KILLING KIM

 The bedside alarm went off at 7:00 a.m.

 James Bond was not by nature an early riser, but he had a 10:00 a.m. appointment with M, so he knew he needed to be extra alert. Bond had been on a two-week leave to rest after concluding some nasty business near the Syrian border. He quickly climbed into his sweats and trainers and went out for a vigorous hour jog. The day was overcast, but for late September, the temperature was still comfortable.

 Bond lived in an attractive Regency-style neighborhood in the Notting Hill area of London these past four years, at #1 Stanley Gardens, W11, 2ND. His second floor flat balcony faced west onto Stanley Crescent. He chose it because it was only five miles from MI6 headquarters – a short ten-minute drive in good traffic – and because any bright rising sun in the morning would not disturb his sleep.

 At the end of his run, Bond stopped at the Farm Girl café, which was just a block from his flat. Run by a chipper young couple from Australia, it served breakfast all day. He ordered three scrambled eggs, Greek yogurt, and a large black coffee to take away. As usual, both the wait staff and clientele were twenty-something Millennials, with their colored hair, facial piercings, and tattoos. The food was all ‘organic’ this and ‘naturally sustained’ that, but it was always tasty. On other days if he had more time, Bond would walk to Portobello Market down the street and buy his own groceries and cook for himself. Or more commonly, have his latest girlfriend cook for him.

 Being a bachelor, James Bond was not concerned with decorating his flat in any harmonic manner. The few artworks he had acquired (mostly framed prints of historic sailing ships) were still resting on the hardwood floors against the walls. Furniture was sparse, and used laundry was in a casual pile in one corner of the bedroom, to be sent out. The dishwasher was full. Books rested in a stack near the sofa. He had a laptop computer and a mobile, but Bond didn’t own a television. Once a month, when he was not on assignment abroad, he had a regular housecleaner come and tidy up.

 Bond hungrily ate his take-away, took first a quick steaming hot then a longer icy cold shower, shaved, carefully applied a nicotine patch to his left upper arm, and dressed in a dark tan suit with cream shirt, black knit silk tie, and black oxfords. He glanced at his copy of The Times – endless problems and strife worldwide – and fleetingly wondered how much longer the planet could keep going like this.

 At least he could depend on his company car, a beloved magnetic silver Aston Martin DB11. The V-8 engine roared to life, then purred contentedly as he headed to Vauxhall. MI6 headquarters – dubbed Babylon on the Thames or even Legoland by cheeky staff members because of its rather peculiar architecture – soon loomed ahead. Bond eased his car into the company underground parking garage, then took the lift up to his office. After checking his phone messages and reading some inter-office memos, Bond walked down the hall towards M’s office. It was 9:55 a.m. when he saw Ms. Moneypenny.

 “Good Morning, James. How have you been? Did you enjoy your break?” Moneypenny was 27 years old, a Jamaican with a pearly smile, cocoa eyes, and flawless café au lait skin. She’ll make some lucky bloke very happy someday, Bond mused.

 “I’m glad to be out of that Syrian mess alive, Penny, and yes, I had a pleasant leave, thank you.” Bond replied. What made Moneypenny especially exciting was not just her beauty, but her calm intelligence. Professionalism, however, precluded anything beyond mutual admiration and the business at hand.

 “He’s ready for you now, so you can go right in,” she indicated, as the room’s clock chimed the hour. The sound of Big Ben echoed similarly outside in the distance.

 M was busy reading a thick file when Bond walked in. The Section Chief removed his eyeglasses and motioned Bond to the chair opposite the large mahogany desk. “Have a seat, 007. Nice job there in Syria. Your action saved the lives of several of our undercover agents. Feel rested and fit?” M’s real name was Ajit Thakur, from Mumbai, age 47, married, with three sons. He had been Section Chief for five years now. As Bond had heard it, the name ‘Ajit’ meant ‘invincible.’

 “Thank you, Sir. I believe I am ready for my next assignment.”

 “Good. I understand that you have given up your smoking habit. How is that going? I believe you were up to three packs a day until last month.”

 “Frankly, Sir, the craving is still there, but my Section Physician Dr. Hawley has me on the patch and on nicotine chewing gum. Both are very helpful. I believe I’m getting better every day.” Bond had smoked a special Turkish blend of Morlands, with its three gold bands, for many years. Now at age 38, they were starting to hurt his endurance, so Bond was determined to quit.

 “What about drink, James? What did Hawley say about that?”

 Bond was embarrassed by M’s directness, but answered with honesty. “I have cut back, Sir. Probably half of what it once was.”

 “Sorry to put you on the spot, 007, but I wanted to hear it from you. As you know, you are one of only three agents in this department that are licensed to kill. You are also the oldest. Most ‘double 0’ men here quit by the time they hit 35. Just burn out, living on the edge 24/7, so to speak. The muscle reflexes go, the eyes lose their 20/20, it’s only natural. It’s a hard, hazardous, and lonely life, I don’t have to tell you. So I need to know if my top man is still up to par, especially with possibly the most important job of your career before us now.”

 M paused and moved through his stack of files. “I just got off the phone with the Foreign Secretary, who was in touch with the Russians, the Americans, and the Chinese. The current situation with Kim Jong-Un and his nuclear threats is increasingly alarming and unacceptable. Putin, Trump, and Xi Jinping are all on board with having Kim removed with extreme prejudice. The three major powers claim they cannot get directly involved due to political constraints. That leaves us. They have offered to share intelligence, then look the other way. Her Majesty’s government has directly authorized us to kill Kim Jong-Un. What do you think, James? You don’t happen to speak any Korean, do you?”

 “No, Sir – just French, German, Spanish, and Russian. But if you could specifically tell me what you have in mind…”

 “No problem, 007. Kim went to school in Switzerland, so he can read, write, and speak in English, French, and German. Here’s our plan: We will fake your death and provide you with a new identity, but it will mean this will be your final assignment. Once you are gone, you are gone. Your twelve years here were exemplary, James, and as a reward for taking this possible suicide mission, Her Majesty’s government has authorized MI6 to grant you a double service pension for the rest of your life -- 98,000 Pounds Sterling per annum.”

 Bond remained attentive but unexpressive. Yet in his mind, he knew he would accept. He knew deep down that he was secretly psychologically tired of his work – the tedious desk work, the stressful and exhausting field assignments, the lonely lifestyle of always being on guard and of being able to trust almost no one, with no time for a normal life of marriage and children. Plus he had to live with the memory of killing fifteen people in the line of duty. Those he killed surely deserved it. But like a battlefield soldier, nightmares crept up, and peace seemed never to come. Bond concluded that it was time to go before he completely burned out. So this was an ‘out’ with honor and with justification, for killing Kim would be worth Bond’s final official action. Then the freedom to enjoy a regular life afterwards, if he survived! That would be the true reward.

 M continued and hence Bond’s focus returned to the present. “Here are the specifics, 007: You will be killed by an imaginary female named Kimberly Abbott. Her photo will be a computer composite. She was jilted by your refusal to marry her after a long relationship. Then she commits suicide. You will have an official obituary in The Times, a Royal Navy Commander’s funeral for your four years of service, and even a grave plot with headstone. Meanwhile, you will secretly be here in our company hospital, undergoing a change of appearance. Your blue-grey eyes will be injected with a new, permanent dye which will change their color to brown. A chemical injection will change your black hair and eyebrows – indeed all of your body hair -- permanently to a greyish-white, ‘silvery’ color. That takes about a week. Then you will undergo a further chemical injection which will aid in making you look ten years older, with facial blotches and some wrinkles. But that third effect will wear off in about two months, so don’t worry. We’ll do some dermal abrasion on your 2 " vertical right cheek scar, and of course alter your fingerprints with laser. Your new identity will be as a black market arms dealer from Vienna named Klaus Rybeck. You will take the Chunnel to Paris, fly to Moscow, board the Trans-Siberian Express to Vladivostok, where one of Russian friends will meet you and transport you to Khasan, which is on the border with North Korea. We have a long-time mole in Kim’s inner circle, a general named Woon Ha Lee. He will escort you to Pyongyang, and later to Kim Jong-Un’s Presidential Palace and private residence. There you will meet Kim and offer to sell him a black market 28 kilogram, two kilo-ton, suitcase-sized nuclear bomb for $15 million U.S. After you conclude the deal, you will shake the Supreme Leader’s hand. On your right hand will be a signet ring, specially designed by Q Branch, which will painlessly inject a lethal nerve poison into Kim’s body. You will have about thirty minutes before Kim suddenly dies, as if from a heart attack. By this time, General Lee will have you spirited out of Pyongyang on your way to coastal Nampo, where a fishing boat will sneak you out of North Korea under cover of darkness into the Yellow Sea. There you will be picked up by one of our submarines and taken to Gibraltar, and then to your choice of anywhere in the world you would like to live, as a retired Royal Navy officer on a pension. Naturally, you can select your new name and country of residence. All of your belongings in your Notting Hill flat will be delivered to you over time. Unfortunately, you cannot keep your company motorcar. You will surrender its keys, and your office keys, when you leave London. Our Armorer also will collect your Walther PPK and your shoulder holster from your flat. There you have it, James. It is all outlined in this file.” M handed Bond a dossier stamped EYES ONLY in red block letters. “Finally, you are required to sign our standard non-disclosure document – to never reveal anything you have done for MI6 over the last twelve years. Well, James, this is the Big One, and a bit of a grand finale for you and your career. I’ll give you 48 hours to think it over. If you decide to proceed, you have five business days to put your financial affairs and other personal details in order, before we alter your appearance in our private company hospital ward. Think of a new name and where exactly you want to live. Any questions, 007?”

