting cross. "It's the only explanation."

"There has to be a reason for this," said Doug thoughtfully, topping up the glasses.

"If you ask me," opined Jon, "the bloke with the transmitting end has dropped it or trodden on it or broken it in some way, or even just lost the damned thing."

"That's impossible."

"Don't keep saying that." Jon was getting peevish now. "Why is it impossible for God's sake?"

"Because it's not portable."

"Not portable?"

"That's right."

"How come?"

"Because it's imbedded, that's how."

"Imbedded?"

"That's what I said. Imbedded. The bloke who's got it is wearing the thing. Internally. It's inside the man. Implanted. He can't drop it or tread on it. Where he goes, it goes."

"That wasn't part of the briefing," said Jon.

"And I probably shouldn't be telling you now, either, so keep it to yourself."

"So he's actually wearing the transmitter, so to speak? I've never heard of a bit of kit like that before. Nobody said anything about it at the briefing."

"Terribly new and hush-hush," confided Doug. "Micro digital technology invented by some whiz-kid particle physicist. This is the first time it's been used."

"And it doesn't work," suggested Jon.

"It's been working perfectly until now."

"So what's gone wrong?"

"Could just be a power failure," said Doug thoughtfully.

"Flat battery, you mean."

"Could be."

"If he's wearing it, how can he plug it in to charge it up?"

"He doesn't. The charger is built in to the thing. Nuclear powered."

"You mean that poor sod is walking around with a nuclear power station inside him?"

"Not quite. It's a tiny bit of radioactive material, as I understand it, which generates just enough heat as it decays to charge up the battery and keep it going. It's called a Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator."

"Oh. One of those!"

"Do you know about them?" asked an astonished Doug Ritchie.

"Never heard of them! But why can't we get in touch with it to find out what's wrong?"

"It only transmits. It's not a receiver."

"So it's not much use to the guy wearing it, then."

“Not much. It’s rather more for our benefit than his, so that we know where he is.”

“Except we don’t, because it’s not working.”

Doug thought for a moment.

“Perhaps it is still working, and the Comsat is just not picking up the signal. It’s finely tuned and aimed at the region where he’s working, I’m told. We know the rough area where the chap is going to be operating, and the satellite is tuned in to that area.”

“So the guy could have wandered off, out of range.”

“Exactly my thought. You’ve worked in the field for long enough to know that you need to travel around a bit from time to time.”

“I would still be out there if that bastard in Damascus hadn’t winged me. Nothing ever goes as planned. Sometimes you have to free-lance a bit, and operate out of theatre just to get the job done. Sounds like that’s what this fellow has done.”

“The point is, we shall have to keep monitoring the thing at the scheduled times in case he wanders back again.

“What if he’s been picked up by the opposition?”

“They wouldn’t find it, and even if he was dead it would still keep working.

“Life out in the field is plainly not what it used to be in my day.”

“I suppose I shall have to tell Head of Section and ‘C’. They will not be amused.”

“Especially not if you tell them now. It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“I wasn’t planning on ringing either of them – too risky. I’ll see them later this morning. You’d better come along too.”

“Our blokes at the Embassy can’t help I suppose?”

“The Embassy doesn’t know anything about this operation or that there is anything special happening on their patch.”

“Our chum really is on his own, then.”

“Very much so. And at high risk.”

Jon stood to leave.

“Thanks for the grog, and the extra briefing.”

“Keep it to yourself, that’s all.”

“Drinking on duty, d’you mean?”

They grinned, as Jon Field closed the door behind him.

James Piper was Head of Section 7, one of the divisions of MI6 which carried out special operations. They concentrated on the Far East, but sometimes had to work in other areas as well or instead, depending on what was needed. In the past, Piper had been posted to there on his own on special assignments. So he knew the ropes, and knew that part of the world quite well. Which was why his section had been given responsibility for this top secret mission. He knew a lot more about it than Jon Field, but decided to take him along to his meeting with Sir Geoffrey Sefton, together with Doug Ritchie, who had just briefed him on the night’s events – or rather the lack of events.

They were quickly ushered into ‘C’'s office. He was staring at the computer screen on his desk, but motioned them to sit down. His PA brought them all a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of biscuits, both very welcome to Jon and Doug, who had been up all night.

“I gather there’s some sort of problem,” said ‘C’, looking up from his screen. It was a statement rather than a question.

“I thought you should know that we are still out of contact,” said James without further ado.

“Same as last night?”

“Exactly. Straight lining again, I’m afraid. Our end seems to be in good order, but we received no signal at the appointed time last night. No signal and no audio, just like the previous night.”

Sir Geoffrey Sefton sat back and grabbed the red phone to speak to Jack Salisbury.

“Straight line again last night,” Sefton said without further ado.

“So we *have* lost him, then.”

“Looks like it. Nothing since he sent the message that the planned pick-up had failed.”

“We need to plan what to do next,” said Salisbury. “Get over here as soon as you can.”

The red phone went dead.

“When was the last we heard from him? Sefton asked Piper.

“Friday.” said Jon. “I was on duty then, but I’ve had a straight line twice since then.”

“And today’s Sunday. So we’ve not been in touch now for just over three days.”

Sir Geoffrey turned to James Piper.

“How much does Jon know?” he asked James.

“I had to explain about the transmitter,” he replied, “but nothing else apart from what he was told at the briefing.”

“Good. I’ve just been checking your record, Jon, and particularly your security clearances. I think we can take you in to our full confidence about this operation, don’t you James?”

“Agreed,” replied James.

“Thank you, sir,” said Jon.

“No need to call me ‘sir’ from now on. ‘C’ is what everyone else uses, so that’ll do.”

Jon nodded.

“So you know that if our man is operating in the area we expect him to be in,” he said to Jon, “we are bound to pick up a transmission from him. Since we’ve heard nothing, and all our kit appears to be working, then the satellite has received no signal to send us. That can only mean that he’s not where he should be.”

‘C’ sat back and thought for a moment.

“Anyone got any better theories?”

“I wondered if it could be a battery problem in the man’s transmitter,” offered Jon. “Not sending a signal as it should.”

“That’s highly unlikely – some would say impossible,” replied Sir Geoffrey. “The battery is the really secret bit of the equipment we’re using. Except it’s not really a battery either. It’s some kind of supercapacitor made with graphene coated silicon. It’s a tiny chip which holds four times more power than the most modern lithium-ion batteries, and charges up in a flash. I’m told it’s the sort of thing that will be powering all our mobile phones in ten years or so.”

“What about the nuclear generator?” asked James.

“It was developed at Harwell, really for military use. It’s the same sort of thing that powers satellites, although on a sub-atomic scale. A tiny micro-chip of radioactive material generates heat as it decays, which is just enough to charge the battery and keep the whole thing going. The nuclear scientists at Harwell got together with a team of particle physicists to develop the whole transmitter, and in a way, our man is doing trials for them. But it never failed under tests. I got in touch with the project leader the first time the signal failed to arrive, and they can think of no reason why it should fail now, out in the field so to speak. Obviously, I’ll talk to them again later this morning.”

“Any way of re-tuning the satellite, to widen its field of operation?” asked Doug.

“There probably is, but in my view it would be far too risky. Our signal to the Comsat could easily be intercepted, and that would blow the whole operation out of the water.”

“Could the opposition have picked up our man and disabled the transmitter in some way?” asked Jon.

“It’s always possible that he has been picked up, especially where he is, in which case he’s having a very bad time indeed. But they wouldn’t find the transmitter. It’s too small to be discovered by scanners, at airports for instance, and the signal produced by the transmitter is virtually undetectable – the power is in the satellite, which is sensitive enough to pick it up.”

“Could a Geiger-counter detect the radioactive material?”

“Very unlikely,” replied ‘C’. “Far too small to generate anything detectable, I’m told. Our chap would need to wear it for some 10,000 years before the radioactivity had any adverse effect on him.”

“It sounds to me, then, that the transmitter must still be working,” said Doug.

“I agree,” said ‘C’. “I think the only explanation can be that our man has gone out of satellite range. But we must continue to listen out at the specified transmission times, in the event that he reappears where we expect him to be. I’m quite sure he will, if he’s still at all active.”

He paused, thoughtfully.

“James, can you arrange for Jon and Doug always to be on duty together when a transmission is due? That would save us having to up the briefing level of anyone else, which I am keen to avoid as this is such a very sensitive operation.”

“Of course we can do that. I’ll get on to re-arranging the duty roster as soon as I get back to my office.”

“It will mean a bit of extra effort and stress for you two,” he said to the pair, “but I hope you won’t mind.”

“Not a bit,” they said, almost in unison.

“Good. Any more questions?”

“Personally,” said Doug Ritchie, “I’m curious to know where our man is, and who he is. Anyone we know?”

‘C’ looked across at James Piper, the Section head.

“I suppose it’s only fair to tell them, since they know nearly everything else.”

James shrugged and nodded.

