

# **PASSERSBY**

**BY**

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## **GLOSSARY**

**AK-47** - Russian assault rifle

**AKCAM** – The Alaskan Campaign

**ANSAT** – Russian (light) reconnaissance helicopter

**BMNT** – Beginning Morning Nautical Twilight (first light)

**claymore** – US made anti-personnel mine (M-18 A1)

**EI** – Essential Elements of Information

**EENT** – End of Evening Nautical Twilight (last light)

**ETA** – Estimated Time of Arrival

**ETD** – Estimated Time of Departure

**FSB** – Russian secret police

**FSP** – Fuel Supply Point

**GRAIL** – shoulder-fired anti-air missile (officially in Russian a *Strela 2*)

**HIND ...** – Followed by a two-digit number it designates a type of Russian made helicopter

**IMI** – US non-profit military think-tank

**KIA** – Killed In Action

**LZ** – Landing Zone

**Mi...** - followed by a number, designates a type of Russian made helicopter

**M4** – US made assault carbine (5.56 mm)

**M9** – US made sidearm (Beretta 9mm)

**OP** – Observation Post

**OPFOR** – Opposition Force (generic enemy in tactical language)

**PLA** – People’s Liberation Army is China’s Army (**PLAN** is Navy) (**PLAAF** is Air Force)

**POW** - Prisoner Of War

**PRC** – People’s Republic of China

**RFE** – Russian Far East (East of and *not* included in Siberia)

**ROB** – “Road of Bones” (epithet given to Kolyma road from Yakutsk to Magadan)

**ROC** – Republic of China (Taiwan)

**RPG** - Rocket Propelled Grenade

**RPV** – Remotely Piloted Vehicle (drone in common usage)

**S-2** – Intelligence staff officer or staff division

**Sitrep** – Situation report

**SU ...** - Followed by a one or two digit number it designates a Russian made high performance jet

**UAV** – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (drone)

**WIA** – Wounded In Action

... any potential adversary has now discovered the futility of an open deliberate struggle  
... against the firepower and discipline of Western infantry.  
Yet, ominously, the legacy of the Greek's battle style  
lingers on, a narcotic that we cannot put away.

Victor Davis Hanson  
*The Western Way of War*

“The whole damned Chinese army walked through my mouth...barefoot.”

*Standard lament of the hung-over Korean War G.I.*

# PRELUDE

The cremator appeared shortly after the corpse's demise. Late fall had chilled the deceased so deeply that decomposition was next to zero. The caller zipped the sleeping bag, which had become the newly dead man's bier and dragged it gently to the deepest corner shelf. That act would entomb the body under the incessant snow drifting about, powdering every flat surface. This sole pallbearer sheathed the bag in a vermin proof fabric coffin before backing out with respect.

Months later, when the next phase of its internment began with the return of the decedent's sole living adherent, the cadaver was frozen solid as a marble pillar it now resembled. With the same reverence the fur clad visitor eased the icy remains on to a runner borne hearse, which soon slid them from the flurry filled morgue.

For those familiar with literary portrayals of the afterlife, the deceased's journey resembled a re-crossing of an iced river Styx to enter a glaciated Greek version of Valhalla. The taiga on a windless wintry day was as visually captivating as it was dangerous to the horseman driving the sleigh over treacherous footing under thigh high white fluff. The lone pallbearer's assent to this risk was testament to his esteem for his burden.

The end of the tortuous trail was more prosaic and less white. The sled passed by a steep roofed, low, logged, rambling retreat to a smaller, square, sod-roofed shed -- its interior a dark loam motif. The decedent's passage from a snow-flaked morgue through a blanched Valhalla to an earthen tomb would pause here in company with vegetables and hooved carcasses until the undecided undertaker could act. In the meantime, he stacked hay and ice all around and over the shrouded body. The result replicated those icehouses, which had provided wine-bucket ice in August for czarist aristocrats. The quiet buzz of an easy summer day would be a more fitting time to end his procrastination over the timing of his friend's formal farewell.

## COUNTER-PUNCH

Aleksey started, fully awake before he heard it. He could not remember what *it* was. “Had he heard them? Did it warrant ‘the drill?’”

Hoping those thoughts had not taken as much time as it seemed, he spun over the covers, off the bed and took another roll after thumping the floor into the two meters of open floorboards. That last shoulder bounce dropped him face down, engulfed by a dank huff of disused couch to await his intruder’s next move. His rebound from the hinged flooring had slammed it down over him and he sighed a profound hope that no one had heard the whole wake-roll-and-drop drill. With a half turn, he grabbed the dusty flak vest from its hook – checking the pocketed pistol and detonator as he donned it. In this buried one-prone-man shelter, he could fight back -- in the dark - - with no more than the twitch of a hand. Concealment, overhead cover and the other inherent advantages the defense were supposed to give him the upper hand in the engagement to follow, if surprise -- a capricious vixen -- favored him. “We will see,” he thought, breathless. Silent.

He had decided months ago that he was prepared to destroy his beloved, hand-hewn dacha. Rather than be taken by the FSB, Aleksey would bring the bucolic cottage down around his own shoulders. He had been expecting this latest incarnation of the KGB, since a foul rumor had tiptoed his way, rebounded and echoed back. Seems there had been an “inquiry” about some resident with American connections.

If they were here, six years of unwashed bucket crapping, mosquito slapping, and sweat mopping drudgery in a tent was going to waste tonight. He had taped blisters, dragged logs and rebuilt dumb mistakes for so long he had begun to cherish this old bunkered shack. “Shack? Hardly,” it occurred to him. People marveled at the inappropriateness of the split-levels, beamed ceilings and indirect lighting. It was blatantly bourgeoisie and he loved it all the more for the distinction.