 Bond gazed briefly over M’s head at the large oil painting of the Battle of Trafalgar. Life and what one did for one’s country was surely clearer in those days, he imagined. One directly knew one’s enemy, his strengths and weaknesses. Yet there was still honor and dignity and patriotism, on both sides back then. Today, all was an endless, complicated muddle, often with no real winners or losers. Just politics, and the dirty grubbing for money and power.

 “I won’t need 48 hours, Sir. I’d like to volunteer for this assignment now.”

 “I had hoped you would agree, 007. Here is the latest file on Kim.” M handed Bond a hefty file. “Take it home and study it. Stop at Q Branch on your way out now and get a briefing on the use of the poison ring. Good luck, Commander. That is all.” M looked down, picked up his Waterford, and busily began scribbling some notes onto yet another manila folder.

 “Thank you, Sir. I estimate my odds at 1-4 in succeeding in this scenario, but I will do all I can to accomplish my mission.”

 “Unfortunately, our simulation experts give slimmer odds of just 1-5 here, James,” M replied, looking up. “But if anyone in Britain can pull this off, it’s you…so good hunting. Your country and the world will be better off for the elimination of this deranged megalomaniac.”

 Moneypenny met James’ glance as he exited M’s office. “How did it go, James? Off to save the world again?” she asked cheerfully.

 “I think I should get ‘Korean for Dummies’ and learn a few basic phrases,” Bond quipped, waving his thick folder. “Well, I’m off to see Q. I’ll tell you more later, Penny -- if I can.”

 In the vast basement of the MI6 complex, Bond was instructed in the use of the poisoned signet ring by its designer, Alistair Thwaite, known simply as Q. Thwaite had been Section Quartermaster for the full dozen years Bond worked here.

 “This is rather straightforward, James. The ring has one dose of fatal nerve toxin.” Q took out a small case, revealing a gold signet ring. “It is completely safe to you, the wearer. By pressing the front ‘KR’ initials of your new name three times…” he demonstrated by casually draping his left hand over his right and pressing them with a finger “…a micro pin is activated on the underside. When you shake Kim’s hand, the pin will painlessly and undetectedly touch his skin, rapidly releasing the poison in under two seconds, then retract. You have thirty minutes to leave before Kim suffers what will appear to be a heart attack. He has gained an enormous amount of weight over the last 14 months and probably weighs close to 21 stone, so his heart giving out will not be much of a surprise to either his nation or the world. Only if he is given a full autopsy will the truth ever be detected. But you will hopefully be long gone by then, 007.” Bond thanked Q and headed for his Aston Martin parked in the company garage.

 Bond needed a drink, but he needed a clear head too for reading Kim’s file. However, he was also hungry, so he drove to Claridge’s in Mayfair for an early dinner. There, at its Fera restaurant, he had a fresh grilled sole with new potatoes, seasoned Brussel sprouts, and a half bottle of vintage French Muscadet. Afterwards, over coffee but no dessert, Bond thought about how over the years his life was slowly transitioning from one of pure action and adrenaline to one of more relaxed contemplation and a surprising desire for -- with lack of a better word – ‘domestication’. Could he someday soon make the switch to becoming a husband and a father? He felt he could, but he abruptly snapped himself out of his reverie to focus on the difficult reality of the deadly job ahead. At least he was convinced that his acceptance of the mission was undoubtedly the right choice. The last time, and he had to make it work. Plus, he had to survive!

 His nicotine patch having worn out by now, Bond chewed some nicotine gum as he drove back to his Notting Hill flat. Once inside, Bond changed into casual clothes, then poured himself a neat tumbler of chilled Latvian craft vodka. He sat at his living room desk, and opened the file on Kim Jong-Un.

 It read in part:

 “Age -- estimated 33-35 years old.

 Height -- 5’7”.

 Weight -- current estimate at 21 stone (almost 300 pounds, U.S. measurement).

 Psychological -- a delusional paranoid sociopath (Bond paused and thought back, recalling Dr. No, Goldfinger, Scaramanga, Drax, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, Zorin, Le Chiffre, Largo, and other twisted personalities bent on world domination and destruction whom he had killed…Kim was more of the same, like all the sick scum in SMERSH and SPECTRE);

 Habits -- smokes Yves St. Laurent cigarettes, prefers Johnny Walker Black Label whiskey, drives a custom supercharged Mercedes, and is fanatical about American basketball (and is publically a ‘friend’ of Dennis Rodman).

 Politics -- Supreme Leader and Chairman of the Communist Party of North Korea since the death of his father on 28 December, 2011.

 Health -- probable diabetes and hypertension, ankle problems due to excessive weight, prone to gout due to fatty unhealthy diet and alcohol consumption.

 Family – Kim had his exiled half-brother killed with VX nerve agent on 13 February, 2017 at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Thought to be married to young model Ri Sol-ju, and to have a daughter, Ju-ae. Never photographed together. May have additional illegitimate children.

 Residences -- Kim is believed to have several heavily guarded palaces across the country. In addition to the Presidential Palace in Pyongyang, satellite images show another large palace on the eastern North Korean coast in Wonson. Compounds usually include horse stables, a swimming pool, a private airstrip, and an underground train station. Coastal palaces would also include boat docks.

 Additional -- Kim suffers from an inferiority complex, and is trying to outdo both his dynastic father and grandfather in bending the population to his will and ego. Wants to go down in history as Korea's greatest leader.

 Summary – Unpredictable, unstable, unreliable, corrupt, with a dangerous ever-growing arsenal of nuclear weaponry. Likely determined to start World War III.

 Her Majesty’s government official suggested course of action = complete elimination of Kim Jong-Un with all possible dispatch.”

 Bond put down the file and finished his drink. He went out on his balcony and gripped the black wrought-iron railing, lost in thought. The street lights were on now, and all the white Regency buildings around and including his flat shown with a soft glow. He knew he could and would kill Kim Jong-Un without hesitation, when the time came. Then he went back inside, undressed, and went to bed naked, as was his habit.

 Morning arrived with clear skies and a cooling north wind. After a late breakfast and The Times, Bond took out his world atlas to help himself visualize where he would like to live. After an hour of eliminating several possibilities, he finally decided on the island of Mallorca – specifically the sunny northeastern coastal town of Alcudia. He had been there years ago and had found it both attractive and peaceful. Pleasant year-round weather, and not far from the international airport at Palma. Plus, the language was no problem because he spoke Spanish. As for a name, Bond flipped through the telephone directory, choosing a new first and last name that he could live with. Hence, after he became black market arms dealer Klaus Rybeck for his upcoming mission, he would retire as a Royal Navy Commander named Alec Weston in Alcunia, Mallorca.

 Over the next few days, Bond attended to his necessary financial and legal needs, but this was done in a careful manner so as not to tip off any suspicions of a major life change or upcoming catastrophe. MI6 was expert at doing everything else in making anybody disappear and then re-appear as a completely different person with a new passport and driver’s license, a new personal history with all prior documentation and records, and even – as in Bond’s case – an altered physical appearance. Bond was ready. He glanced at himself in the hallway mirror and pushed the careless comma of black hair (which always seemed to fall over his right eyebrow) back from his face for what was probably the last time. Goodbye, James and Hello, Klaus, he thought ruefully as he walked out the door. It was Tuesday, October 3rd.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

 The one-week transition surgery at the MI6 clinic went off without any complications. Bond had earlier cleaned out his office, and had turned in both his car and all personal keys (but was allowed to keep his trusty Rolex). Next, he said goodbye to a tearful Ms. Moneypenny, signed M’s non-disclosure release and bid a rather somber farewell to his stolid, ‘invincible’ boss. Finally, he informed Personnel of his new residence choice and his new selected name, and opened a new Swiss bank account where his pension would be secretly deposited every month. All computer and hard copy evidence of the existence of a certain Commander James Bond was then scrubbed. The announcement of Bond’s death and memorial service and burial was carefully choreographed and made believable. Because Bond had no family or living relatives and no close friends apart from his MI6 coworkers, his ‘vanishing act’ was simple to accomplish. 007 himself was rather amused when he read his own obituary in The Times!