“I can’t emphasise too strongly how very secret this whole venture is, so I must have your absolute guarantee that none of this will go any further, even to those within this service. At present, I have not even dared to tell the politicians who are my masters. Neither the Foreign Secretary nor the Prime Minister knows anything of this, nor, if I get my way, will they be told anything until we have a successful conclusion.”

Both men nodded their agreement.

“I will only say that Maurice Northcot, who I’m sure you know, is now in North Korea to collect vital information from our agents over there. He’s operating very much on his own. Not even the Ambassador knows he’s there, but he should by now have made contact with, shall we say, friendly agents. You will understand, I hope, how very disturbing it is to have lost contact with him, even though we are not in direct communication with him. That would have been to put him at even greater risk, a situation which he fully acknowledged before he left.”

“I know Maurice very well,” said Doug. Jon nodded. “I also know that if, as it seems, something’s not gone as planned, he would keep going to achieve the aim of the operation, whatever that is. It’s plain to me now that something *has* gone wrong, and that he has moved out of area to salvage what he can of the mission, regardless of his own safety.”

“Any one of us would have done the same, Sir Geoffrey,” said Jon.

‘C’ looked at the men closely for a moment.

“Thank you gentlemen.”

As the meeting broke up, the Head of MI6 asked James Piper to stay behind.

“It’s been going through my mind, James, that if Maurice doesn’t appear on our screens again soon, we may need to send someone out there to try to find out what’s happened to him. We need to know whether he’s still on the case, so to speak, or whether we have to start again in some way.”

“I agree,” replied James. “This mission is too important to let it slide, and the information Maurice has gone out there to collect must be of the utmost importance, although I’ve no idea, of course, what that information is.”

“Only a handful of people do know, and if you don’t mind, I won’t add you to the list; not yet, at least. But you can take my word that it is of vital international importance.”

Sir Geoffrey looked at his computer screen again.

“The problem is, who shall we send?”

He looked across at James.

“Someone from your section, perhaps, but who?” he asked again.

“I need to think about that.”

“We may not have much time. Whoever goes will need detailed briefing, and probably some training as well. Has anyone from your section ever been to Korea before?”

“I don’t think so – certainly not in my time.”

“As I thought. So we would need to send someone who is totally unfamiliar with the area, and who probably won’t even speak the language.”

James nodded agreement.

“As you know, I’ve looked up Jon Fields’ records. They were on my screen when you arrived. The injury he sustained in Damascus was serious, but should have healed enough by now to make him fit enough for field work again.”

“He’s certainly itching to get out somewhere,” said James. “And he’s said often that he should be fit enough.”

“Well, subject to all the proper checks, I am inclined to select him as a back-up if we need to send someone else out there. He’s already half-briefed as it is.”

“Could be an excellent choice. His name was going through my mind as well.”

“So be it, then. His record also shows that he is a natural linguist, if there is such a thing. Very quick to learn. We may need to put that to the test, as we did with Maurice Northcot, although he already spoke the language. You’d better tell him immediately, and arrange for him to have a thorough medical as soon as possible. If he passes that, we’ll get him to Bourleywood House for a detailed briefing and some basic language training if there’s time.”

“I’ll get on to that straight away, although he’s probably gone home by now, having been here all night.”

“You will also have to arrange to take him off the watch keeper’s roster. There was one of his other colleagues at our limited briefing – what was his name again?”

“Giles Clayton.”

“Ah, yes. Well get hold of him, and jiggle the roster so that he and Doug Ritchie are always on duty together, while Jon is detached for training. Let me know if you think Giles should have any further briefing.”

“Certainly.”

“In spite of all this James, Jon will not be our first choice to send out there.”

“Who then?”

“Kang Soo.”

“One of the SAS men?”

“The survivor. His colleague was executed as an American spy.”

“I remember.”

“Kang Soo volunteered to go back with Northcot, but he eventually chose to work alone. But Soo has only recently returned from there, knows the background and knows what Dr. Choi looks like. Jon will be third man, so to speak.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Let’s hope this turns out to be no more than contingency planning, and that we re-establish contact with Maurice before to need to put any of this into effect. I must say that this is all very worrying. I just hope that nothing’s happened to him.”

The first thing James Piper did when he got back to his office was to send Carol, his P.A., down to the mess for a bacon sandwich while the kettle boiled. He was starving.

The second thing he did was to think.

He needed to speak to Doug and Jon, but they had both been on night duty and then had to stay on at the end of their shift for the meeting with ‘C’. They were by now probably at home and in bed. He looked at his watch. Nearly half-past-eleven. They were on duty again this evening – eight ‘til eight was the night shift. He’d ring them later – about five o’clock would probably be about the best, he thought. They would both be up and about by then, and if they weren’t, they should be.

He also needed to speak to Giles Clayton. He pulled up the duty roster on his computer. As luck would have it, he was in the Ops room now.

Gillian came in with his sandwich and coffee. He asked her to get on to the Ops room and get Giles to come up if he wasn’t too busy.

“Let me eat this, first, though, or he’ll want one! While I’m doing that, get the medical people on the phone for me if you would. Doc Perkins, if he’s about.”

Ex-RAF Air Commodore Mark Perkins, known in the trade as Doc Perkins, had been in charge of Aviation Medicine before he joined the intelligence service to run their medical section (*read ‘Motorbike Men’*).

Doc Perkins was about.

“I need a quick appointment for you to re-assess Jon Fields,” he said. “You will remember that he was withdrawn from field work after being shot up in Damascus. Well, we may need him back out overseas in a hurry if he’s fit enough.”

“Damascus again?” queried Perkins.

“No, somewhere quite different.”

“I need to know where. He may be fit for New Zealand but not for Namibia. Know what I mean?”

“Try Korea.”

“You were right. That is ‘quite different.’ There’s a special breed of diseases out that way, so a lot will depend on his immune system. I take it you mean South Korea, by the way, and not North.”

“Don’t ask me. God knows where he could end up.”

There was silence for moment.

“OK. I’ve got his record up on my screen. I’ll see him myself. When can he come over?”

“He’s on nights this week, and due in about eight this evening, but he doesn’t know anything about this yet. ‘C’ only pulled his name out of the hat an hour or so ago.”

“I don’t mind doing a bit of overtime. Get him over here as soon as you can, and I’ll get nurses and all the tests set up for him.”

“Great stuff, Mark. Thanks. I’ll ring him about five when he’s had some sleep, and get him to go straight to your place.”

“Will you tell him where you want to send him when you talk to him?”

“I probably don’t need to, at this stage. In view of recent events, he will guess.”

“I shan’t tell him, then. He won’t know a typhus test from tetanus, so it shouldn’t matter.”

“He’s just dead keen to get out in the field again, even if it is North Korea. That enthusiasm may wane a bit when he knows he is only third reserve, so to speak.”

“What if I find him fit enough for other places but not there?”

“Just tell me and we’ll find someone else. If there’s the slightest doubt, fail him.”

“Nothing would persuade me from doing otherwise, as I’m sure you realise.”

Giles Clayton was having a quiet day, but nevertheless wondered what was going on to warrant a summons to the boss.

He thought he noticed a faint smell of bacon as he went into James Piper’s office, and realised he was hungry. He hoped this wasn’t going to be a long meeting – it was getting near lunchtime.

“Come in Giles. This won’t take a minute, but I wanted to warn you that I may need to make changes to the duty roster fairly soon. We could well end up short of Jon Field – he’s having a medical later to see if he’s fit enough for operational work again, and we have a possible job lined up for him if he is.”

“He’ll be delighted to be found fit enough again. He bangs on quite a bit about wanting to get back into action.”

“Well if he is fit enough, he’ll be on contingency stand-by. That’ll mean that you will be the only watch keeper briefed about the secure signal transmissions, and rather than brief someone else about this top secret affair, I shall want you to run it solo. That means always being on duty when a signal is due, and always being on shift with Doug Ritchie as your Duty Officer.”

“Sounds OK,” replied Giles.

“The problem is, as you know the signals are very randomly scheduled, so you could be on a day shift one day and nights the next. It will make planning your own life quite difficult, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t mind that.”

“Good. The other thing you need to know is that we have received no signal at all on the last two scheduled transmissions. We don’t know why yet, although there are theories, but obviously we have to keep listening for them at the planned times in case the satellite comes back on air again.”

“That’s odd,” said Giles. “I thought the whole thing was supposed to be virtually infallible.”

“So it is, but we think we know what could have happened. The transmitter has probably moved out of range – we hope that’s what the problem is. Anyway, if you’re happy to work in this rather unstructured way, I’ll arrange for you to have a further briefing before you start.”

“Not a problem,” said Giles. “I shall look forward to having my own project as well as all the other operations going on.”

“Perhaps you’d stand in for him this evening, until he gets back from his medical. He shouldn’t be too late.”

Giles decided to go back to the Ops room via the mess to pick up a bacon sandwich. The smell of it in James’s office had proved too much for him.

Later that evening, James managed to get hold of both Doug Ritchie and Jon Field before they left home. Doug was told to report to James's office before going to the Duty Officer's 'shack', so that he could be briefed about the need for a new roster and the reasons for it.