Then he thought, “Old? My ass.” He had only been in it three short seasons when the mindless Chinese hooligans had picked a fight with the infernal Americans and decided to get at

them by crossing his backyard. His sanctuary in the RFE was supposed to have been too far away from all that. This end-of-the earth redoubt was ...

“Pig fucker barred the fucking door,” a voice interrupted. It was no one from town, but he would have recognized that angry, arrogant certitude anywhere. The FSB was inside. Aleksey had promised himself that he would not pause at this point. “Bye, Bye, my beloved cozy corner,” he thought, and aloud he whispered, “fire one.”

In the front room just inside the only door, he had triangulated three M18A1 claymore anti-personnel mines. These US made slabs of greenish gray C4 explosive – bent slightly back from the target – spit fiery 3mm spheres in a 600 meter per second arc, wicked out to 100 meters and lethal inside 50 meters, making a hell of a mess with a nasty back blast at the point of detonation. Casualties were certain and kills assured when fired simultaneously, as he did, from the ceiling and walls,

Outside he had concealed another three claymores, with overlapping arcs aimed across an inviting grassy patch under the mined trees. It was where an agitated rescuer was sure to put casualties from the indoor carnage. Further from the door, inviting alder pines around the next likely area of retreat were hung, like malevolent Christmas trees, with glass jarred M61 grenades. Aleksey liked to call them his fruit jarred wall bangers. The safety-clasps that normally popped loose to start the fuse when a hand-grenade was thrown were held close – in this instance -- by the wide mouthed jars -- pin out. Shatter that glass and the fuses kicked-off their terminal five-second countdown. He had stocked his bunker out back with a loaded M4 carbine and another M9 Beretta with ten full clips each. Just in case things got really hairy, he had backstopped and aimed contingency claymores down likely corridors approaching this dugout.

He had to arm and disarm nine claymores daily. On top of that, he rotated ammo and grenades with indoor stocks every two months. It kept him busy but he felt not the least paranoid. He had witnessed firsthand the longevity and the finality of the FSB's grip on its captives.

The whirl of the detonator set off a frantic belated query of his memory circuits. “Did I put in *all* the blasting caps last night?” Having to pull them out every morning and replace every one each night was tedious for him – despite his firm grasp of the necessity for it. “When did I last check det cord connections?” His mind churned as the last milliseconds between crank and bang flew by.

The shock wave slapped his head sideways off the edge of the sofa and hammered his ears. The hatch popped up revealing a dust-fogged gloom. As the floorboards bounced back, he had seen that it was almost dawn. “That would make all of this easier,” he thought – worrying again that he might have spoken aloud. “There had to be claymore casualties in the front room. How many? Did the roof cave in? Could those still walking even get in to help?” He surely hoped so.

Sudden yelling and thudding boots confirmed his hopes. “It was time for round two.”

\* \* \*

Walking the battlefield in the stillness of the aftermath was not the grimly introspective moment portrayed in so many war movies. He was too dammed busy. “How had he forgotten about cammo paint?” His thoughts spun. “Every last thing for the trip should have been in the shed,” his last standing structure. “I have no time for this shit,” he said picking through the rubble of what had been a bathroom.

Ahead there was a long, slow escape and evasion to execute. Aleksey knew he could not waste this daylight. “No going to Beliiya in the dark. And, no Beliiya today meant no partners. Then, Shit, why whitewash it? ‘Partners’ were, in fact, ‘accomplices’ or ‘collaborators,’ weren’t they? Depended on which pursuers showed up.” His immediate worry though, was some WIA still functional somewhere in this mess. “Why didn’t the second agent run when the first grenade detonated?” He asked himself again for the third time. “Too wounded? Or, was the swinging pinless grenade-in-a-jar so unexpected that it froze its victims?” And, he could not shake the notion – against all the odds -- that some spook was aiming a round his way.

Although Aleksey was fully aware of how maddeningly random the probable kill radius of a blast could be, he had still found it hard to imagine any survivors from that hellish triple blast in his living room. “Oh shit,” he had thought, “maybe only two thugs had entered in the first place. Then, did that leave more invaders fit for a fight?”

He recalled that he had been sliding through his hedge tunnel to the bunker in the rotted stump when the survivors of round one were stomping about in his front room and dragging wounded outside. His thoughts stampeded on, “Was that two wounded and one left inside under debris too heavy to move? Or, one and one?” When he blew the claymores across the front yard he had had no idea how many of that group had remained upright. However, more than one



intruder had clustered, as expected, between trees that hid shrapnel packed explosives behind some of those ubiquitous sackcloth wraps used to discourage parasites.

Bit by bit, his scrambled accounting began to stabilize. As Aleksey got a better hold on real time, he remembered that after that ambush only two passed his line of sight from his new perch. Hence, he had believed all but two were down. None of the explosions had endangered him. He had thought to position his observation post to put the house between himself and that second blast. When they had appeared from behind his dacha, one had been limping painfully and had to be helped to the wall-banger grove. "Two alive, one fit for duty," he had been thinking, just before yanking the lanyard that brought the steel pee down on their deserving asses. Of the dozen M61's at least five had burst above them from swing lines that had smashed the glass against trunks and swung back overhead. At that point, if any of his erstwhile captors had remained conscious, they had gone stock-still. "The beleaguered shits must have been certain by this time that they were being acquired as targets by someone, somewhere. Someone close who had the capability to kill whatever moved. They had lacked same."