 Next, he was given a new Austrian passport as Klaus Rybeck, new credit cards, and a new mobile, along with a lengthy dossier on his new ‘past’ to commit to memory. In the file were photographs of the suitcase-sized nuclear bomb that Bond would attempt to sell Kim Jong-Un. There was also a photograph of his Russian contact, "Boris," who would meet him at the Vladivostok Station. The biggest surprise was when Bond saw himself in the mirror for the first time, now with brown eyes, a somewhat puffy-blotchy-wrinkled complexion, and silvery hair and eyebrows. He looked ten years older (What would the ladies think? he immediately wondered), but inside he felt exactly the same. It would take some getting used to, so Bond was grateful for six days on a train to gradually adapt to the transition. And so it was done. No turning back now. 007 went to the company gymnasium for the last time to work out for two hours, and finished with thirty-eight fast laps in the staff swimming pool -- one for each year of his life.

 Going from London to Paris to Moscow was routine. When Bond arrived at Yaroslavski Station, his trained espionage eyes immediately detected the various Russian Mafia drug dealers, drug addicts, pimps, prostitutes, vagabonds, drunks, businessmen, youthful backpackers, and other tourists in the milling crowds inside. He carried a leather Gladstone, a briefcase, and a folded garment bag containing a tan trench coat. The clothing selected for this assignment was less-tailored and more drab than 007 would normally wear, but that was that. He was already wearing the tarnished -- so as not to appear new -- poison signet on the ring finger of his right hand. (Q had repeated the importance of a good, firm, two-second handshake with Kim so as to completely discharge the ring's toxin. "Remember, James, Kim doesn't ordinarily like to shake hands with strangers, so part of your job is to get him to like you and trust you so he will not decline at the crucial moment.") And, as a parting good luck surprise gift, the MI6 staff had included a large tin of 007's favorite Beluga caviar, and a bottle of his favorite Latvian craft vodka, under his clothing folded in the Gladstone. He was wearing a rather ordinary medium grey suit, pale yellow shirt open at the neck, with brown loafers. 007 missed wearing his Walther, and felt somewhat odd having no weaponry of any kind on his person for this mission.

 Bond found his way to the Trans-Siberian Express platform. He would be riding the Rossiya #2, which ran every other day to Vladivostok, 6000 miles and six-days away. It was the world's longest single-service railway, stopping at fifty-nine stations over its 144-hour run. It was Thursday, October 12th, and the train would depart Moscow that evening at 23:45. If the train ran on time, he would arrive at Vladivostok on Wednesday, October 18th at 23:55.

 His train was luckily one of the newer TSE versions, painted two-tone grey with red accents. A first class LUX room for a single passenger cost 1205 Pounds Sterling, which equaled 90,993 Russian Roubles or 1326 Euros. The room had two sofas which converted into beds, but Bond would have the tastefully wood-paneled room all to himself. There was a small fold-down table near a picture window with drapes. Air-conditioning/heating controls, a fan, a mirror, and LED wall-mounted television, various lighting and electrical outlets, and storage areas completed the layout. All meals were included in the tariff -- to be eaten either in the dining car or delivered free to one's room. There was a shower car for first class, and a sink/toilet at the end of each car. Each car also had a matronly female car attendant, a throwback to the Soviet days, whose job was basically to keep an eye on her charges and attend to any extra passenger needs while also making sure there was always plenty of hot water in the car's samovar for preparing tea. Although the room window itself could not be opened, the multiple hallway windows outside one's room could be lowered for fresh outdoor air. The train also offered two other, less-expensive rooming options: Second Class, a private room with two upper and two lower beds; and Third Class, which was a large, unisex dormitory-style room with fixed bunk beds and no privacy. Neither of these two options included meals or a shower car, so people either brought their own foodstuffs (bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs, sausage, fruit, tomatoes, cucumbers, nuts, crackers, beer, bottled water, liquor) or purchased edibles and beverages at any of the 10-20 minute (up to 30 minutes at the larger cities) station stops. They could also purchase meals in the dining car, to be paid for in roubles only. As for washing, most used baby wipes or took wet cloth 'sponge baths' in the cramped toilet areas.

 007 was escorted to his Room #4 by his Provodnitsa car attendant (Irena, who smiled, flashing a silver incisor, when he addressed her in fluent Russian and tipped her five Euros), and then he unpacked. He stowed his clothing items and toiletries, and exchanged his dress shoes for more comfortable calf-skin moccasins after changing into casual black slacks and a burgundy polo shirt. He had also brought his Smart mobile (perfect for accessing Korean language lessons) with charger, a portable shortwave radio (for music and the BBC), a small magnetic chess set, a deck of playing cards, his Swiss Army knife, and a selection of four paperback books (mostly history and biography). Wrapping up the inventory was an adequate amount of nicotine patches and related chewing gum. Luckily, there was no smoking on the train at all, only outdoors at each station stop. He checked his Rolex as the train moved out, pleased that it was on time. The TSE would stay strictly on Moscow time for the next six days as it crossed seven time zones from Russian Europe into Russian Asia and the Far East, all the way to its terminus.

 Rossiya #2 rolled eastward, the land flat and monotonous, punctuated by groves of the national tree, the birch. Bond stayed mostly in his room the first two days, reading, thinking, and relaxing while gazing out his window. He got out for a stretch at most of the quick daylight station stops. His room was compact but comfortable and it was just wide enough for him to be able to do some push-ups and sit-ups to help maintain fitness. His meals were filling and nourishing, but certainly not gourmet. Still, he enjoyed his meat or fish dishes, his potatoes and cabbage, his borscht and blinis. Plus, he had his stash of craft vodka and caviar! By now, the train had crossed the Volga River, sped past Kirov and Perm and the white obelisk at Mile 1777 marking the official boundary between Europe and Asia. Then came Yekaterinburg -- the town where the last Tsar, Nicholas II, and his entire family were butchered in the Ipatiev House by the Bolsheviks on July 17, 1918. Omsk soon came and went.

 The problem began on Day Three, when the TSE crossed the Ob River and stopped in Novosibirsk. Bond had decided to eat his lunch in the dining car for a bit of a change-up, rather than in his room. He was finishing a slightly stale eclair with his black coffee, when an overly made-up, overly perfumed, mini-skirted woman in her mid-twenties shyly ask in Russian if she could join him. He instantly knew she was a whore, but thought it harmless to engage in a little conversation in the local tongue. "Tanya" ordered tea, and asked him where he was from and where he was going. 007 immediately and professionally concocted another alias and went on from there, making up lies as he went along. They chatted for about twenty minutes.

 "Forgive me, Eric, but I noticed you are not wearing a wedding ring," Tanya observed.

 "Sadly, my wife died in a motorcar accident when we were skiing in the French Alps last winter," Bond replied.

 "Don't you ever get lonely, Eric? Those are too many months to be alone, especially for a strong, handsome man like you," Tanya cooed, smiling. "Perhaps you would like to come to my room sometime? I'm in Second Class room #9."

 Bond laughed inside, clearly finished with the charade. "Oh, you are very nice to offer such comforting companionship, Tanya, and you are very attractive, truly. But I'm afraid I am still in mourning and not really in the mood. I hope you understand."

 Tanya quickly looked over Bond’s left shoulder with a sudden look of fear. "Excuse me," she said abruptly, "But I must go now. Goodbye." Bond turned as she walked away, noticing a swarthy man in his early 30s near the dining car exit door. Probably her pimp, he surmised. 007 got up, paid for Tanya's tea, and started back to his First Class car.

 Before long, in the corridor, he felt a man's hand roughly grab his arm from behind. Bond turned slowly around, instantly analyzing the situation. "What is the matter, my friend?" the swarthy man hissed in Russian, reeking of garlic. "Don't you like the girl? Trust me, she is clean. Only 200 Euros, thirty good minutes. A bargain, eh? Come on...you aren't gay, are you? Or maybe you want to buy hashish or coke? How about some heroin? I need you to do some business with me today," he smiled sickly, showing bad teeth, squeezing 007's arm more tightly.

 The two men were alone in a corridor of a Second Class car. "Not today, comrade...Now, if you'll be good enough to release my arm?" Bond offered, with a bland expression.

 "Look, you son-of-a-bitch, I'm tired of playing games. Give me 100 Euros first, then I'll let you go. I have bills to pay. All you businessmen can afford it. Write it off on your expense account. Let's have that money. Now!" Mr. Garlic Breath flipped out a switchblade knife and held it to 007's throat.

 James Bond always had trouble controlling his anger. Just before he would explode, his mouth would set itself into a thin, cruel line, and his jaw muscles would tighten. Like now. He spoke low and direct in Russian. "You are making a big mistake, comrade. Now put the knife down and walk away."

 "Nyet, comrade. I'm giving the orders here. Let's have the hundred before someone gets hurt."