Jon was absolutely delighted to be told to go straight to the medical centre for a going over.

"What happens if I get through this check-up?" he asked.

"If you're found to be fit enough, we can send you out into the field again," replied James.

"That would be wonderful news," said Jon. "With all due respect, I'd sooner be out and about than being a watch keeper, interesting though that is."

"Just what we thought. And we have an operation in mind for you if you pass, although only as a back-up, so don't get too excited about it."

"Where to?"

"Pass the medical first!"

"Why so suddenly, then?"

"This is 'C's' idea. You impressed him this morning and he thought you were being wasted stuck indoors."

"A very astute fellow that Sir Geoffrey! Is this North Korea, to find Maurice Northcot if he doesn't make contact soon."

"You're on the reserve list, so don't be disappointed if this one doesn't come off"

"I shall actually be over the moon. It will mean Maurice is safe."

"Something else will turn up, once we know you're fit again."

"A tenner says I'm fit to travel."

James rang Doc Perkins.

"I win a tenner if you fail Jon Field."

"I'm a professional," he replied. "I can't be bribed!"

"But I want him to pass."

16.

THE ESCAPE

Maurice Northcot was trying to do several things at once.

The first was to become invisible. He had to avoid detection and possible capture at all costs if he was to stand any chance of completing his mission.

The second was to try to work out what the hell could have gone wrong.

He knew the souvenir peddler at the Museum was one of the top men in the admittedly rather shaky organisation in North Korea run by his MI6 colleagues. For that reason, the man could well have been under surveillance already, and picked up by the authorities. If so, it should have been possible – just – for London to get word through to Maurice. If the man had been picked up, then so had the vital package of secrets which Maurice was supposed to collect. If that was the scenario which had unfolded, then was it really worth trying to track down Dr. Choi? Of course it was – Northcot knew better that to make so many assumptions, or to give up so early into his operation.

Nevertheless, it would be nice to know where the package was, and what had happened to the guy who was supposed to 'sell' it to him.

In all honesty, he wasn't used to working while almost totally out of touch with HQ.

He could understand the reason – most communications networks in North Korea were routed through China, and as it was some of China's nuclear secrets he had come to collect – well, he could understand why.

But he wasn't totally out of touch. He was able to send pre-coded and very short messages, like the one he had just sent - '*No Drop*' - although he had hoped to be able to send '*Collected*'. Perhaps later. And he knew that HQ was able to keep in touch with him in terms of knowing where he was. Always providing, of course, that he was where he was supposed to be. But as he was about to set off out of range, they wouldn't have a clue where he was, and he couldn't tell them, like he usually could when he was 'travelling' abroad.

Not that it mattered particularly.

He had a job to do, so would get on and do it. But it would be nice to tell someone where he was and what he was doing.

As it was, he was blessing the day that he had met Kang Soo at Bourleywood House before he left. Soo had been able to give him a complete debrief on his own experience in North Korea from the time he and his now murdered colleague Park Yon had got ashore, to the time he had left. They had been able to pour over maps together, and it was now essential that Maurice was able to recall the details of the way the two SAS men made their way to Yongbyon.

He planned to follow the same route, as best he could, in the remote chance that one of the people who had helped Kang Soo may be able to help him as well. There was an outside chance that the internal network could be alerted to the fact that Northcot was there, and look out for him. If not, he could remember enough of the detail to enable him to make his way to Yongbyon, although he thought he would mostly have to travel at night. He headed west towards the coast where the two men had been put ashore, and then turned north, skirting Pyongyang. But nobody made contact with him, and he appeared not to have aroused any suspicion on his journey.

He made a brave decision some miles from Pyongyang. At a bus stop. He noticed there was a service of sorts to the town centre – two a day.

After all, he had all the right papers, so why not take a chance, even if he would be immediately identified as a foreigner – and a westerner at that.

He decided to catch the next bus to Yongbyon, although he had no clear idea what he might do when he arrived. Find Dr. Choi's flat, he supposed, and hope that the man would be at home.

He paid his fare, and decided to sit near the front of the bus in case he needed to leave it in a hurry. Apart from one or two strange looks from other passengers, nobody took any notice of him.

He got off in a small village just outside the town, where the two SAS men Kang and Park had met their first contact. Northcot remembered the place from the satellite maps and Kang's description, and headed to the small street market with its half-empty stalls in the village square.

He sat at a stall selling tea, and drank a thin but warm concoction, which tasted of nothing much, and slowly ate a small bowl of vegetable stew, which tasted much the same as the tea. He remembered that if you are hungry and thirsty, it is best to eat and drink slowly to stave off the worse pangs. He was both hungry and thirsty.

He could see the nuclear research power complex in the near distance, but thankfully did not have to make his way to it. He knew that Dr. Choi's flat was not far from the village square, and decided to wait until dusk before looking for it.

Suddenly, Maurice was startled to find a man standing beside him. He should have been more vigilant and noticed him approach, but he was immediately alerted to the possibility that the man represented danger of some sort.

Instead, he produced a crumpled piece of paper, and thrust it at Northcot.

“Keep this. I shall not want it again. Dr Choi is in hospital, very sick. Visit him and ask to see his surgeon, called Ramsay. You are expected.”

At last, some form of communication. Somebody friendly knew where he was, and had made contact of sorts.

The man disappeared into the gathering gloom as silently as he had arrived.

He was the farmer, and the piece of paper was the photograph taken at Aldermaston.

Northcot thrust the now dog-eared picture into his pocket, and looked about him.

People were too concerned about their own life to bother about his, it seemed.

He racked his brains to remember, from his briefings, whereabouts the Hospital was in Yongbyon. The man had indicated with a jerk of his thumb that it was away from the nuclear facilities, which would be a great relief if true.

If it was within the perimeter, he had no idea how he would get past the security system to reach it. If it was outside, however, all he had to do was find it. He supposed it made sense for a large local hospital to be sited away from what could be the source of a major health disaster within the nuclear complex.

He wondered if it was signposted.

It was.

He wondered if it was like hospitals in the UK, where people could walk in and out freely.

It wasn't.

Northcot had decided to wait until early morning before attempting to get into the place, to give him plenty of time to find Professor Ramsay. From what the man had said, Ramsay was expecting him, although Maurice was at a loss to work out how he could be. But at least he had found the rambling buildings, which he had to admit looked more modern than he would have expected. There were signs, too, directing ambulances and, he supposed, visitors, to the various departments of the hospital. The radiological and cancer department was in a separate block, away from the main hospital but linked to it. He decided to go straight there, rather than go to the main entrance.

He spent some time watching the entrance. Not everyone who turned up was allowed in.

Some were turned away, so there was obviously some form of monitoring system to filter out people who were not deemed to be ill enough, from those who were in need of immediate treatment and who were therefore admitted. He could not imagine that the system was anything like that in UK, with its timed appointments.

So he needed to convince whoever it was at 'reception' that he was really ill, and ill enough to warrant the attention of Professor Ramsay. The problem was, he had no real idea of what the symptoms might be of, say, radiation sickness. But somehow, he had to bluff his way in to see the man. In the end, it proved easier than he had thought.

Acting had never been his forté, but he had to gamble on the fact that most North Koreans, especially those in responsible jobs, would speak some English.

Eventually he summoned enough courage to stumble up to the hospital entrance, gripping his stomach and holding a rather dirty handkerchief over his mouth.

“Sick,” he mumbled, and managed to wretch convincingly.

The man in nurse's uniform, who had greeted him, took a step backwards.

“Very ill,” moaned Maurice, and pointed towards the Nuclear Research Centre, visible behind the hospital buildings.

He wretched again, and half collapsed.

This time, the man stepped forwards to help him.

“Ramsay,” said Maurice, throwing all caution to the wind. “Must see Ramsay”

He collapsed to his knees, and was again helped up by the man, who had this time called for help.

“Accident,” mumbled Northcot, pointing again at the nuclear facilities and at his stomach. “Must see Ramsay.”

He vomited.

The two nurses grabbed a stretcher, bundled him on to it, and pushed him hurriedly away from the entrance into the hospital. One of them made what was obviously an emergency call on his phone.

Northcot was in.

Professor Peter Ramsay was sitting in a small cubicle which served as his office, catching up on case notes and viewing X-Rays and various scans on the screen in front of him when the emergency call came through.

There was no emergency at the nuclear site but it seemed a foreigner, English they thought, had suffered an accident while working at the research centre. He had arrived very ill and was demanding to see him.

Northcot, he wondered? Who else could it be?

He quickly put on his white coat, grabbed his stethoscope, and hurried towards the admissions ward.

Northcot was lying on a bed in a small ward. He thought there were three other beds there, from what he had seen when they pushed him into his cubicle, surrounded by curtains.

He hadn't been there long before Ramsay appeared, and ushered the hovering nurse away.

He immediately started work with his stethoscope, muttering quietly as he did so,

“Dr. Penny, I presume? I'm Peter Ramsay,” he whispered.

Northcot raised a hand in silent salute.