However, he had been wrong. It was supposed to have been a three round fight but a round four had sprung up in a flicker of peripheral vision. Another WIA goon had limped around the other corner of the house aiming his AK47 at Aleksey's get-away hedge. This could have been a back-door guard returning to his post (despite the absence of a door). As Aleksey had squeezed his head down behind his log parapet his rib cage eased inward slightly with relief. It was a foreseen contingency. A millisecond visual sweep of his little battlefield had revealed no other movement and the backyard menace had not moved his way. Head down, although he hated to fire anything not looking, he had cranked number four. Good thing he had ducked. Even with granite outcropping and a parapet between him and the target, the back-blast had been as unpleasant as a car crash. While loose debris was still falling, he had seen only a black wispy nothing where an upright man had been.

There in the reverberations of aftermath -- waiting for he knew not what -- he speculated, "Did that smoky void end it? Could he really have covered everything?" His inner ears thumped with his elevated heartbeat. "Never happen," he thought, "'chips fly when you chop...'" Then again, the Americans do say, 'There is always a first time...'

The longest delay of this incessant morning may have elapsed while Aleksey's six-kilometer stare screened a cascade of memory rewinds interrupted by reality validations. He

covered every written checklist from memory. He recounted details of Vasily Yurovich's scoffing at the lists. He went over the micro-geography of his mini-battlefield tallying each tree and every rock, then room-by-room and niche-by-niche, both indoor and outdoor. He finally stirred, head shaking, fully actionable, when he recognized that his ability to apply English to the situation was perhaps the best evidence that his subconscious had already pronounced the "all clear." Some astute American intellectual (whose name had lapsed from memory) had made the case – convincing at the time – that real professionals got things right in a twinkle without fail. But, then again, that's what might end up on his tombstone. With that unhelpful reflection, some unmeasured interval after the last claymore blew, Aleksey stood.

As vision re-emerged from his long blank stare he was struck by the bulkiness of the bodies sprawled around his homestead. The FSB never sent small fry on a mission like this, as if five-to-one odds were not advantage enough. If his attackers had been standing, he would have appeared unimposing indeed. His American women friends had teased him gently with the nickname "bony." Only later had he learned how much they preferred his physique to the alternative. Despite the absence of blue eyes and not easily burned skin, his off-blond hair led many in the US to mistake him for Scandinavian or German. His mastery of English – on par with his Chinese – blurred his native Russian into a generic East European accent. Anywhere overseas he always referred to himself as Siberian.

Growing up in a foreigner's enclave supporting a People's Liberation Army naval base in Manchuria had spread him across a broader cultural spectrum. Aleksey was less Russian than his parents but more European than his native Chinese friends. He did not see Arabs or Persians as exotics just as people possessed of curious languages. He picked up a little Spanish from a Cuban playmate while they both were learning American English from a moonlighting Chinese Stanford graduate who befriended the Russo-Cuban duo. They spoke only English on the frequent lengthy visits to the PLAN Lt. Commanders home and like him – and most of this isolated community – they became more imbued of military culture than any nationality. It was a disposition derived of this cosmopolitanism that would serve him so well after he had survived in the Caucasus. When Washington think tanks finally decided that having Russians on the staff was cool, it was easy for him to line-up early. It had been merely some more war business. Aleksey had always been the kind of professional who could see a military adversary's point of view. The media and the politicians on either side were harder to unravel.

Then, coming back into harness again, he vowed to pack quickly for a change. "If ever he was to overcome his checklist mania, this was the day," he thought. "Only the basic load of explosives and extra ammo in case of..." he stopped this train of thought. "Fight who?" If the capture detail had left someone behind, that poor bastard would also be up against Lev, and probably Vasily, as soon as he arrived on the scene. Three to one hardly required enough ammo for a firefight. "What's more," he thought, "any goon left in Beliiya would be some loser or neophyte who got cutout from the easy pickings." That deduction, in turn, prompted the realization that the hit squad must have come by water. There was no way to make a covert helicopter night landing anywhere in the vicinity of Beliiya. Although, the river route from Yakutsk would have been a six-day round-trip, it did garner for them the ease of a surprise attack and rewards of more space to carry loot that they would not have to share with a helicopter crew. Their orphaned boats would necessitate a re-route on his way.

A quick last look from the perimeter of his property was not a wise move. As his broken-backed sanctuary lay unsinewed before the first shafts of day, the grisly scene transformed his perspective from utilitarian to personal. It caused an unexpected cluster of connections to spark an abrupt realization. The homestead had brim-filled an otherwise aimless life since his wife had departed, and the thought of no longer having this place left a void. From now on, whatever held up the empty membrane formerly inflated by his soul would remain a mystery. In an absence of consciousness, his hollow form slumped toward the rustic slum of Beliiya -- neither victor nor victim.

The sun was all the way up and beaming like a new mother. On a day like this, you could not keep a Russian inside. Every man, woman and child in the Russian Far East would be out in the sun as naked as he or she dared. On the most magnificent day in weeks, Aleksey was about to do a sensory deprived sleep walk. He would ignore the budding Taiga that had brought him this far away in the first place. The landscape was at its best in this light during this, its best season. He had come here smitten by the variety in the topography. Deep pine shaded, needle carpeted creek lines that opened up their banks to grass and scrub flats, which in their turn, rose to scrubrier ridges flecked with bald grey outcroppings breaching from the beige grass like stone whales. It had been those boulders poking out of earthen seas, emerging unexpectedly among larch stands, and jutting from banks, which had sealed his future with the RFE. Moss matted waterside stands of arrow straight conifers, interlaced with outbreaks of crosshatched white birch,

were just so much icing on a sumptuous cake. He had known for most of his adult life that he would only settle down among granite pods of those landlocked cetaceans. In his present state, and along with the hundreds of distractions directly related to survival, it would not occur to Aleksey for some time that he would be passing right by life's beauty and piquancy for many more days than he dared to contemplate. Worst of all, he would remain fixated for those many days by the dread of isolation out there -- the ugly side of the Taiga he so cherished otherwise.