 In a blinding flash, 007 spun around and grabbed the man by his oily hair and crashed his face into the thick glass window in the corridor. Then he neatly broke the man's arm -- which was still holding the knife -- on the metal sill of the nearest open window, sending the switchblade flying away outside. This was followed by debilitating body blows and paralyzing kicks until the stranger crumpled unconscious on the corridor's blue carpeting. A single door in the hallway opened, and Tanya's head popped out of #9.

 "Oh my God! What happened? she wailed.

 007 dragged the inert body into Tanya's compartment, then closed and locked the door behind him. He took out Garlic Breath's wallet and emptied it of about 1600 Euros. "Look, Tanya. I'll take him off at the next station stop and leave him there. Then I want you to take this money and get off at the best next stop. Disappear. Go back home to your family or friends or whatever. This is no life for a nice girl like you. Now, did either of you have any luggage or any drugs?"

 Tanya produced a single purple backpack. "This is everything. Sergio and I had been working just the Novosibirsk to Irkutsk segment. I was a runaway from Smolensk. He took me in and took care of me -- at first. Then he changed and started beating me. He forced me into being a whore. He threatened to kill me if I ever tried to quit or leave him. I think he is Russian Mafia. I am glad he is dead."

 "Well I didn't kill him, Tanya, but he will be hurting for weeks when he wakes up. I need you to take the backpack to the toilet room down the hall and flush away any drugs that were in it. Then flush his wallet with all of his identification too. The metal toilets empty their water and contents out under the train onto the tracks. Can you do that without being seen? Then come back here. I'll check the train schedule to see where and when the train stops next. Now go!" Tanya quickly obeyed.

 Bond pulled out his mobile, and saw on the TSE schedule page that the next stop was Yurga, coming up in about 20 minutes. That was where he would stand up and half- drag off and dump his "poor, drunk friend...he fell...too much vodka!" (if anyone asked) in a toilet stall in the station's men's room. Tanya would then stay alone in her room for another 600 km until Krasnoyarsk, where she would get off, head for the airport, and vanish. When she returned to the room, she agreed with Bond's plan. She thanked him profusely and kissed him tenderly on his cheek after Sergio's removal was completed in Yurga. "Remember, Tanya, we can't be seen together anymore now, so this is goodbye. Good luck." Bond quietly left Room #9 after checking that the car hall attendant was not visible. He returned to his own room, poured himself a tall Latvian vodka, and chewed some Nicorette. He placed his portable shortwave radio on the small table near his window and found some relaxing classical music. Then he got out his deck of playing cards and began to play Solitaire. As always after a fight, he re-played his moves in his mind and did a self-critique. He was satisfied how this one went. He recalled that the last time he did battle on a moving train was against Red Grant on the Orient Express, somewhere in the Balkans.

 On Day Three, Bond saw his first glimpse of deep blue Lake Baikal from his bed, and he knew the train would soon arrive in Irkutsk. He hoped that Tanya had gotten off safely, earlier in Krasnoyarsk. By the time Bond showered and dressed and had breakfast in his room, Rossiya #2 had pulled into the so-called “Paris of Siberia.”

 He went outside for some fresh air and a quick jog around the station, but was not too surprised to find that the mid-October temperatures were about 20 degrees F. colder here than in either London or Moscow. He finished his short run, however, then popped inside to grab a wool sweater and some roubles before going outside again. He brought some smoked omul fish for snacking from a cheery, red-cheeked babushka platform vendor. As he turned to re-board Rossiya #2, Bond noticed an attractive, tastefully dressed blonde -- who faintly resembled the French actress Catherine Deneuve when she was about age 40 -- boarding the train with her suitcase. Their eyes met briefly, but that glance was enough to convince 007 that she deserved his further attention later if their paths crossed.

 Back in #4, he read for about two hours, then did a series of push-ups and sit-ups. He wished that trans-continental trains would have a fully-equipped gymnasium car, but that was just a fantasy. Next, he practiced a few basic Korean phrases using his Smart mobile. But before long, his mind slipped into reverie. He thought about the hundreds of beautiful young women of so many nationalities that he had slept with over the years. His last bedroom escapade was about three weeks ago -- too long! -- and he needed some warmth. Almost all of his interactions were sheer animal release, and he heartily enjoyed every one (even those done in the 'line of duty' with female spies, who as expected betrayed him afterwards, as a matter of course). Yet he had been truly in love only once, to Tracy Draco, to whom he was married for less than 24 hours. She was fatally shot in the head by Ernst Stavro Blofeld's henchwoman, Irma Bunt, who was trying to kill James while he was driving with Tracy on his honeymoon in Switzerland. The shock had sent Bond into a deep depression, and he almost quit Her Majesty's Secret Service. Now, as he grew older, he realized he needed love and affection and lasting companionship with a woman, not merely endless casual sex.

 Bond's mind next turned to killing Kim Jong-Un. He played various scenarios over and over in his mind, even what to do in the event of unforeseen problems or failure. So this would be his final job as 007. The reality was still sinking in, but it was what James had chosen and it was what he wanted. He realized that it was the careful planning and the exhaustive research and the minute details and logistics of the execution of the mission (and the ‘escaping alive’ part, with its adrenaline surge) that he relished most. A job well done, like a perfect-as-possible military exercise. Any actual killing and violence and destruction was usually somewhat of an anti-climax. In other words, Bond -- like most espionage field agents -- was not a natural born, blood-thirsty killer. Bond's mind then transitioned, so he took out his briefcase and studied the picture of his Vladivostok contact, Boris. Strong, heavy-set, full dark beard, probably mid-30s. Bond had no choice but to trust him when they would meet in just three day’s time.

 James was delighted when he saw the blonde woman eating alone in the dining car that evening. He tipped the waiter five Euros to ask her if she would like some company with her meal. She turned to meet Bond's admiring gaze, considered the proposition for a moment, then smiled and agreed. Bond introduced himself in Russian, but offered English, French, German, or Spanish if she preferred. She replied, "Oh, it has been long since I practice English, so let's try that. If bad, we can do Russian."

 Her name was Larisa, and she was traveling from Irkutsk to Vladivostok to visit her parents. Her father was in failing health, so she tried to visit at least once a month. She had one younger sister, married, living in Vladimir, and a son running a computer software business in St. Petersburg. Larisa had lost her husband to a construction site accident three years ago. He had been an electrical engineer. Larisa had studied literature at University, then switched to Nursing School and had become a nurse.

 Because Tanya was now gone, Bond was able to recycle his alias as Eric, a widower businessman from Frankfurt, on his way to sell machine calibration tools in Vladivostok. Dining with Larisa was easy and pleasant. Her soft eyes were the color of blue frost. Bond insisted on paying for her meal, but she revealed that her meal was included in her tariff. She likewise had a First Class ticket, but in the second car. Bond didn't press for her room number, even as he sensed a strong mutual attraction at play. Instead, he invited her for a nightcap in the First Class bar lounge car.

 Larisa ordered a neat Drambuie, while James ordered a neat vodka. When presented with a choice between Smirnoff and Stolichnaya, he groaned, disliking both mediocre brands. He relented with the latter. When his drink arrived, he asked the bartender for a small dish of black pepper. Bond took a pinch of the pepper and sprinkled it onto his Stoly, to the puzzlement of both Larisa and the barkeep. "It attracts the harsh fusel oils and carries them to the bottom of the glass," he explained. "It actually lessens any hangover. An old trick I learned." He then used his index finger to remove any still floating specks of pepper, wiped them on a napkin, and drank. The pair talked some forty minutes more, then Larisa looked at her wristwatch. "I better get some sleep now, Eric. Thank you for the nightcap. I hope we can see each other again tomorrow, if you like." Bond paid the bill and tipped the barman, then escorted Larisa to her car. "I am in the next car, by the way. Perhaps sometime we can arrange a friendly game of chess? I have a small chessboard ready to play."

 "Chess?" Larisa did not readily understand the word in English, so Bond repeated in Russian, "Shakhmaty."

 "Oh, da, da...forgive me. Yes, we Russians love to play chess. I would enjoy the playing," Larisa smiled. "Until later then, Eric, Good Night." Bond returned to his Room #4 and listened to the BBC news on his shortwave for any new developments out of North Korea before retiring for the night. His mood was upbeat as he drifted off to sleep.

 The morning of Day Four was crisp and clear, the scenery spectacular compared to the seemingly endless flatlands prior to Lake Baikal. Here were spruces, pines, and larches, with rolling hills, rushing rivers, and even mountains. They had passed Ulan-Ude, where many passengers got off and connected to the Trans-Mongolian Express heading to Beijing. Bond dressed and had his breakfast delivered to his room.

 An hour later, there was a sharp knock at his door. His car attendant, Irena, flashed her silver tooth as she handed him a small sealed envelope, then went back to her cleaning duties. It was a note from Larisa, written in English.