“You acted too well,” said Ramsay. “They are convinced you have radiation sickness, so I shall have to keep you in at least overnight for observation. It will mean routine tests too, I'm afraid, but to respond otherwise would arouse suspicion.”

He sat back to look at his new patient. “No bad thing, probably; we can clean you up and give you a meal.”

“That sounds like good news,” replied Northcot in hushed tones. “I'm certainly hungry and thirsty, and must smell like a pole-cat. I'm in your hands, and will do what you say.”

Ramsay nodded.

“I have what you came for,” he said. “Our supply chain broke down, and the material never left here for Panmunjom.”

He went to the console behind the bed, and pressed the bell. He was fitting the blood pressure apparatus when the nurse arrived – a pretty young thing, Maurice noticed.

“Soon-Bok here speaks reasonable English,” said Ramsay, as he noted Maurice's blood pressure, “and will look after you.”

He turned to the nurse.

“Mr. Northcot is a technician visiting the research centre, and believes he managed to expose himself to quite a high dose of radiation. He is certainly exhibiting early signs of low level radiation sickness – nausea, vomiting and so on, but no diarrhoea or fever yet.”

He looked at Maurice, who nodded agreement.

“Headache?” he asked.

Maurice shook his head.

“Good. We’ll keep him in for observation and the usual tests,” he said to the nurse. “Take his temperature, and check his blood pressure every three hours. Scan him with the Geiger counter every hour – usual thing. I want three blood samples now for urgent tests.”

He turned to Northcot.

“We need to check that the white blood cell count is normal. Any further vomiting or sickness, use this,” he produced a large bowl from beneath the bed. “How close were you to the source of the radiation? Nearer than six feet?”

“No. Further away than that.”

“Good. Check his urine, too,” he said to Soon-Bok, “and when you’ve done that, strip him down and clean him up. Check his clothes for radioactivity and put them through the laundry. Get them back here by the morning. Then arrange for him to have a good meal.”

“If you’re going to throw-up, you need something to do it with,” he said to Northcot. “I’ll come to see you again later.”

Northcot didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“By the way,” said Ramsay with a grin as he pulled back the curtain to leave, “Soon-Bok means *‘gentle and blessed’*. You’re in good hands.”

Northcot had slept the sleep of the un-Godly until an orderly arrived with breakfast – green tea and a rice cake. Ramsay followed him into the curtained cubicle.

“I am pleased to say that all your tests have proved negative, and that you are probably not suffering from radiation sickness after all. Possibly something you have eaten.” The Professor announced. “However, if you do have radiation sickness, it is also possible for the symptoms to return after a brief period, so I shall provide you with medication in case that happens. Otherwise, you are free to leave.”

He waved a hand to dismiss the orderly.

“Dr. Choi is now very ill, and you should not visit him,” he said quietly. “We have passed word to his nephew, and arranged for your return. You will leave here shortly.”

Ramsay left before Northcot could even begin to thank him.

Almost immediately another nurse appeared, complete with white coat and stethoscope.

It was Kang Soo, frowning and with his finger to his lips.

“I have come to take you back,” he announced quietly. “Here is the medication the Professor promised to give you.”

There were two packages, with a large radioactive black and yellow symbol label on one side, and a Red Cross on the other.

A typed label gave explicit instructions – In the event of a repeat of the radiation sickness symptoms, take this medication as prescribed and report immediately to the nearest Hospital. AVOID CONTACT WITH OTHER PEOPLE AT ALL COSTS.

‘That should be enough to keep curious fingers from opening it,’ thought Maurice. *‘Well done, Ramsay.’*

“Come with me,” said Soo, grabbing Northcot’s back pack.

Outside the Hospital, he bundled Northcot into a rather battered ambulance, turned on the siren and flashing blue lights, and made off at high speed.

Only then could Maurice ask, "How the hell did you get here?"

"It's a long story – tell you later. We must get out of here, fast."

Which is what they did – in silence.

Not far out of the village, they swerved down a side road, and came to a sudden halt.

"Out!" commanded Kang.

They scrambled out, as a motorbike arrived from the opposite direction. Kang and the driver exchanged places without a word, and Northcot climbed on to the pillion.

The old ambulance sped off.

Kang delved into his back-pack and pulled out three slim boxes, which he gave to Maurice.

"Compo-rations," he announced. "One day packs, to keep you going. Eat the contents raw if you can't cook them – quite good, however, especially if you're desperate. My orders are to get you on a safe route home, and leave you. I then have to stay on to try to resurrect the fragile network MI6 had here, which has just about collapsed. The plot is to get you to Kaesong, where you will be met. You will change into military uniform, and be escorted in a dash across the Demarcation Zone where American forces will meet you and take you into South Korea. I'm glad it's you, not me," he said. "If the North Koreans see you go, you're as good as dead – they don't like defectors."

They sped off down the rutted country road, but not for long.

As they neared a narrow muddy river crossed by a railway bridge, shots rang out.

"We've been followed!" shouted Kang. "We must split up – good luck!"

With that, he flung the bike into a skid which threw them both off. Northcot ran for his life into the dense undergrowth, apparently unseen by their followers, while Kang headed for the river. He dived in, surrounded by a hail of bullets. He threw his back pack into the river as he went, hoping the gunmen would think it was his passenger who had also dived in.

As Kang hit the river, he jack-knifed, and swam back underwater towards the gunmen, who concentrated their fire further across the river ahead of where they naturally thought he would be. It was an old trick, but it worked.

He made his way silently underwater into the reed bed at the river's edge and lay beneath the surface, raising his head only briefly for breath. He could see and hear the gunmen, who eventually withdrew.

He did not see Northcot again, who had made good his escape through the woodland alongside the track, towards the railway bridge.

Maurice could hear a train approaching, fortunately slowly before crossing the river bridge, and managed to sprint after it and scramble aboard one of the freight wagons.

But now he was heading back the way he had come, and guessed that the train might be intercepted by his pursuers, so once it had crossed the river and before the train began to gather speed again, he leapt off, and hid in the scrub and bushes on the embankment just below the level of the track.

He was badly shaken, no mistake, but unhurt. He looked back at the river, but could see no sign of Kang Soo.

He had no clear idea of what to do next, but he knew he had to make his way in the other direction, if he was ever to reach Kaesong. But once again, the plans carefully made for him had fallen apart, and, once again, he was very much on his own.

He decided to wait where he was until dusk. He could now send the 'Collected' message, although he doubted on present form if he would ever 'deliver'. As he lay hidden, he opened the packages given to him by Ramsay. The contents appeared identical. He kept

one intact, but secreted the contents of the other in his clothing, back-pack, shoes – wherever he could.

It now seemed as if he was very much on his own, with nobody to help him and no escape route.

On the distant road, he heard a convoy of military vehicles. They were certainly after him.

But there was nobody he could turn to for help now, between him and home. For the first time in his long career ‘travelling’, he doubted if he would ever get there. He was half way round the world in a hostile country and being hunted down.

He heard a train approaching from the opposite direction, heading the way he needed to go. It slowed to cross the bridge. He made no attempt to scramble aboard, but decided to wait for another, after dark perhaps, when those chasing after him may, with any luck, have started searching somewhere else. They were almost bound to stop this train in their efforts to hunt him down, but he reasoned that they may let the next one pass unhindered.

He could only hope, and hide, and gather his thoughts.

If only there was someone between here and London he could turn to for help. He had no clear idea where he was, or how he was going to get out of this wretched country, never mind get home. There was certainly no point in trying to get through the DMZ without help, although he would try to get to Kaesong. At least he had been there before.

But then where would he go? Into China, perhaps, or Japan? He thought South Korea would be too risky, even if he could get there.

Someone, somewhere, knew about the vital information he had with him, and desperately wanted to stop him getting away with it.

They were bound to assume that he would head south.

It was nearly dark when the next train approached – another freight train. Like the others, it slowed to cross the bridge, but it was still going at a fair pace when Maurice left his cover and gave chase. There was one freight car with the side door open, and that’s the one he wanted.

He quickly formed the view that the train had not slowed down as much as it should. He had trouble keeping up with it, but eventually threw his backpack and then himself onto the passing wagon. He could barely grasp the truck as he desperately tried to haul himself aboard.

Suddenly, a hand grasped him by the waist band of his trousers and tried to help haul him aboard. It went through his mind that it must be a friendly hand – otherwise a boot would have stamped on his grasping fingers instead.

As he was dragged inside, he lost a good deal of skin from one of his shins, but was eventually thrown into a corner on top of a pile of sacks of rice.

He was gasping for breath and in some pain.

“Welcome aboard,” said Kang Soo.

“Not you again!” exclaimed Northcot.

“I thought you might catch this train,” said Soo.

“I missed the last one,” responded a breathless Northcot.

“I really hate commuting, don’t you? Let me look at that leg.”

He was obviously well trained in first aid, and had basic kit in his bag, with which he quickly cleaned and dressed the wound.

“Keep it clean,” he said with a grin.

“Are you going far?” asked Northcot.

“Kaesong.”