Despite the temptations to stay overseas, the USA had no real Taiga. That place's charm was the money that allowed him to live in comfort across these longitudes. Other Russians thought of the RFE as a wasteland, but he had been able to see through the difficulties of so little infrastructure in a cold, unpopulated region. If one came only in summer, used military transport, (as he had until recently) and could pay for everything from construction to fuel to communications, it was easier to capitulate to the solitude and serenity. A territory that so oppressed most of its inhabitants had treated him more benignly.

His well-conditioned legs had fallen automatically into the six-kilometer per hour pace that would get him there in a little under three and a half hours (including the detour by Cho's cache). But, even someone who traveled a trail four or five times a week could not stumble on mind-dark for that long. The sharp edges of small realities intruded and his thoughts transitioned domains back to pragmatism. Still on full autopilot hiking mode his considerable powers of concentration found their way to the last thing his brain remembered calling up -- End of Evening Nautical Twilight. EENT was the far bracket for the next stage. On a day like today, he would have to hide on the fringes of Beliiya. Being spotted by anyone would be hazardous and that threat would persist into summer's long high-latitude twilight.

## TEN DAYS AGO

[EXCERPTED intercept by desk officer, NE China. FILE: Amur Reg., MISC. (SUBJ: Criminal activity vs. subject's nationals)] Clas: SECRET

...we must surmise that this breach coincided with the death of an officer missing in action (MIA). The unaccounted for individual nearest to the pilfered cache at the time was Lt. Gun Yong Cho, (People's Liberation Army (PLA) Corps Engineers). This officer was also the only one of the half dozen MIA's who had clearance broad enough to unseal so many canisters. It may become relevant that this 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant was on the advance party that emplaced these storage vaults the season before Operation Barefoot -- as a 3<sup>rd</sup> Lieutenant. It is also conceivable that it was his remains nearby that had heretofore been identified only as "no-name-PLA" (by our atypical dentistry). Muscovite forensic interlopers in this jurisdiction leaked the discovery of the corpse's nationality to our provincial sources. They revealed nothing more about ID or why Russian Federal agents were involved in the first place.

Our inventory uncovered a most interesting list of missing items. Of course, our quartermaster (QM) cannot know exactly which items were legitimate usage and which were misappropriated. However, there were unusually large removals of certain articles that were not missing in similar quantities and categories from other inventories -- across this latitude of the march. For instance fewer replacement M4 carbines were requisitioned -- across the board -- than had been expected, and as a rule, very little additional 5.56 mm ammunition was needed. You may recall that we had only minimal expenditure during the entire transit of the RFE. However, from the cache nearest Lt. Cho's last reported position (closest town: Beliiya, Khabarovsk Krai, Russian Far East) three (3) M4 's were missing along with three (3) M9 Berettas. No other officer side arms were replaced during the RFE transit. Furthermore, every last 5.56 mm cartridge -- from all pilfered canisters -- was gone.

In addition, someone removed *all* of the M18A1 claymore anti-personnel mines and M61 fragmentation grenades from all of the breached canisters. This was very

unusual since the logistics staff had heard of many complaints about the requirement to carry two each per crew. The supply chain had always suspected that a great deal of this ordnance was routinely “lost” and never replaced due to “excessive weight” and not to legitimate usage. (Note: this cache did not conform to operational specifications and was more distant than the prescribed 800 meters from the nearest transport landing.) Other inventory shortages were C4 charges and det-cord. Many C4/det-cord inventories were depleted during the RFE road march. However, none of the large withdrawals occurred from other supply points across this 2-degree band of latitude.

Most telling is the inventories of personal items. It is not the quantity missing but the uniformity of one portion of one particular canister’s inventory deductions that got our attention. Normally soldiers took personal items in a random fashion – a torn coat replaced here, a punctured dry suit there. Underwear was normally replaced in ones and twos from a variety of sizes. Regular attrition of hardware inventories was even more random. In many caches, the original stocks of well liked gear such as combination shovel/paddles and axes were 100% intact. Other hardware inventories were reduced by what appeared to be breakage replacements – an odd deduction here and there -- such as one of our “troubled” rucksacks or a wire saw. However, in what we will refer to as “Cho’s cache” three (3) of every type of personal accouterment in sizes by threes (e.g. three sets of three different sizes of underwear) was missing from the original inventory. Where officer equipment differed from enlisted gear, only the officer items were removed. It seemed as if three PLA crew-men had been rendered bare-assed and then had been re-equipped from head to toe – as officers – with a whole new kit including every standard crew item from carbines to GPS handsets to blasting cap boxes.

The QM staff had warned us that loses were bound to occur. However, we had expected *looting*. If any items were left behind, we had expected them to be the heavier gear or military specialty equipment that would be difficult to sell on the black market, e.g. claymores. Instead, this thievery was strange because of how much salable stock was *not* taken.