 "Good Morning, Eric -- If you would enjoy the playing of the chess now, my room is #11 in second car. Looking forward to see you. My Best, Larisa"

 Bond smiled and grabbed his magnetic chess game and headed for her room. Larissa was comfortably dressed in a black cashmere sweater and dark slacks, with an amber locket on a silver chain around her neck. Her soft blonde hair complimented both her outfit and her smooth alabaster complexion. They played with skill and concentration, casually chatting between moves, for about ninety minutes, then took a break by ordering their lunches delivered to her room. The game concluded by late afternoon, when Bond fibbed and declared a draw. Dark clouds, meanwhile, had rolled in, and raindrops began to pelt the room's window. Bond removed the chessboard from the small table, got up, and stretched. Larisa asked if he missed his wife, and he said he did, but he was actually thinking of Tracy rather than his alias Eric's wife. Larisa confessed that she too got very lonely. Any new men that she was introduced to by friends turned out on dates to be typical Russian males -- heavy drinkers or crude dullards or both. Larisa then surprised Bond by asking if he knew any Russian poems or songs. Because he was supposed to hail from Frankfurt, Bond lied and said no.

 "If you come here and hold me, I will sing you some songs and tell you some poems," she shyly offered, patting her bed. Bond gently joined her, and they snuggled up -- still fully clothed -- on her not-very-wide bunk. It reminded Bond of the more innocent, less randy female interactions he had during his younger university days before he joined the Royal Navy and later MI6. The rain streaking the window added to the mood, as Larisa spoke or sang her deeply Russian -- hence very melancholic -- repertoire. She then asked if she could take a nap in his arms, so he kissed her tenderly once and let her drift off. That he wanted her was undeniable, her lips electrifying, her body inviting. But now was not the time.

 When Larisa awoke, it was nearly time for dinner, so the pair agreed to change clothes and meet at 19:00 in the dining car. Bond ordered borsht and Beef Stroganoff, while Larisa selected the goulash with a beet salad. They had a fair bottle of Georgian "bull's blood," which was simply a strong red wine, and split a berry tart dessert. Their conversation ranged easily from favorite books and movies to favorite foods and even childhood memories. Bond stayed in character as Eric. Larisa reached out and held his left hand, rubbing his fingers as the wine kicked in. They did not converse on current world events or recent incidents of terrorism. Too serious. Certainly not romantic. Bond made sure she did not accidentally touch the gold signet ring on his right hand. Thankfully, she never asked what the KR initials on it signified.

 They were warm and relaxed as they walked back to Room #11 with their arms around each other's waist. The hallway car windows were steaming up, indicating the quick drop in the outside temperatures. The copper corner samovar would help make a lot of hot tea for passengers this evening. Larisa halted outside her door, stared dreamily into Bond's eyes, then leaned forward and whispered in Russian, "Eric, I need you...will you please spend the night with me?"

 Their lovemaking was delightful. Her body was well-tended and alluring, her skin warm, soft and creamy, her nipples flushed pink, an arousing blonde triangle of hair between her legs. Although she had given birth to a son in her younger days, the couple found a sexual position on her bed that was snug and pleasing to both of them. Bond took his time as Larisa moaned with pleasure. When they were finished, both were happy and content. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

 They made love again the next day -- Day Five -- this time moving to Bond's room, with ever-observant but discreet Irena giving Bond a knowing wink as the couple entered his #4. Afterwards, the spent couple greedily finished James’ Latvian vodka and Beluga caviar (Larisa had even brought some crackers). Bond was genuinely attracted to Larisa, and he could imagine beginning a deeper relationship with her, but he was also on an important and dangerous mission, and he needed to be honest with her. They talked back in her room as the train pulled into the large city of Khabarovsk.

 "Larisa, you know we must part tomorrow when we arrive in Vladivostok. You will see your parents, while I will conclude my business there, then transit on to Seoul and Osaka for more business," Bond explained, holding her hand. "I can make no promises, but I would really like to see you again. If you leave me your mobile number, I can call you once I get back home to Frankfurt." Bond gently kissed her. "I truly do care for you," he added with sincerity, for this was how he really felt about this woman. In fact, so far there was nothing he did not like about her. He kissed her again.

 "I know," Larisa sighed. "It is sad and can't be helped. But here is my number," She opened her purse and took out a pen and a tiny notepad and scribbled the numbers and handed him the detached sheet. "Oh, Eric! Maybe we can have happiness in this crazy world. Knowing you since Irkutsk has made me very happy," she acknowledged. "Let us say good-bye here. Or I will cry on the platform in Vladivostok," she added, her blue frost eyes now teary and red-rimmed. "Spasibo, moy dorogoy," she murmured tenderly as Bond kissed her farewell and returned to his own room, her mobile number safely in his pocket.

 The TSE pulled into Vladivostok Station amazingly only four minutes late, on Thursday, October 18th, a minute before midnight. Bond changed his Rolex from Moscow time to the correct local time. He tipped Irena twenty-five Euros as he left his compartment and stepped onto the platform with his Gladstone, his briefcase, and his garment bag. He had changed back into his earlier business suit. He kept his eye out for his Russian contact, Boris. He had carefully destroyed Boris' file photograph, and was now in full mission-mode. His very life depended on his focus and concentration now. He forced any thoughts of Larisa to the private back of his mind.

 Vladivostok was built on a series of hills (much like San Francisco) on the western shores of the Sea of Japan. Because it was the home base of the Russian Pacific Fleet, it had been off limits to any foreigners for security reasons from 1958-1992. Bond noticed the temperatures had returned to like those in Moscow six days ago, for it was warmer here than in Irkutsk. Upon exiting the station, 007 noticed the brightly lit, modernistic, Golden Horn Bay suspension bridge, which was completed in 2012. He then spied bear-like, bearded Boris walking towards him, with an outstretched hand in greeting. "Dobro Pozhalovat, Mr. Rybeck. Come with me, my car is just over there," he continued in Russian, indicating an aged black Mercedes in the parking lot.

 Boris stowed Bond's belongings in the boot, then outlined the next steps when they got into the car. "I already checked you in at the five-star Hyundai Hotel, just a few minutes from here." He produced the card key to Room 505 and handed it over. "You can ring up maid service to collect your laundry, and they'll have it ready in the morning. And I'm sure you'll enjoy at good night's sleep in a bed that's finally not moving! They have a fitness center and indoor swimming pool, which I'm sure you can use after six days on a train. They also have a fabulous inclusive breakfast buffet, the best in town. I'll pick you up at noon tomorrow in the lobby. Then it's a four-hour drive to Khasan, on the DPRK border. It's a small town with less than 800 people and no hotel, which is why you are staying here in Vladivostok tonight. I'm to drop you off at the Russian-Korean Friendship Rail Bridge at 17:00. That's all of my instructions, so I won't need to know any other details of why you are here or what you are doing. Well, here we are." Boris pulled into the deluxe hotel driveway, got out and retrieved Bond's belongings and handed them to him. "Have a nice rest and see you tomorrow. Dobroy Nochi."

 Bond politely declined the luggage porter's help and took the lift alone to the fifth floor. Calling for laundry pick-up and placing the bag outside his door, he then placed the Do Not Disturb tag on his door handle. Finally, Bond washed his hands and face, brushed his teeth, closed the thick room drapes, stripped, and slipped between the cool sheets of his comfortable King bed. He was fast asleep in a few moments.

 The next morning was cloudy and breezy, with welcomed patches of sun, as 007 threw open his room curtains and gazed out at the city. He collected his clean laundry from outside his door, then headed down to the hotel's fitness room for an hour of vigorous exercise. When he returned, he took a short, steaming hot shower, followed by a longer icy one, shaved, slapped on a nicotine patch, got dressed, and took the lift again down to the ground floor breakfast buffet. It was just before 10:00 a.m. He ate heartily -- steak and eggs, potato hash with diced green peppers, grilled tomatoes, toast with orange marmalade, grapefruit juice, and a large pot of black coffee. Using his mobile, he caught up on news from around the world after he finished eating. Then he returned to his room to continue reading his paperback for an hour until just before noon. He gathered his belongings and turned in his hotel key card at the front desk. His bill had already been settled.

 Boris appeared right on time, and led Bond to the waiting Mercedes. The four-hour drive to Khasan was uneventful, with Boris doing most of the talking when he grew tired of listening to mournful classical music on the radio. Bond asked a few casual questions about how Russians felt about Putin. "Oh, he is probably the richest man in the world by now!" he exclaimed. "It is a well-known secret. He is very clever too. He wants to bring Russia back to its glory days. Most Russians respect him for that." Bond then asked about the huge upsurge in organized crime, the dreaded Russian Mafia. "It's a terrible problem," Boris admitted. "When the Soviet State collapsed, opportunists took advantage of the chaos during the economic transition to a free market economy. Some got incredibly rich by working hard legally. But others began importing drugs and weaponry and sex slaves. They also hire young, skilled computer hackers to steal bank accounts and credit cards. The police and military try to crack down, but many are being bribed to look the other way."