“How do you know this is going there?”

"I asked the conductor chappie. He let me on without a ticket! Some people will do anything for a decent bribe."

"And then snitch – report you. Never trust anyone in this country. We shall be met when we get there, you watch."

"He has no means of telling anyone we're on board – I 'fixed' his radio for him when he wasn't looking. I suggest now we crack open one of these delicious packets of compositions."

"Yours or mine," asked Northcot.

They laughed.

"What happens after Kaesong," asked Maurice.

"I have to leave you there, and get on with trying to patch up the network. But what will you do? I don't know anyone there who can help you, and if you try to cross the DMZ, you'll fry."

"There's nobody there who can help me," admitted Northcot. "Or anywhere else for that matter, except that it has occurred to me that there is one bloke who just might get me back to UK if I can track him down. But only one."

"And where's he?"

"China."

"China? With what you've got in your hip pocket? You're probably going to fry anyway."

"I haven't worked out my route by any means, but I hoped to remember enough of our briefing at Bourleywood to get me back to the coast where you and Park Yon got ashore, and perhaps get out by sea – fishing boat, or something."

Soo thought for a moment.

"Where do you need to head for?"

"Anywhere on the east coast of China, then I'll need to make my way south."

Soo looked hard at Maurice.

"Towards Shanghai?"

Maurice nodded. "That sort of way, I suppose. It might be easier and safer heading down the coast than going inland."

"Tell you what I'll do then, since you're an old mate. I'll take you to where we got ashore, near the estuary of the Chiongchon River, west of Mundok. There's a decent sized fishing fleet there – ocean going by the look of some of them. We could do with a few contacts there anyway, so perhaps I can talk you aboard one of them for a cruise, even if only part of the way."

"What are the chances?"

"Since I'm Korean and you're not, I probably have a better chance than you would on your own. But if I get you aboard one of these stinking old vessels, you really will be on your own from then on."

"Anywhere on that coast of China would be good. I guess I can make my own way after that."

"Once you've left North Korea, I can get word to London."

"They'll be pleased."

"Not if I tell them you've gone to China with their nuclear secrets."

"Don't tell them then."

There was excitement and relief in the MI6 HQ, when the ops room reported that it had received the 'collected' message from Northcot. It meant that he had managed to rendezvous with Professor Ramsay as planned, and get away again.

But the relief was short lived when they then received a brief message from Kang Soo, who was equipped with communications equipment, to say that they had been betrayed and were on the run having escaped an armed ambush.

Since then, however – silence. They had no idea where either of the men were or even whether they were still alive and operating together.

There were fears, too, that Ramsay had been compromised by the operation, which would have made matters ten times worse. As it was, the already shaky network in North Korea had taken a battering, and they had taken a huge risk sending Kang Soo back there, not only to help Northcot, but also to try to rebuild the network of agents and informers. But their worst fears were eventually proved to be unfounded, when Ramsay managed to get word through that Dr. Choi Shin had died. So he at least was still there and operating on their behalf.

As Head of MI6, Sir Geoffrey Sefton had been in almost hourly contact with Jack Salisbury to keep him updated. For a change, the Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation was sitting in Sefton's office.

"This has all been nail-biting stuff, has it not," he said to 'C'.

"And it's by no means over yet," Sefton reminded him.

"Quite so."

"But at least Ramsay seems to have avoided detection."

"So far. But he is a vital link for us, and we all knew the risks in getting him directly involved."

"To sum up," said 'C', "Maurice Northcot has collected the information, via Professor Ramsay, from the now-deceased Dr. Choi. But where the information now is, which we so desperately need, nobody knows."

"Neither do we know where Northcot and Kang are, or even whether they are still alive."

"And if they are still alive, where they are going."

Jack Salisbury strode over to the window.

"I almost believe you have a better view than I do," he said.

He turned as a tray of tea was delivered.

"Ah; tea! I think better with a cuppa."

"Better still with Scotch, as I do, but it is a bit early, even for us."

Salisbury grinned.

"Are you taking bets on where Northcot will go, if he has been spared?"

"None at all," replied Sefton.

"If he's any sense – and he has plenty – he will keep well away from China, bearing in mind the information he has collected."

Salisbury ambled over to the map on the wall.

"Which only leaves Russia or Japan, and he can only get to Japan by sea."

"Either way, he needs to head north or east."

"Our SAS man won't be of much help."

"His orders were to get Northcot to Panmunjom, for a dash across the DMZ, but that option was obviously blown out of the water when the pick-up at the museum failed."

"Northcot is no longer a priority for Kang, anyway. He has work to do patching up our network while there is still something of it left to patch up."

There was a knock at the door, and James Piper burst in.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we've just had a patchy signal from Northcot – nothing strong, but not a straight line, either."

"Thank the Lord he's still alive," said Salisbury.

"Yes, but he's heading south and west."

“Towards China? I can’t believe it,”
“Looks like it. Where the hell does he think he’s going?”

He was going to find the one man in the world now who could help him.

17.

THE TUNNEL

Major Peter Northcot’s phone rang. His mobile.
He looked at the clock on his digital radio.

This was his second tour in Hong Kong, but nobody ever rang him at home on his mobile at 04.37 in the morning. On a Sunday. Not even his secure phone rang at that time. Not even in Hong Kong. Well, not often, anyway.

He switched on the bedside light, thumbed the button to answer the phone and said ‘hello’.

“Who’s that?” said a voice he didn’t recognise.

“Who wants to know?”

It was plainly somebody he didn’t know. All his contacts were in the mobile’s address book, and one would have shown up on the screen if the caller had been listed.

“What number is that?”

“The number you dialled, probably.”

“I want to know who I’m talking to,” said the voice, irritably.

“You mean who you *were* talking to,” he replied, and rang off.

The phone rang again. It was the same number as before, now automatically logged on his phone and displayed on the small screen. He jotted the number down – a quick check in the morning would find the owner of the mobile.

“Was I talking to you just now?” said the same voice.

“How would I know who you were talking to just now?”

“I dialled the same number as before, and you sound the same as the chap who answered it last time.”

“Do you have the slightest idea what the time is?”

“Half past four – I’m sorry, but it’s urgent.”

“What is?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Ring my office later, then, and my PA will arrange a meeting. But only when I know who you are and what you want and if I agree that it is urgent.”

He rang off again.

He didn’t really have an office as such. His wasn’t that kind of job. But he hired an agency to take care of things like this. They provided him with his own ‘office’ phone number, which they monitored. Nobody much rang it, but when somebody did, they told him.

The phone rang for a third time.

“I’m going to gamble that I’ve got the right number,” said the voice. “I’m in Singapore, and arriving at Chek Lap Kok on UA 896. Meet me. It’s urgent and important. You’ll recognise me.”

This time, the man rang off before Peter could say anything. *What the hell was going on?*

Peter rang the stored mobile number. There was no answer. Not even a voice mail.

He swung his legs out of bed, and went into his small kitchen to make coffee and to think. It was five o'clock now. If he remembered rightly, it was about 4 hours flying time from Singapore to Hong Kong, so the man couldn't arrive much before 0930. UA 896, the man had said. United Airlines, eh? American. The man didn't have an American accent – very English, in fact. He didn't recognise the voice, but the man said Peter would know him when he saw him.

All very strange. Peter didn't like things like this. They made him uncomfortable – and nervous.

He rang the airport to check to arrival time of the United flight. Leaving Singapore at 0640 and arriving at 10.30. So the man was still in Singapore. He rang his mobile again, but still no reply. Maybe in the departure lounge by now, unless he was changing planes; in that case he'd be in the transit lounge.

Northcot checked on the mobile phone number. Not listed. Now that *was* very odd, and no mistake. It must be listed – the man had used it three times this morning already. He checked again. No trace.

This whole thing began to stink.

A man who refused to identify himself over a phone that didn't exist, who Peter didn't recognise but would know when they met, was arriving in Hong Kong in a few hours on an American flight from Singapore and demanding to be met because it was 'urgent and important.' What was?

Only one way to find out, decided Northcot, pouring a second cup. Get to the airport and meet the man.

He rang a contact in security at the airport. In spite of the fact that Hong Kong was now under direct Chinese rule, bits of the 'old boy network' from the Colonial days still worked. An airside pass would be waiting for him in arrivals, and Northcot could watch the passengers off the United flight from behind a one-way glass window overlooking the baggage gondola. If he saw someone he knew, he could slip out to meet him – if it was someone he would rather not meet, he would stay put until the man had gone.

Peter Northcot decided to walk to Lam Tin, and catch the A22 coach to the airport. Only 39 dollars, which he could claim back, and a nice morning for the 34 Km drive from Kowloon. He had nothing much else to do, anyway. He arrived at the airport early, and had breakfast before he picked up his pass.

The plane arrived on time, and it was only 15 minutes or so before the passengers started to arrive at the gondola in the baggage hall. His view from the security office was as good as it could get. It was specially located for an up-close view of arrivals before they went through customs. He recognised nobody.