This absence of wholesale looting, the indications of ordnance depletion throughout, plus the head-to-toe outfitting evident from canister #4 has led us to conclude

that a small group (3 men) may have used the cache to equip themselves for an armed foot march of some considerable distance. With the gear they could have carried, they could be headed anywhere in the RFE, or even West into Yakutia, (if they did not need to rely upon our GPS receivers, which would have been out-of-zone there). The theft of GPS is curious because of its lack of utility for most inhabitants of the RFE. There is a low probability that any Russians or most Chinese -- with less than an advanced degree in military affairs -- could decipher the characters for such highly specialized military usages.

Please note that these are preliminary conclusions and do not account for the removal of large amounts of ordnance from all pilfered canisters. The aggregate weight of the claymore mines and grenades alone were a full order of magnitude more than even five men could carry at once, on foot.

Despite some inconsistencies, it is nonetheless feasible that this breach was the work of insurgents or other criminals. This is relevant because we know Russian federal officials in Moscow have resumed the exile of political prisoners to the RFE. Our intelligence sources on the ground assure us they keep them under loose house arrest in isolated settlements both North and South of Magadan. The precise manner of custody depends, of course, on the relative severity of their political deviance. Nonetheless, this type remains problematic for us because of their predisposition to publicize their beliefs. However, regardless of who the intruders were, they would possess hard evidence of our transit during the operation. This could be worse than the other post-operational sightings reports and perhaps, even as troubling as the Aleksey Krasnaya episode. As the situation was then, any involvement from Moscow escalates the importance of any leak.

If this possibility were to pertain, it would behoove us to nudge our friend the Governor -- casually through the usual liaison, of course. This recommendation seeks, as always throughout this endeavor, to insure that any evidence bearing detainees are silenced. As you may imagine, such individuals or groups could provide Moscow with just enough new detail to undermine our current level of deniability about our little "Barefoot" trespass. He will recognize the exigency of such measures as readily as do we. Regardless of the remaining uncertainties, perhaps we should consider insuring that all liaisons are prepared to *act with an excess of caution*. "Why wake the Devil," [original

*in Cyrillic ~trans.*] as our Russian comrades would say. We believe that Moscow's people this far East of Siberia are no longer looking for this kind of evidence – whether from lack of interest or capability (or both) is not known. I would pray we do not, somehow, allow them to trip over something that will cause them to focus on us instead of the Americans...[END EXCERPT]

Translation: Mandarin to US English

Chinese Div.