 The pair arrived in Khasan just past 16:30. "Well, Klaus, your next contact will meet you there at the front of the Friendship Bridge at 17:00," Boris announced, indicating ahead as Bond got out of the car. "This is as far as I go. Good Luck, my friend." They shook hands and 007 thanked him. Boris then headed back to Vladivostok.

 Bond noted the border guards on the Russian side of the railway bridge, which spanned the rather narrow and brownish Tuman River. He could also see the first town on the North Korean side, Tumangang, and its border guards, in the distance. Bond was just turning around to inspect modest Khasan when a short man, grey-haired and probably in his mid-50s, approached him, produced an unlit cigarette, gestured, and asked in English, "Excuse me, friend, but would you happen to have a match? I'm just dying for a smoke." The stranger was dressed in ordinary clothing, but Bond had been previously trained to give the proper response to this carefully worded question. "Sorry, friend, but you'll be dying young if you don't give up the habit." The man smiled in recognition and acknowledgement. "Klaus Rybeck? I'm General Woon Ha Lee, at your service. Please wait here while I change into my uniform, then we will walk into the DPRK. My car is just across the river."

 Ten minutes later, Woon Ha Lee returned from a nearby building, dressed in full North Korean General military regalia. "I also sent a coded text to London, informing them of our successful contact. After we cross the border, it is a ten and one-half hour drive to Pyongyang. The sun will set in a little more than an hour, so you won't see much until we reach the capitol. I brought some food and beverages in a picnic hamper for when we get hungry and need a break. Driving at night works to our advantage against suspicious, prying eyes!" Here he paused for a brief chuckle, then continued. "We will arrive around 03:30, and go directly to the DPRK's largest hotel, the Yanggakdo International. You can rest and prepare there until noon. We are scheduled to meet the Supreme Leader at his private residence in the Presidential Palace at 15:00 tomorrow, October 21. After you finish your assignment, we will get you away fast to Nampo. We made a decoy reservation on the 18:00 flight to Beijing, connecting to Dubai and then Vienna. The drive to Nampo takes 44 minutes on the Hero Youth Highway. A fishing boat with six of my operatives as crew will meet us and take you west out into international waters. There, the British submarine HMS Triumph will rendezvous with you at 20:00 and take you to the Royal Naval Base at Gibraltar. Should take you about two weeks to get there if the skipper short-cuts through Suez. Questions?"

 Bond committed all of Woon Ha Lee's specifics to memory. "No questions, General. I'm ready. Let's go."

 The two men walked right past the Russian border guards, who saluted after Bond's passport was quickly stamped. Bond carried his briefcase and garment bag, while the General carried 007's Gladstone. It was somewhat tricky negotiating the tracks and ties on the Friendship Rail Bridge, because it was obviously not built for pedestrians. It took about five minutes to cross into North Korea. The DPRK border guards quickly snapped to attention and saluted their General. For show, he acted upset about something and yelled at them angrily in Korean. A large, vintage black Russian ZiL limousine was waiting for them. "A gift from our Marxist friends before the company went bust in 2012," Lee quipped. "For our privacy, I declined my usual driver. I will be at the wheel. Now, let them stamp your passport, and we will be on our way."

 That task complete, the car sped away. Bond noticed a grey and brown land, dreary and devoid of trees. "All chopped down and burned for fuel in the winter," Lee remarked. The roads were pathetic, which was why it took more than ten hours to get to Pyongyang. The ZiL could never cruise at its top 125 mph speed.

 As they drove in the fading light, they passed primitive, small villages looking like ones did a century ago. "30% of the people in North Korea live in poverty," Lee proclaimed. "Our 'free' universal medical care is abysmal, with out-dated equipment, alarming shortages of supplies and medicines, and rampant diseases still around that were eradicated decades ago in other nations. Naturally, the elites and the Party members and the Military get the best of everything while the rest of the country suffers. We continually have famine and food shortages. The Kim Dynasty started off well enough with the current dictator's grandfather, Kim Il-Sung. But it steadily went downhill with his son, Kim Jong-Il. Now, with Kim Jong-Un, it is a pure disaster. I put my life and the life of my family on the line and went 'mole' for MI6 to help save my country, Klaus. I went to school at Oxford, did you know? You must realize that there are no freedoms here in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and no human rights. Policy debates are outlawed, hence we live here in a nightmare world of total propaganda and press censorship, blocked access to the Internet, and secret police arresting any dissidents. Everyone is under constant fear and suspicion, with neighbors spying on neighbors. Meanwhile, The Chairman and Supreme Leader's will is absolute. All of his decrees are simply rubber-stamped and 'applauded'.

 By now, darkness had fallen, and General Lee went silent. Bond looked out the window, deep in thought. About three hours into the drive, the two men stopped to piss and stretch their legs by the side of the road in a totally deserted area. The stars overhead were brilliant. The pair then broke out some cheese sandwiches, apples, and bottled water from General Lee's food hamper and ate by the car's running headlamps. In the ZiL's boot were several extra jerry cans of petrol, so Lee added five gallons to the limousine's tank after they finished eating. "It is so big and heavy that it only gets about 18 miles to the gallon. And the few service stations until we get to Pyongyang are all closed after dark," he explained. Bond noted that they have not seen a single car since they left the Tuman River area.

 They drove until midnight, then stopped for another piss-food-petrol break. The General had talked about his family, and his hopes for the future once Kim Jong-Un was gone. "Like Hitler, there have been many plots to overthrow Kim or assassinate him. Obviously, all have failed. The details have never been reported in the Western media, but of course the worldwide Intelligence community knows the facts," Woon Ha revealed. Bond then asked about education in the DPRK.

 "One-third of the curriculum at all levels from pre-school to university is simply indoctrination about the Kim Dynasty. Students are brainwashed into believing that their leaders were (and still are) all-knowing, all-benevolent, and all-powerful. They are portrayed as near-divine gods who are more loving and more important than even one's own parents and family. Total insanity!" Lee added with disgust.

 Three hours later, they reached the brightly lit outskirts of the capitol of North Korea. The road immediately became modern and smooth. Bond began to see tall, white apartment blocks and deserted parks and empty wide boulevards. "We will arrive at your hotel in about thirty minutes, Klaus. You can see it now in the distance. 1000 rooms, just like the Rossiya Hotel near Red Square in Moscow, only vertical instead of horizontal," the General laughed. Bond then remarked on a bizarre, huge, squat pyramid-shaped building in the center of the metropolis. "That will be an even larger hotel someday, but it has been under construction for many years now, with no completion date in sight. An absurd blight!" Lee commented.

 Bond remarked on the many floodlit metal and stone statues and giant portraits of Kim's grandfather and father. There were no traffic jams or pollution here because the inhabitants walked or bicycled or took city buses to school and to work -- much like Beijing prior to 1990, Woon Ha explained. "There are also no homeless people, or graffiti or advertisements. Just heroic propaganda murals and banners." It was eerie to arrive in such a deserted capitol city, Bond thought, even if it was the middle of the night. "It is not much different in the daytime, either," the General admitted. You are looking at nothing but the grand facade of a would-be world power."

 Around 03:30, they arrived as expected at the imposing Yanggakdo International Hotel. Bond grabbed his belongings, then General Lee got him checked in after his Klaus Rybeck passport was scanned. The lobby was devoid of any signs of other visitors, foreign tourists, or businessmen. The desk staff were all dressed identically in dull grey Mao-style suits, both men and women. Their faces were frozen in apathy, their eyes wary and suspicious. It was absolutely silent -- no lobby muzak, no gurgling fountains, no conversation. A sole flower bouquet on a marble table added a rare flash of color to an otherwise sterile setting of steel, glass and chrome.

 The General leaned forward to subtly whisper in Bond's ear. "Have a good rest and a good breakfast, Klaus. Remember that your room is bugged and that you are under constant observation from now on. I'll come up to your room at noon tomorrow. You'll be in Room 1101. I'll be bringing you a change of clothes -- specifically a blue-grey, Mao-style outfit. Kim is uncomfortable around Western suits, and prefers his guests to dress more like him. I'll also bring a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label, which you will present later as a gift to the Supreme Leader when you meet him at 15:00." Woon Ha Lee then turned and left.

 The rest of the hotel stay was uneventful. At noon, the General returned with the two items he had earlier promised. He put his fingers to his lips, so there was no talking until they checked out and were safely back in the ZiL.

 "Well, this is it, the Big Day...Are you ready, Mr. Rybeck?" Bond tugged at his Mao suit, straightening the polyester fabric a bit while seated. "Do I look ready, General?" They both grinned as professionals, but this would be deadly serious work coming up, and both their lives were on the line in the event of failure. The weather was cool and cloudy, adding to the pair's somber again mood.