He made his way, the long way round, to the arrivals hall the other side of customs, where people were met by friends, relations and hire-car drivers bearing the name of their intended passengers on bits of paper. He had access to a balcony above the crowds, where he could see but not be seen. Again, nobody. There was nobody he recognised, either, among the meeters and greeters.

He made a final check. All the passengers had now left the customs area, and there was no baggage from the United flight left on the aircraft, or in the immigration hall, or on the gondola. A helpful official, suitably impressed by his pass, provided him with a passenger list. None of the names on it rang even the faintest of bells.

This was altogether bloody odd, he thought.

He could not work out what was going on. The man who rang him three times at such an un-Godly hour this morning, had not rung again or left a text message or anything. But then, how could he. His phone didn't exist.

The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became. Suppose - just suppose - that he, Peter Northcot, had walked straight into a trap. Just suppose - only suppose - that some villain or other had wanted him out of the way for an hour or so. Out of the flat. His mind raced to remember what, if anything, there might be in the flat. Nothing of any value, that's for sure - but papers? Code books, perhaps? He was certain there was nothing of value to be found; not to anyone, even the opposition. Almost sure, anyway.

Suddenly, he was in a hurry.

He dashed to the nearest police office, and within minutes was being driven, much too fast, back to Kowloon, blue lights, sirens and all. They dropped him off near his flat, having switched off the bells and whistles a few blocks further away. Kowloon is never quiet, even at this time on a Sunday, but it was as un-crowded as it gets. He sprinted down several back-alleys, cutting through to his block, and went up the fire-escape, two at a time. It opened onto the lift lobby, with its faded carpet and old Chinese prints on the wall. He could see there was no-one about, and the lift was on the ground floor.

Trouble was, he only had a front door. There was only one way in to his flat.

He had a spy-hole in his door - the sort that lets you see who's outside, ringing the bell. He had modified his a bit, so that he could look in as well. He carefully adjusted the focus, and peered in to his front room.

There was a man standing at his balcony window, looking out over the harbour.

He was silhouetted against the daylight, so Peter could see no detail, but the man appeared to be casually dressed, and was standing with his hands in his trouser pockets. *Did he have a gun?*

The man moved away from the window, and looked nonchalantly around the flat's living room. He glanced at his watch, and moved back to admire the view from the window, hands in pockets again.

He didn't appear threatening, but Peter knew he had to get into his flat somehow. And quickly. He heard the elevator on its way up. He silently put his key onto the lock and took out his Smith and Wesson.

In one swift movement, he opened the door, burst in and threw himself flat, levelling the gun at the man in the window.

"One move, and you're dead."

The startled man froze, still with his back to Peter.

"For God's sake don't shoot," pleaded the man.

Peter stood up, and closed the door behind him.

"Put your hands behind your head, one at a time and nice and slowly," demanded Peter.

The man did as he was told, nice and slowly.

Peter walked over to the man, jabbed his gun into the man's ribs, and quickly frisked him.

No gun and no knife.

Peter took a few steps back.

"Now turn round," demanded Peter. "Nice and slowly. I've had a bad morning already, so don't make me any more nervous."

The man turned to face him.

"Hello, Peter," he said. "Long time, no see."

This time, it was Peter's turn to be startled. Shocked and astonished, more like it.

He lowered his gun.

“Dad. What the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, but I need your help. Urgently.”

“I recognise the voice now. You rang me from Singapore.”

“I rang you, but I wasn’t in Singapore. I just wanted anyone who might be listening in to think that’s where I was.”

“Dad, you look terrible. But I’m not surprised – I nearly killed you. Come and sit down, and let me get you something.”

“I’ve had a bad couple of weeks, I won’t deny. Not much sleep and little to eat. But I can’t relax yet. I must get back to London.”

Maurice Northcot slumped onto the sofa.

“If you weren’t in Singapore, where were you? I went to the airport to meet the flight.”

“I know you did. I rang you from across the street and watched you leave for Chek Lap Kok. But can you help me get back to London?” pleaded his father. “You’re my only hope.”

“Of course I can,” Peter reassured him. “Come and sit in the kitchen while I get you something to eat, and you can tell what’s happened.”

“Please get my return to London organised first.”

“OK. But why the great rush? What’s been going on? Why can’t you just go to the airport and catch a plane home like anyone else?”

“Because my life is in danger, that’s why, and I may well have put you at risk now as well. I’m truly sorry about that, but I was desperate for help. That’s why I came here.”

“Where from?”

“Korea. North Korea, as a matter of fact. I work for MI6, and I was sent to get vital information about the Chinese nuclear development programme which the North Koreans are helping with. But the whole operation blew up in my face, including my escape route, and several people who should have been able to help me have been killed, or captured – which is probably worse. So I’ve had to make my own way out. I was south of Pyongyang, near the Demilitarised Zone when it all went wrong, and since then I’ve been operating very much on my own. I eventually managed to collect the information I went for, but the opposition has been hunting me down ever since. Getting out has been a nightmare. You were the only chap in the world who I could think of who might be able to help. So here I am, but I must get to London. I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you can, please help, quickly.

“Are they still after you, then, from the North?”

“Almost certainly. What I have is far too valuable for them to let it go without a fight, which is why I came looking for you. We’re in the same business, after all, and you speak Cantonese. I speak Korean but very little Chinese.”

Peter was appalled and grabbed his secure phone.

“We have several escape routes from here,” said Peter. “Let me get on to my controller at the Embassy. She’ll help, even though it is Sunday.”

“Suzy? I need to use the ‘tunnel’,” he said. “Urgently.”

“You? Not you, I hope.”

“No, a colleague who’s on the run after a job, and has made his way here.”

“Code name?”

Peter put his hand over the mouthpiece.

“She want’s your code name. It’s all right, she’s quite safe. In the same business as us. And this is a secure line – digital satellite link with agile frequency transmission.”

“Dr. Penny.”

Peter repeated the name to his contact. There was silence for a moment.

“Are you quite sure about that?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Describe him.”

“Medium build, about 5ft 9ins, grey hair. Broken nose with scar from mid forehead across his nose to his right cheek.”

There was a pause.

“Are you sure about the scar?”

“Quite sure. It’s feint now, but I put it there.”

“You what?!”

“I did it with a football, years ago – he’s my father.”

Another pause.

“I hardly believe this,” said the girl, “but it sounds like ‘Penny’ all right. The whole world’s been looking for him. Hell of a panic. Earlier today, GCHQ told us they thought they had picked up a signal that matched his voice signature, but they weren’t sure. We thought he was in Singapore.”

“So did I. Now we must get him on the home run in double quick time, before the opposition track him down again.”

“Agreed. The UK is desperate to find him and get him back. Hang on.”

Another pause.

“On second thoughts, don’t hang on. This is going to take a bit of organising. I’ll ring you back in a few minutes – keep the line open.”

They went into the small kitchen, where Peter hurriedly cooked up a meal of sorts for his father.

“But why here? Why did you come here rather than head for Japan, which is closer? The Embassy in Tokyo could have helped you. Or you could even have crossed the border into Russia.”

“I don’t know anyone in Japan, or speak the language, let alone read it. And the Embassy people would have known little or nothing about me. I would have stood out by a mile, and would probably have been caught. Same applies to Russia, although I did have a few official pieces of paper which might have helped.”

“How did you get here, then?”

“Let’s just say I got in by unconventional means. It’s a long story which I’ll tell you one day I hope, but I managed to escape an armed ambush just after I’d collected the information from one of our agents and then made my way to Kaesong by rail. As it happens, I was with a sergeant in the SAS who had been sent to help, and we both managed to get to the coast. After that, I travelled mostly by boat down the east coast of China. I jumped ship near Shanghai, and dared to use public transport for a bit, but I knew they were still tracking me down, so I took to the sea again, making my way south mainly with local fishermen. According to some of the people on the boats I was on, there was an increasingly high level of Chinese ‘gun-boat’ activity. Some fishing boats were even boarded and searched, but thankfully not any that I was on. I’m sure they were looking for me. I eventually fetched up being put ashore on Stonecutters Island as luck would have it, so it was easy getting to Kowloon from there.”

The secure phone rang. It was Suzy.

“Here’s what we’ll do.” she said. “We have a civil crew in town on lay-over, and as luck would have it, there’s an exchange member on board. About the same build as Penny, fortunately. I’ll send him over, and you can do the switch. Get Penny to the Mandarin Hotel where the crew is based, and he can go with them to the airport on the crew coach later. Let’s just hope you’re not being watched. When was your flat last swept?”

“Thursday.”

“Should be all right then, but be careful. Penny is about the most wanted man in the world at the moment, both by us and the opposition.”

The line went dead.

“You’re pretty hot property at the moment, Dad. They’ve all been looking for you, but with any luck we’ll have you out of this flat in an hour or so, and on the way home later tonight.”

He outlined the plan.

“You’ll be on the crew manifest for the British Airways flight out of here later tonight. BA028 leaves about midnight. Once you’re safely on board, change back into civvies and travel as a passenger. Business Class, of course! Non-stop to London, where you’ll be met. It takes about 13 to 14 hours, depending on high level winds over Siberia, so you should get in before six, London time. Now let’s have our meal before your double arrives for the switch.”