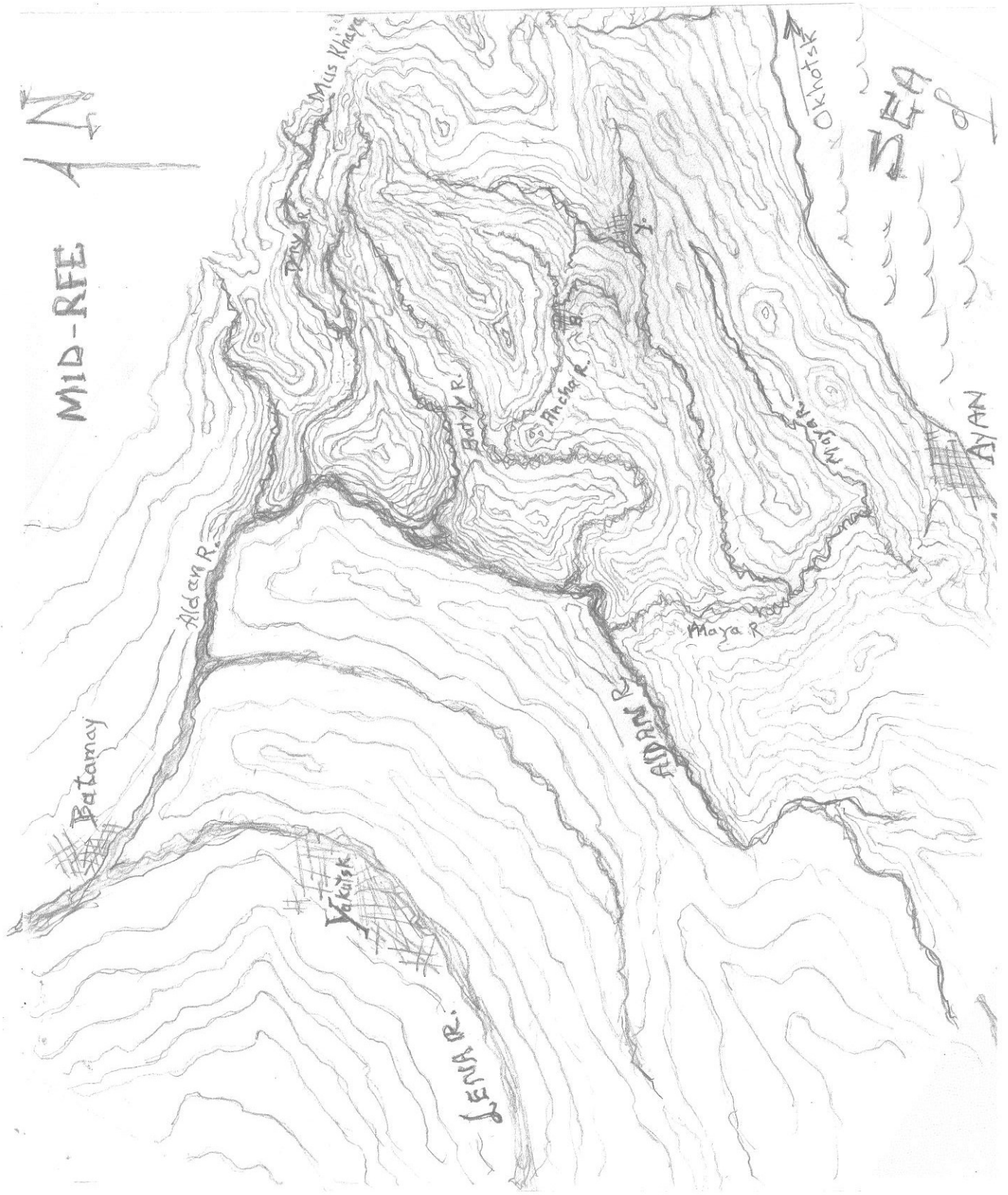
E. Asian Directorate

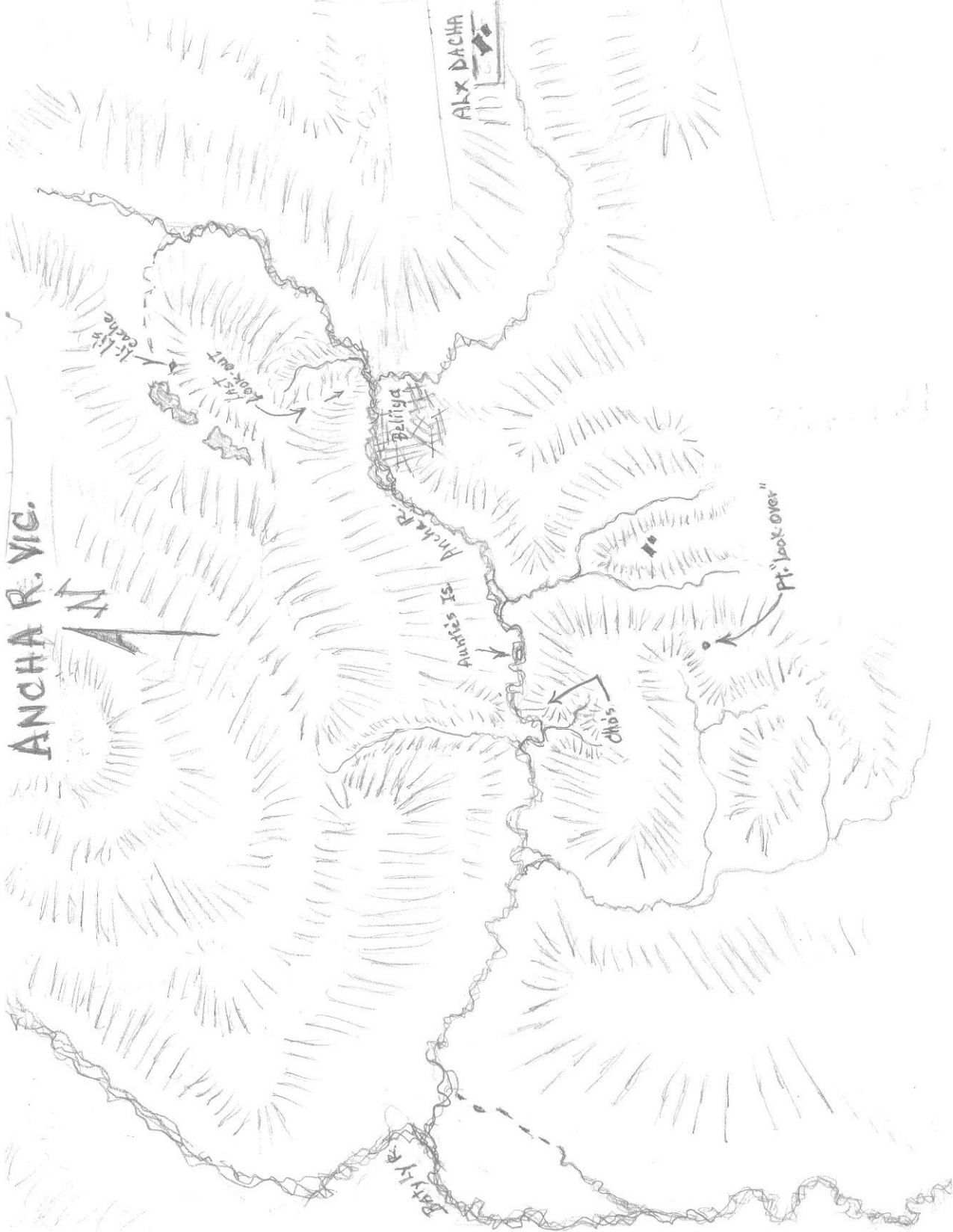
National Security Agency

[FILE: Amur Reg. MISC.]

Clas: SECRET







## ETD

He'd been there so long by late afternoon that a horsefly had buzzed him so interminably it had begun to resemble a demonic moon, which careened around his sweat drenched head at odd times in ever more eccentric orbits. After the first five hours, he had lost his storied ability to plan in exquisite detail -- giving in to imagining what celestial forces could create such trajectories and to conjuring astronomically correct moon names.

As it neared that time when one could not discern a man's form at 20 meters it already felt near midnight. He had managed to convince himself that Vasily Yurovich, in fact, had seen his repeated signals. From hiding, he had seen Vasily rush from his hooch 15 minutes ago and that could mean any one of three things. Either someone untrustworthy was already inside or was expected soon, or Vasily wasn't going to bring Aleksey in until he consulted Lev. Thanks to some perverse deity, this inane spy-craft horseshit had been necessary for months now simply in order to maintain the three colleagues' longstanding friendship. The new system of Russian exile was not that different from the Stalinist version. "Political" were free to move about within their assigned settlements and work at menial jobs. However, the authorities proscribed their travel beyond a certain village perimeter and nowadays each had a watcher they called "boss." Most "bosses" were locals on the federal payroll and in spite of that downside, the villagers kept them posted on their charges as part of the matter-of-fact community gossip. "There were some give-a-shits and real hard shits but damn few that were worth pissing on -- had they been afire," he thought.