 "When we arrive at the Presidential Palace, you will be searched and frisked and put through a metal detector. Your briefcase will be carefully examined, but then returned to you. The gift bottle of whiskey will likewise be analyzed, then returned. You'll be asked to remove your Rolex for checking too, but your signet ring can stay on. We will then be served lunch while we wait for our appointment. I hope you like Korean food, but even if you don't, eat it anyway, because we will be constantly videotaped and monitored. You will go in alone to meet the Supreme Leader. He may or may not have either a male or female aide with him, I'm not sure. You can immediately speak English to him because I already informed him that you don't speak any Korean. Always formally address him as 'Supreme Leader'. You have only thirty minutes to present your offer and show him the pictures of your nuclear device and assure a deal. I will wait in an adjoining room. For God's sake get him to like you enough to shake your hand firmly for two seconds! We will then feign to leave for the airport, but instead race to Nampo. O.K., here we are."

 The Presidential Palace complex was massively fortified with anti-vehicle cement pillars, high walls with electric barbed-wire, and throngs of security personnel along with monitoring cameras and several checkpoints. General Woon Ha Lee was saluted and quickly allowed access into the compound after his VIP passenger, Klaus Rybeck , was thoroughly checked out. Upon entering the enormous gaudy gold and marble hallways with their heavy crystal chandeliers, Bond was reminded of Bucharest and the Palace of Parliament built by the crazed Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Who do these pretenders think they are impressing? Bond wondered. Who exactly do they think they are fooling? Raping a nation's treasury and starving its population to build these shrines to twisted egos. The reality always sickened Bond.

 Up grand marble staircases they trudged, their footsteps echoing in the vast, yet immaculate emptiness. Other than expressionless uniformed armed soldiers flanking the halls every two-dozen meters and saluting the General, Bond and Woon Ha Lee were alone. Finally, they arrived at a banquet room where an impressive luncheon meal for two was waiting.

 Having dined years before in Seoul, 007 was familiar with basic Korean foods and habits. Koreans used stainless steel chopsticks, rather than wood or plastic as in China or Japan. The tips were scored to afford a better hold on slippery noodles and other dishes. The spoon was used for rice and for soups. One put the chopsticks neatly to the right of the spoon when finished.

 A buffet line was set up, with both male and female white-uniformed servers. There was ox bone soup, short rib soup, and stuffed chicken soup with ginseng. Then came stir-fried Korean noodles, Mandoo dumplings, beef barbeque Bulgogi, Bibimbap with rice, assorted pickled vegetables, seasoned seaweed, bean sprouts, shredded carrots, and of course Baechu Kimchi, whose garlic smell oddly reminded Bond of battling Sergio back on the TSE. Both men passed on any beer, wine, or liquor and stuck with bottled mineral water and tea. Dessert was a variety of sweet cakes and sliced fruits. As ordered, Bond sampled a bit of mostly everything, even though his mind and appetite were elsewhere. He and the General made innocent small talk during the meal: comparing the Vienna weather to that in Pyongyang, or complimenting the food, which was actually quite good.

 Shortly before 15:00, an aide to Kim arrived to escort Bond to his appointment. They first stopped at an ornate restroom and freshened up. Then the General was taken to one room -- with a gold-colored sofa in it -- to wait, while James Bond, clutching his briefcase and gift bottle, was taken past two armed guards flanking a heavy golden door which led into a formal reception room. Inside was a large, dark-wood executive desk with a tall leather chair. Behind it was an unlit fireplace, with two portraits arranged on the mantle: Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il. The DPRK flag was displayed alongside the desk. Opposite the desk were two modest chairs, presumably for visitors. A few feet behind were two blue sofas facing each other, with a low mahogany table between them. A huge chandelier provided the light. Although the room was vast, every piece of furniture was oddly crammed into only this one side. Bond remained standing, alone, studying the layout. Suddenly, he heard a commotion, and a panel opened, revealing a secret door. Three men rushed in, wearing identical black Mao suits. One of them was Kim Jong-Un. Bond recognized him instantly by his bizarre haircut, which helped make Kim the laughingstock of the civilized world.

 "Ah yes, you must be Klaus Rybeck from Vienna!" He walked right up to Bond and shook his right hand vigorously. Bond was stunned, for he had been briefed that Kim never shook hands with strangers. James obviously had no time to activate the poison ring either. "I understand you have a special item to offer me for sale?" Kim continued. "Good, good. I see you have also brought me my favorite whiskey! Shall we share a glass now? Why not...glasses, bring me two glasses!" he barked as one of his aides sheepishly complied, quickly rushing to a wooden side cabinet. Kim opened the bottle himself and poured two fingers of whiskey into each tumbler. "Prost!" he toasted as he clinked 007's glass. "Bottoms up, but you first. I need to see if it is safe, you understand." Bond had no choice but to obey, with Kim eyeing him carefully for a long, silent moment. Convinced the liquor was legitimate, Kim then smiled and greedily gulped his drink. Then he surprised 007 again by asking out of the blue, "Say, Klaus, do you like karaoke? I love it! My favorite song is 'My Way' by Frank Sinatra. I'm sure you know it...can I sing it for you?" Bond looked at Kim in wide-eyed amazement. This man was a babbling idiot, a doughy-faced man-child...

 "Ahem. Thank you, Mr.Park. Nice work, you can go now." Bond spun around and saw...Kim Jong-Un! He was dressed exactly the same, with the addition of thick, black-framed eyeglasses. "I see you already met my double, Mr. Rybeck. Just one of my many security precautions, I'm sure you understand. Mr. Park stands in for me at most public and media events. The resemblance is uncanny, don't you agree? Plus, he plays the fool so well. The West is completely tricked. Like that Dennis Rodman stuff. True, I am a basketball fan. But Rodman has never met the real me. Instead, he unwittingly parties with Mr. Park. I mean, who would actually want to spend time with that big ape?"

 Bond's head was swimming, so he tried to stay focused on his only task. He was alone now with the Supreme Leader. Kim's black, Mao-style clothing stank of cigarette smoke. Bond then looked into Kim Jong-Un's eyes. They were the cold, unfeeling, dark eyes of a reptile. The eyes of a man who could kill millions of people without either justification or remorse. 007 had seen such eyes before. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking...

 "Supreme Leader, it is a true honor to meet you. Thank you for inviting me. I have something here that I'm sure will interest you," Bond began, opening his briefcase.

 "Yes, I know. General Lee told me all about your special little device. I assume you have photographs? Then we can discuss price and delivery details." Kim motioned to one of the blue sofas. "Let's see what you have. Spread it out on this table." Bond sensed that this man was intelligent, in command, and dangerous. But his pasty skin pallor and obesity bespoke underlying poor health.

 "Certainly, Supreme Leader, take a look. A two kilo-ton device weighing only 28 kilograms. Fits neatly in a large suitcase. Easy to hide, easy to transport, easy to detonate. A fitting addition to your proud, ever-growing arsenal." Kim was carefully examining the photos as Bond lectured.

 "Exactly where is the device now, Mr. Rybeck? Vienna?" Kim inquired.

 "No, Supreme Leader, It is currently in Baku, in Azerbaijan. I purchased it from the Iranians there."

 "I see...how long would delivery to me take? And how much are you asking for it?" Kim asked.

 "If we can agree on the price, I can have it in Pyongyang within 48 hours by small private jet. I would want half of my payment deposited in my Swiss account now and the other half upon delivery. The price is $15 million U.S. This, I assure you, is an excellent price and is non-negotiable. If you are not interested I can sell to either the Russians or the Chinese. Of course, you can think about it for a day or two. If we are then in favorable agreement, General Lee will contact me and he will handle the financial arrangements in my absence. I must unfortunately leave for Vienna tonight at 16:00. I'm sure you understand, Supreme Leader. Business never sleeps where money is involved." Bond smiled, then went silent, watching his adversary. The body language. The breathing. The eyes. Bond leaned back on the blue sofa, casually placing his left hand over his right hand. A curled finger pressed the KR initials on the signet ring three times, as Q had demonstrated back in London. Bond detected a tiny movement on the underside of the ring. The micro-pin was activated. This was it. Bond slightly cupped his right hand so as to not accidentally inject his right pants, and hence leg, with mortal toxin. He willed himself, with every fiber of his being, to stay calm. The half-hour meeting time was almost expired.

 Kim broke the silence. "I want this device, Mr. Rybeck. I want this because it will afford me still more power over my enemies, especially the Americans and the Japanese. They mock me and my nation. But their time of world domination is almost over. You see, my nuclear test missiles are just a diversion. I have been secretly building a large nuclear arsenal underground. In another year, I will combine with ISIS and together we will detonate nuclear bombs all over the Western world! I suggest you move somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere soon, Mr.Rybeck, because once we start, Europe will be the first to be obliterated! America and her allies will attack both China and Russia, believing them to be behind the holocausts. They will destroy each other while I wait, don't you see? I swear I will outdo both my father and my grandfather to make myself adored by my people as the greatest ruler in history! We will co-rule the world at first with ISIS, then I will destroy them too!" Kim was now red-faced, his dark lizard eyes bulging, spittle forming on his lips like a madman. The man was insane, Bond realized. He had to make his move.