“I hope this works,” said his father. “I have two sets of vital documents and copies of plans of their nuclear facilities, mostly on terabyte USB’s, which I simply must get to London. I’ll give you one complete package now. If anything happens to me, you will have to take them. Everybody wants them – UK, USA, United Nations, everybody; especially China.”

“Why China specially?”

“Because it’s about their nuclear development programme, which is being undertaken in North Korea. And before you ask, I know Hong Kong is now part of China, but I ran out of options. I’ve already spent days crossing China with their nuclear secrets in my pocket, which is why they and the Koreans are after me.”

“You’ll be safe here,” Peter tried to reassure him.

“If I’m not, then neither are you. I’m sorry about this, but you are my only hope.”

“Don’t worry – try to relax for a bit, and get stuck into lunch.”

“Let me show you first what I’ve got, and what you must deliver if anything happens to me. They’ve already made a couple of attempts to get me, but hopefully they’re now looking for me in Singapore.”

“Bright move, that, if I may say so.”

“I’ve been in this business, travelling around the world, for long enough. Too long, probably. But if I survive this trip, it will be my last.”

“It will if you don’t, too,” said Peter. “Sorry, Dad. I shouldn’t joke, because I know it’s serious. Just trust me and my people here to get you safely home. Now show me what you’ve got.”

Some of the USBs were in the lining of his small bag, others strapped to his body.

“There’s a letter on its way to you as well. Whatever you do, get that to London as well as the package if I don’t make it. It’s in code, but don’t lose it.”

“I’ve still got every letter you’ve ever written. They have been a bridge between us.”

“I’ve kept all yours, too, as it happens. For the same reason.”

Peter’s secure phone rang. It was Suzy, his controller.

“Alex Sumner will be with you in twenty minutes or so,” she said. “You know the drill. One of our friendly taxis will be cruising nearby when Penny has changed. Go with him to the Mandarin, and make your own way home.”

“OK, Suzy.”

“Peter! Take great care. I want to see you again.”

“You too,” replied Peter.

Suzy Chi-Lye was about the first girl he’d met who he thought he could possibly have a relationship with, but they had agreed it wouldn’t be sensible. Apart from the odd meal together, they had kept at arm’s length from one another.

Peter and his father had just finished their rather hurried meal when the doorbell rang. It was a smartly dressed BA flight attendant, Alex Sumner. Maurice quickly changed into his uniform, which was a remarkably good fit.

"The hat suits you," said Peter. "Let's go!"

Anyone watching closely would have noticed that Alex Sumner had aged quite a bit in the last twenty minutes, and that his trousers could do with lengthening a bit, but there was no sign of anyone suspicious as Peter and his father bustled into the taxi, and headed downtown. Peter left his father at the Mandarin, and decided to walk back to his flat – it would be easier for him to spot if he was being followed. He let himself into the flat, and went to tell Alex that the coast was clear for him to leave.

Alex, though, would be going nowhere.

He was stretched across the bed with a neat but bloody hole in his forehead.

Anyone else would have panicked. The first thing Peter did was check, swiftly but thoroughly, that nothing important had been taken. So far as he could tell, this had not been a robbery that had gone wrong. Everything was in its place, and even things like day-code books were where they should be. The intruder obviously only wanted one thing – to kill.

Now he panicked slightly. He had a murdered body lying across his bed. The real issue, though, was whether the killer had meant to shoot Alex Sumner, or kill his father, the much-wanted escaping spy, or even himself. If they had got the wrong man and found out, they would be back, he concluded. His father had been right. Now he was in danger, too.

There was only one thing to do.

He rang Suzy, and told her what had happened.

"The worry is that we were, after all, being watched, and that my father was being followed," he said.

"You are probably still under surveillance," she replied.

"Exactly. So I need to get out fast myself now. My father left me vital information which has to be delivered to London ASAP. Any 'tunnels' left open?"

"Nothing much," she replied. "The nearest military transport is over 1,000 miles away, and we probably wouldn't be able to divert it, even if it was a good idea. The only other option is a coastal Junk to Macau, and then hope the Portuguese can do something to help you."

"All too slow," said Peter.

After a moment's thought, he said, "So here's what I'm going to do, Suzy. I shall pretend nothing has happened. Sling my bag over my shoulder, get to Chek Lap Kok, buy a ticket, and go home. There's just a chance that if I act quite normally, I shall get away with it, and nobody will notice me."

"I suppose it's worth a try," she said. "I agree that you certainly can't stay here a moment longer than you need, but I can't think of any better plan on the spur of the moment."

"I'm off, then," he said. "Do me a favour if you will, after I've gone. There's a body here to be dealt with, and other bits of admin and paper-work to be collected or sorted out. Will you look after all that for me?"

"Of course I shall," she replied. "And Peter..."

"Yes."

"Please take care!" There was the slightest of pauses. "I love you."

There was only a momentary hesitation from Peter. "You too, Suzy. If I'm spared, I'll be in touch."

For the second time that day, he walked to Lam Tin, and caught the A22 coach to the airport. He was the last to board the coach, and was almost sure he had not been followed. But he had been sure earlier this afternoon, too. What the hell! If someone was after him, they would get him whatever he did. And there was no other way of getting out quickly.

He bought a ticket, Business Class, and checked in.

He spotted nobody suspicious.

With any luck, his father would already be on board the Boeing 777, with the rest of the crew.

By then, he should have ditched the uniform and changed into civvies. The crew were glad to see the back of him. They didn't like this sort of operation, well-rehearsed though it was. Just knowing they had a runner on board made them nervous. They should have found him a seat at the back somewhere, where he could mingle anonymously with the fare-paying passengers.

They'd been airborne for about ten minutes and the seatbelt signs were off, when Peter spotted his father a few rows in front of him. Safe, thank God.

He slid into an empty seat next to him.

"Hello Dad. Long time, no see!"

"Peter! What the devil are you doing here?!"

Peter told him about Alex Sumner.

"I just had to get out, and this was the only way we could think of in a hurry."

"They were probably after me still, not you," said Maurice. "Now I'm responsible for yet another death."

"It's the job, not you, so don't take it personally."

"Sometimes you can't help it."

"I'm in the Army, so I know the feeling."

"I've had enough now, Peter. I've been thinking that for some time, especially after my last trip in Jakarta. I was nearly killed there, too."

"Some cats need more than nine lives," said Peter.

The girl came round with the Champagne.

18.

THE END

"I think I need another one of these," said Peter, holding up his empty flute.

"Why not," replied his father. "I'm beginning to relax for the first time in months. And it's so nice to be together with you again. Let's celebrate that."

"Don't relax just yet," said Peter with a grin. "We're actually flying over the middle of China at the moment, and you've only just got away from there!"

The girl with the champagne came over again.

"I'm surprised the cabin crew are all so friendly, after what happened to that poor fellow Alex Sumner."

"They don't know that anything happened yet. We made sure that not even Head Office was told, let alone this flight crew. Suzy did that. She has also arranged for a reception party to meet us at Heathrow. She will have been on to the Defence Attaché out there to get my future organised, and I gather you normally have a 'hot debrief' after you get back from one of your operations. I suspect I shall be involved in that as well."

“That’s good news. I wouldn’t want to be separated from you immediately we get back, having only just met up again after so long.”

“We’ve used this ‘tunnel’ before, and normally our escapee is last off the aircraft so that we can be sure it’s safe for him to leave. That’ll probably happen to us – much easier too, as we only have cabin baggage. Immigration and customs just won’t be a problem, and we should be met air-side, and driven straight into London.”

“Probably to my HQ in Lambeth,” said Maurice. “After that, we have a lot of catching up to do, you and I.”

“We certainly do.”

“For a start,” said Maurice, “I must tell you about my visit to Sandhurst.”

“The Military Academy?”

“That’s the place. I was at your graduation parade.”

“*What!* Why didn’t you tell me for heaven’s sake? It would have made my day if I’d known, and we could have had lunch together in the Mess.”

“Well, I wasn’t supposed to be there, for one thing. I was supposed to be operating in Warsaw, but in fact I was in Indonesia. Nobody knew I’d dashed back to see the parade until I was discovered on the plane back. One of the crew spotted me going through the Sovereign’s Parade programme, and mentioned it to the Military Attaché to Singapore, who happened to be on the same plane and recognised me. Which reminds me – I must ring Alastair Carter some time – he could have got me the sack!”

“As you said, there’s obviously a lot to catch up on.”

“Will you be going back to Hong Kong sometime?”

“I doubt it, after this,” replied Peter. “Apart from anything else, I’m a Defence cut. I’ve been made redundant thanks to the Defence Review, and was due to leave the Army in a month or so anyway.”

“This was to be my last run, too,” said his father. “I very nearly didn’t make it into retirement, though. It’s only thanks to you and your controller, Suzy that I’m here at all.”

“We should be OK now, Dad.”