Minutes later Vasily did return with Lev but they did not signal him in. Instead of the green shade, Vasily Yurovich pulled down the maroon one, which meant they were to meet at the warehouse. This was a good decision. They would be less likely to be noticed entering and leaving, and would be much less likely to be interrupted. Their covert cubby was in a disused shipping container buried deep at the back of a long line of rusting metal boxes awaiting an unlikely return trip to the RFE's transportation Olympus. Many more came up the *Ancha* River into Beliiya than left it. The container queue would not move until the transport omniscients panicked at some sudden shortage of empties. In the meantime, they'd have their toasty kerosene stove encircled by discarded easy chairs and Lev's ubiquitous vodka chilled by a scrounged French wine chiller on 10 meters of extension cords. Not the least of the hideout's charm was the absence of any need to be

quiet. This had ever endeared the little den to the ever un-muffled Lev who spoke first upon Aleksey's arrival.

"Well, well, pipe up the bloody pig rutter's Internationale, and Vasily Yurovich, my friend, take down the sign for the undertaker. Our comrades from the organs of security have somehow missed our very own Aleksey Mikhailovich Krasnaya. So did all your booby traps work? Or, did you just come straight to us from hunting lost chinks in the Taiga. If you have somehow not seen any FSB yet, you should know there are some outsized gorillas who want to chat you up."

"Louder Lev Ivanovich," Aleksey said feigning a frown, "I doubt the far side ferryman heard you yet. And, it's chatting *us* up – not just me – that the security *apparatchiks* wanted. Furthermore, your Brit 'public' school bias is showing again. 'Chinks' my ass. You keep forgetting I'm one-half Chinese," he said, frown lifting. "Besides our comrades of the glorious Middle Kingdom are probably the one's whose left-overs from the war are gonna give us whatever tiny chance we have out of this slimy mess we're in."

"How wretched of me, I do beg the pardon of your dear departed mother. But tell us how you got away."

"Well, in short, home defense-in-depth worked almost as planned – not flawless but damned nasty indeed. The impression that has stuck with me is increased skepticism about the Osama Bin Laden narrative. Either Bin Laden was a careless, unsupported dummy who could not think to take a few of the precautions we devised, or the American security *apparat* has yet to tell the whole story. That Arab should have had more access to ordnance, motion detectors, and such than we did."

"Mess *we* are in?" Vasily interrupted. "*Wanted* to chat *us* up? Did I hear right? How did this become the federal's security toughs hunting Lev and I, not just *you*?"

"Well Vasily Yurovich, my learned colleague, since you just had to ask," Aleksey smirked in full awareness of his young civilian friend's squeamishness about the use of deadly force. "Five recent corpses of FSB agents pointing accusatory fingers at your own dear friend here," he said thumbing his chest, "will cause any of Moscow's emissaries to seek conversation with all of my known associates. Know any of those who are *not* in this room right now?"

"Just great Aleksey Mikhailovich," Vasily gritted. "We help you out with your palatial dacha and now you throw it up in our faces. Do you really think they'll care about a little unpaid labor and some scrounged shit? Dammit, did you say that you murdered five federal agents?"

Aleksey held up a palm and said as his look darkened again, “You did miss Stalin’s reign, didn’t you. *They* – not I -- will ‘throw it up,’ as you say old friend, but you didn’t let me finish. First, it was self-defense. You can’t ‘murder’ someone who’s hell-bent on your destruction. Moreover, there is surely at least a sixth thug whom they most likely sent to recon this village in case I wasn’t home. After they deal with that, they *will* wrap you gents up in it. No way out of it. Has to be done. The repercussions will be automatic. So, let’s commence to begin, to think about, starting, to plan. Do you think this sixth ‘lurk’ might have had his own boat or did they leave him behind on foot?”

As Vasily leaned in to answer, Lev’s most gentle growl barged in, “You can’t kill any stay behind ape.”

No one spoke, sensing Lev wanted to explain. In that confiding tone he said, “He is already dead. And, you, Aleksey Mikhailovich said my academy dress sword was only a toy.”

Still Aleksey and Vasily waited in silence their faces reeking of why?

Lev’s tone changed to expository. “He came from the West by boat and alone. So I spent the rest of the morning finding the damn thing, creating a cover story and ‘short ranging’ the boat’s fuel system. (All this just in case you did survive the ‘visit’ or in case the FSB tried to take me with them somewhere.) While I was sorting through the cockpit lockers, I found one of those miniature SSB radios, which will be of no more use to national security pukes.” He held up a string bag, which Russians called a “maybe,” containing something angular.

“As if his termination were not enough,” he said as his tone turned more exasperated, “and just to be sure all of this will inevitably rebound to me -- to us perhaps -- my ‘boss’ will also be dead soon. He had sent for me,” Lev sounded as if he were tacking on a sad epilogue at a brisker pace. “When I got there he pointed me out to this FSB spook, Ivan Timofeyovich something-or-other, and the spook said I was a co-conspirator with this fugitive,” he gestured toward Aleksey, “who Ivan’s comrades were in the process of arresting as he spoke.”

As Lev paused in seeming embarrassment, Vasily managed a croak, “Go on.”