 "Supreme Leader, I would be delighted in my own humble way to help you achieve your goals with my device. Just let General Lee know within the 48-hour timeframe. Can we shake on it? It is an old business custom that I still like to abide by," Bond emphasized.

 Kim Jong-Un was still in his mental fantasyland as Bond approached him with an outstretched right hand and a friendly smile.

 "Oh, yes, well...thank you and goodbye, Mr. Rybeck..." Kim was just distracted enough to slowly extend his pudgy hand, his mind elsewhere, already looking away, so there was no eye contact. Bond gave Kim's hand a firm grip and counted ...one, one thousand, two, one thousand...to himself before letting go. Kim's hand had felt like cold, moist rubber. The Supreme Leader turned and left the room through the hidden door. Bond hurried back to the low table and shoved the nuclear device photos back into his briefcase. He had to find General Lee fast and get the hell out of here!

 In the hall, General Lee was waiting. Bond rubbed his nose, which was a pre-arranged sign to Woon Ha that the deed was done. The General said loudly, "Well, Mr. Rybeck, let's get you to the airport. You don't want to miss your flights back to Vienna."

 The men walked in silence (knowing they were always being recorded) through the maze of the Presidential Palace compound, past still more saluting guards. Outside, the ZiL was already waiting. They quickly got in and left. Lee explained that they would head in the direction of the airport in case they were followed, but once he determined they were safe, he would drive the 58 km to Nampo on the fast Hero Youth Highway. Bond turned around in his seat and rummaged in his Gladstone for some Nicorette. He was aching for a drink too, but it that was not going to happen for a few more hours.

 "You didn't mention that Kim had a 'double'," Bond said, examining the lethal ring on his finger that he prayed did its intended job.

 "You actually saw a 'double'?" Lee replied, incredulous. "There have been several rumors among the top brass, but never any proof, so I had discounted that possibility." Bond then gave Woon Ha a detailed recap of the whole encounter, ending with the hopefully fatal handshake. The General was very excited. "Well done, Klaus!" I think we can exit here and head southwest for Nampo now. In 44 minutes we will be at the docks."

 Nampo was the chief port for the capitol of North Korea, so it was large and busy with dozens of docked freighters. At a traffic light, Lee noticed the start of mournful music playing on mounted loudspeakers, which were set up in each intersection in every city and village in the DPRK to regularly blare either rousing martial music or monotonous spoken propaganda. He lowered his window to hear better. "It's funeral music!" he joyously exclaimed. "The last time that dirge was played was in 2011 when Kim Jong-Il died. This means that Kim Jong-Un is dead! You did it, Klaus!" The music was interrupted by an emergency news bulletin. The General translated. "We must sadly announce that our beloved Supreme Leader has left us to join his father and grandfather now in heavenly repose...all citizens of the glorious Democratic People's Republic of Korea are ordered to remain calm and await further instructions." Lee rolled up his window and sped off towards the docks. "A new day has dawned for my people, Klaus. I believe that with the right leadership, we will reunite with the South soon and once again become One Korea. I will stay to help with this transition. Just like with the Castro brothers in Cuba, there are decent people already in the wings who were just waiting for the Old Order to die. Those new leaders will now step out of the shadows and help our nation rejoin the modern world."

 Security personnel saluted the General as he passed through several checkpoints at the central docks. He then wheeled his limousine and parked near the water's edge near a medium-sized fishing boat. "Here we are, Klaus. My crew will take you out past the 14-mile international waters boundary line. You can change out of your Mao suit on the submarine. It surfaces at 20:00. HMS Triumph. Appropriately named, don't you think? And don't forget your belongings." Lee handed Bond his briefcase, Gladstone, and garment bag. "If they don't give Kim a thorough autopsy, I should be in the clear. If they doubt he had a heart attack and do detect poisoning...who knows? I can face either execution or a medal. I'm prepared for whatever happens. Good Luck, Klaus. And my nation -- in fact the whole world, I believe -- thanks you for ridding this planet of such a horrible human being." Overcome with emotion, the General embraced 007, then turned and drove away.

 The six-man fishing boat crew helped Bond aboard with his gear, and quickly cast off. James soon realized that the men only spoke Korean. They smiled when he used a few words like "annyeong" and "gomawo." But Bond was exhausted and went to catch some sleep below deck.

 When he awoke, it was dark, and the boat's motor was silent. He checked his Rolex. It said 19:48. Bond went up top. The crew was positioned, watching and waiting, one crewman with binoculars. They offered Bond some hot tea in a battered tin mug. It tasted wonderful.

 Suddenly, huge bubbles and water wakes erupted nearby. A submarine blowing its tanks, like some kind of a metallic whale breeching. The huge greyish-black HMS Triumph surfaced about 100' away, the lettering 'S 93' on its conning tower. A hatch was opened, and an orange rubber dingy was released into the water. Two Royal Navy submariners skillfully motored the dingy over to the side of the Korean fishing boat and secured lines. Bond grabbed his gear, thanked his six friends (saying "gomawo" for the last time), then lowered himself into the dingy, and it shoved off. On Q’s earlier instructions back at MI6, 007 removed the now inert signet ring from his finger and threw it into the Yellow Sea. The fishing boat started its diesel engines, turned about, and headed back towards the mainland.

 When Bond climbed down the submarine's ladder, he immediately met Captain Merritt. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Rybeck. You will share my quarters. I just received a message from Fleet HQ with the good news that Kim Jong-Un is dead. My crew of 130 have strict instructions not to question you regarding your identity or why we picked you up. You have free run of the boat, of course. She is a real beauty, the last of seven Trafalgar-class nuclear submarines. We carry both Tomahawk cruise missiles and heavy duty Spearfish torpedoes. At 30 knots, she'll cover the 9479 nautical miles through Suez to Gibraltar in 13 days and 4 hours, according to our current GPS. The food is the best in the fleet too. So it should be a fine voyage. Anyway I can help you, please don't hesitate to ask. Any questions?"

 Bond had to resist confessing that he himself was once a Royal Navy Commander. "No questions, Captain. Please call me Klaus. But could you send a coded message to MI6 headquarters in London? Just say: 'Package Delivered'. Now, where can I get out of this monkey suit?" 007 pleaded, referring to his Korean outfit. "And Captain? I could sure use a large, stiff whiskey."

 Over the following days, James was relaxed. He read his own books and a few others from the Captain's library. He explored all aspects of the submarine, ate too well, played cards and chess with some of the crew on their off hours, and replayed his successful mission over in his mind. He found the slip of paper with Larisa's mobile number on it and daydreamed about her as well. He had made up his mind to contact her again.

 Before the voyage became too wearing, HMS Triumph arrived at its destination, the fortified underground submarine base at Gibraltar. Bond sincerely thanked Captain Merritt and his crew. They made him an honorary submariner "Dolphin," complete with certificate and official uniform patch, as a parting gift. He was then driven to Malaga where a private plane immediately flew him to Palma, Mallorca. (James knew that he would use the Palma airport to fly to Monaco on occasion, where he could don his tuxedo and try his luck again at the Monte Carlo Casino baccarat tables.) From Palma, a car and driver took him to the new house that he had earlier chosen, overlooking the sea in Alcudia. The driver addressed Bond as "Mr. Weston," for now James was Alec Weston, and would be for the rest of his life. Meanwhile, Bond thought about what kind of car he would be buying for himself soon.

 The driver wordlessly handed James the keys to his new house, then sped away. When James walked in with his belongings, he saw that all of his clothing and the furniture from his Notting Hill flat had been carefully unpacked and arranged. A sealed manila envelope rested on his desk. It included his new passport as Alec Weston, along with various credit cards, his new Swiss bank account information, and other forged identity documents such as his birth certificate. (He had previously destroyed all remnants of his used identity as Klaus Rybeck.) James was pleased when he noticed that his refrigerator was stocked with fresh food, even including a bottle of Latvian craft vodka tucked away in a corner. He threw open the front curtains to enjoy the magnificent view. Then he opened all the windows, and smelled the sweet fragrance of flowers drifting in the warm, gentle air. The sunshine was almost overwhelming, in contrast to being under the ocean in a submarine for two weeks.

 About six months later, Alec received a wrapped brown paper parcel. It was not delivered through the regular post, but simply had "Alec Weston" written on it in bold black Sharpie. There was no return address, stamps, or other markings. The package was simply on his front doorstep when he opened his door one morning.

 Alec untied the parcel's string. Inside was a navy blue, Sea Island cotton short-sleeved men's shirt, size large. Also, there was a brief note:

 "I was told you fancied these kind of shirts. Please enjoy it in good health and much happiness for many, many years."

 It was signed: "With Our Gratitude,

 Elizabeth R "

 Alec called out across the room. "Larisa, come here, luv, and see what just came..."

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 September 17, 2017