“What will you do when you’ve left the Army?”

“Not a clue. I shall get a pension of some sort and redundancy pay I suppose, but it won’t be enough. Probably some sort of desk job at the Ministry is all I can hope for.”

“I’ve got a desk job lined up to see me through to retirement,” said Maurice. “Promotion, too it will be. You could take my old job – this one. I could probably fix that, if you’re interested. You’re better at languages than I ever was, and the Foreign Office is always looking for linguists who are prepared to travel a bit.”

“Could be fun,” said Peter. “What about you?”

“If I’m spared, I shall spend some time as Head of Section 7, and then retire gracefully to the country. You’ve been to the cottage in Hampshire, near some pretty good fishing. We could set up home there together if you like.”

“It’s what we’ve always wanted,” mused Peter. “Perhaps I could get Suzy over as well. She’s an excellent cook, you know. I’m sure you’d like her.”

“And she’s already proved to be pretty good at looking after both of us,” said Maurice.

The girl came round with the champagne again, without being asked this time.

“I think I’ll sleep all the way home after this and dinner,” said Maurice.

“Me too,” replied Peter. “We could chat up here all night, but I guess we’ll have plenty of time for that in the days to come.”

Peter had managed to negotiate a long weekend away from his office in MI6 Headquarters, where he was learning the ropes in his new career, to do a bit of fishing and help with the odd job in his father's cottage near the river. He got down there just after lunch on Friday, and wasn't due back until sometime on Monday.

He needed the break, and he knew the fishing had been good in recent days. Although the Mayfly hatch was more or less over for another season, there were a few hatching most evenings, and the fish were still taking carefully presented artificial mayfly nymphs.

Maurice was looking forward to some time together with Peter again. They had both been working far too hard in recent months, and were in danger of drifting apart again.

A lot had happened recently.

Choi Yong had gone back to North Korea, and was already passing them useful information even though he had yet to graduate. Hang Soo, on the other hand, had left the Army to join MI6, and he too had returned 'home' to North Korea, to run the network he had so successfully rescued.

And Maurice Northcot had retired.

A desk didn't suit him, he had concluded. Fishing did.

He had decided to get to the river early on that Saturday morning, while Peter had a bit of a lay in and got a barbeque lunch going, so that he could fish in the evening. They had planned a pub lunch on Sunday – some locally bred roast lamb and a glass or two of locally brewed beer to wash it down.

This was sort of life Maurice had dreamed of. It's why he had retired. He wasn't sure that the contrast of a quiet life would suit him, but it did.

He was a good way down the river when he smelt the smoke, wafting in the breeze.

Lunchtime already?

He turned back, and saw it immediately. It looked more than a barbeque. He quickened his step, and soon heard the sirens of the fire engine.

Now, he ran, as the smoke thickened.

It was his cottage.

As he approached, he could see an ambulance as well as the fire engine.

Peter?

The barbeque had done it. A spark had caught the thatch. Peter had been in one of the upstairs rooms with the garden hose when the old beam fell on him.

He was dead by the time they got him to the hospital.

There were rather more people at the crematorium than Maurice had expected, although still not that many.

He knew the vicar; a retired military padre, so he understood.

As the curtain closed, they played the Benedictus from Jenkins' *'The Armed Man'*. Maurice liked that, and he thought Peter would, too. In any case, it was appropriate.

The Padre stood by him, waiting to lead him out of the Chapel, but Maurice sat and listened for a moment. The Padre understood.

After a while, Maurice left his seat at the end of the front pew, and followed the man into the early summer sunshine.

"A great loss for you," said the Padre, quietly.

Maurice looked at him.

"My sadness is that I was never much of a father to him. My work kept us apart. We rarely met, and such meetings were very precious."

"I can understand that. In my work, I come across many similar situations, especially in the military."

“We kept in touch by letter,” said Maurice. “I still have all of his, and he still has – or had – all of mine. They were a bridge between us, our letters.”

Maurice looked back towards the Chapel.

“And now that bridge has gone for ever.”

Maurice felt a light tug at his sleeve. He turned.

“Dr. Penny?” asked a girl. She was petite. Chinese probably.

He looked at her closely.

“Dr. Penny?” she asked again.

“Suzy?”

“Yes.”

“From Hong Kong?”

“Yes.”

She reached up and kissed him gently on his cheek. He felt her tears on his face.

“You saved my life,” he said.

She nodded.

“And Peter’s,” he added.

She nodded again.

“Have you come from Hong Kong specially?”

“Specially. We never did say goodbye. It was an emergency, and you both left so quickly.”

“Are you staying?”

“No. I just had to say goodbye properly, that’s all.”

“Thank you,” said Maurice, himself now close to tears. “But why don’t you stay?”

“Peter wanted me to come here, to join you at your cottage. But we decided it would not be for the best.”

“I know,” said Maurice.

“I wish now that I had come to live here.” She paused. “I loved Peter.”

“So did I.”

They turned to watch a butterfly settle briefly on the garland of flowers that had been on the coffin.

“A Red Admiral,” said the Padre, who had been standing next to them.

It fluttered off again.

“A passing visit. Like life itself, really”

Maurice nodded.

He turned towards the others who were there to witness the passing of son Peter. James Piper was there. So was Betty Ogden, and a couple of others, probably from his office in Lambeth. Maurice did not recognise them. There were two in uniform – from Peter’s old Regiment, he guessed.

“Where will you go?” asked Betty Ogden.

“Back to the cottage, when it’s restored. Not too much damage. It shouldn’t take long, and it’s what I always wanted. So I shall go back there when it’s ready to finish my retirement.”

“I’ve a spare room if that would ever help,” she offered. “It would be nice to have you stay.”

They had known one another for a long time.

“That’s very kind of you. Thanks. I would like that. And you can come to the cottage when it’s ready.”

“Only if you teach me to fish for trout, rather than for men.”

“Agreed.”

The Padre took his sleeve.

“There’s a spare room at vicarage, too, if you like. It’s in the village, and you could supervise the work on your cottage.”

“That might be a good idea, but I’d be in the way,” said Maurice. “You’re a busy chap, I know.”

“Not in the least,” he replied. “It occurs to me that I may be able to help you build a new bridge, between you and Peter.”

“A new bridge?”

“Why not?”

“You know I’m not a religious man,” protested Maurice after a moments’ thought. “I never go to church.”

“I know, but we could try.”

“We could go fishing, too.”

Maurice looked around him. People with friends, people with relations, people with somewhere to go afterwards.

He would go back with Betty Ogden, who took his arm to guide him away.

He turned to watch as a small red car left the crematorium. The girl driving it did not look back or wave.

She had said goodbye.

They had both said goodbye.

It was time to build a future.

Perhaps even time to build a new bridge, if that was possible.

Peter would like that.

APPENDIX

THE PEOPLE

UK INTELLIGENCE

Jack Salisbury – Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation.

Sir Geoffrey Sefton, - Head of MI6 - ‘C’.

James Piper –Head of Section 7, MI6.

Maurice Northcot – MI6 agent (code name “Dr. Penny”).

Doug Ritchie – Duty Officer, MI6.

Jon Field – duty Ops Room watchkeeper, MI6.

Giles Clayton - duty Ops Room watchkeeper, MI6.

Betty Ogden – MI6 linguist.

Prof Peter Ramsay – MI6 (Oncologist at Yongbyon hospital).

Lee Cooper – MI6 agent.

Len Ellis – MI6 technical officer.

General Sir Pearson-Jones - Chief of Defence Intelligence.

Martin Davis – Defence Intelligence.

HM GOVERNMENT

Sir William Forsyth – Permanent Secretary, Foreign Office.

Sir Len Watkins – Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence.

Warren Russell – Director of Bourleywood House.

Professor John Williams – Director, Culham Nuclear Research Laboratory (Fusion).

Paul Sheppard – AWE (Atomic Weapons Establishment), Aldermaston.
Professor Newman – UKAEA – Atomic Energy Establishment – Harwell.

THE SAS

Col Seb Owen – Officer Commanding, 22 Squadron SAS.
Sergeant Kang Soo.
Sergeant Park Yon.

THE CIA

Charles J. Haines Jr – Director.
Powell Freeman – Deputy Director.
Lou Lopez – sent to London.

NORTH KOREAN

(Surname precedes given name).
Choi Yong – Student .
Lee Kwang-sun – Student.
Cheong Sung – Student ‘minder’.
Dr. Choi Shin – Yong’s Uncle (Nuclear scientist).
Jang Nam – 2nd scientist.
Moon Pak – scientists’ ‘minder’.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Duncan James was an RAF pilot before eventually reaching the higher levels of the British Civil Service, in a career that included top-level posts at home and abroad with the Defence Ministry, and work with the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard.

A life-long and compulsive writer, he has produced everything from Government statements, Ministerial briefing papers, media announcements and reference books. As a public affairs consultant and freelance author, he was a prolific writer of magazine articles on a wide variety of subjects, as well as short stories and three novels. This is the fifth of a series, all of which are published by Smashwords.