“So I just stood there like an idiot and waited for these blokes to arrest me. But, it appeared as if Ivan, our wretched mouse catcher, was saving the ‘pinch’ for when his friends returned from your dacha. (Guess he didn’t think the odds were favorable enough.) So, as my ‘boss’ was waving-papers-in-my-face listing the new rules of my house arrest, Ivan shot to his feet and left the room without a word. ‘Boss’ followed him out the door shouting assurances of my compliance at his back. When he turned back inside, I caught him with a full roundhouse just

behind the left ear with that pathetic trophy he got for exceeding quotas somewhere in Turksuckistan. He's still alive, barely. Katia showed up immediately acting as if she had heard every word. She turned out to be a sweetheart, Vasily. She bought my he-fell-and-hit-his-head story with a knowing nod, agreeing to repeat it word for word to the village medic. She's at the clinic now playing the good 'boss's' wife. Unfortunately Vasily, the less she says the more suspicions will drift toward you, since you two are, well, whatever it is you are calling it. Regardless, the whole settlement already believes you have plenty of motive to give the fat old cuckold a tap to his top knot."

Vasily's queasiness broke loose, "Swine puking wonderful," he said hopelessly rolling his eyes skyward. "Six dead, maybe seven and my poor unwitting Katia caught in the middle. Great."

Lev stopped him by saying, "Easy, my friend, she can't be expected to know who did it. She's only a postmortem witness. That will wash. When forensics come back they'll have my fingerprints -- not Vasily's or hers -- all over that sodding trophy. Your real problem with Katia Konstantovna is that we'll be leaving. But then, what's she gonna do? Shift blame to you, of course. You'll already be up to your ass in shit by associating with the state's enemies," he said flipping a hand back and forth between he and Aleksey. "Rest easy lad. She's quite simply not in trouble in Beliya. Got deniability up to her cute little ears."

Inwardly, Aleksey puffed a heavy sigh and thought, "Allah be praised, the first big hurdle is down. Lev's aboard." They had all been discussing going "over-the-hill" for months, but he knew that confronting the actuality of it could have been problematic -- hence, this moment was a breakthrough. Any more silent rejoicing, however, was dampened by the inchoate thoughts he had started having about a need to mislead his newfound accomplice before the night was out.

"Leaving,' indeed," Vasily's long exhale signaled the beginning of his resignation to his new fate, "where the fuck does one simply 'leave' to -- in the RFE? The sea is sure to be overrun with Russian Navy, any move south will be just what everyone would expect and it's a damn long way to the trans-Siberian. It's not as far to go west to Yakutsk, that is downstream all the way: *Batyly*, to the *Aldan* and into the *Lena*. But then, some in state security just might know that and be waiting. We'd never get through." He wouldn't even waste his time mentioning what he saw as trackless emptiness to nowhere that lay north. "Anyway," he said with a nod to Aleksey and a note of petulance in his last shot of resistance to the inevitability of their future as fugitives, "I'm not yet convinced that I can leave Katia Konstantovna."

Ignoring what he presumed was the last piece of Katia bullshit, Aleksey replied as though he-thought-you-would-never-ask, "Our dear departed Lt. Cho's stash of electronic gadgets and useful boodle can enable us to tweeze out yet another way. Your grasp of our geography is not bad at all. Thank you for helping me to make my point. As you so astutely say, we *do not* go east to the sea, or south or southwest, or even due west. Gentlemen we *can* go north. (Actually, it's north-northwest in order to get to the West)." Slipping one of his sketch maps on to the table, he continued, "The route goes right through those uncharted wastes that you did not deign to address. All the better since we can expect the FSB will treat that possibility with the same indifference."

He held out his palm to silence mouths opening in remonstrance. "No, hear me out. Everyone presumes a northward flight is craziness, but 'the Peoples' GPS can find us soft climbs that are backdoor tracks well east of the *Batyly*. Let them look up and down that stream all they want. The large-scale maps and satellite terrain close-ups can show us safe trails over the ridges, across the narrower upper *Batyly*, then up to the south branch of the *Tyry* River. This little river, which I'm sure has never come up on anyone's radar, actually goes west more directly to the *Aldan* than does the *Batyly's* roundabout journey to join the upstream reaches that river. Floating down the swift *Tyry* we could join the *Aldan* closer to the *Lena*. There, near that confluence at Batamay, we can hide in a busy waterfront town where no one, I say again, no one will be looking for us."

"Busy is an understatement," said Vasily.

This time Aleksey held up both palms as he hurried on to forestall further interruption. "The ultimate destination, gentlemen, is *not* Yakutsk as you are probably supposing. It is not *anywhere* in Russia. Downstream from there in Batamay we would be able to board one of the lower profile ships that are crowding in and out of port. Since they built the new fuel depot and stationed a customs detachment there -- with pilots -- it's become a gateway to the world's oceans. And, since arctic shipping routes are now open for almost 7 months, we can take those ice free lanes wherever a tramp steamer asking the fewest questions is going."

Holding up four splayed fingers, touching the left index with his right one, Aleksey motored on, "First, passports: can buy with rubles and dollars from the officer emergency kits in Cho's cache and in all the nearby caches, which his fancy little GPS will guide us to. Second, gear: again readily available from the PLA cache. This includes weapons and demolitions to fell trees for rafts to float to and down the *Aldan* River. Third, time: we don't have to slapdash about in a frenzy to get out of here. We'll be throwing distracting crap in the game and those FSB bastards are

famous for living it up in wealthy' victim's retreats. They won't be expected back until the beef and single-malt is all gone. They more than likely imagined that I had stocked my dacha (actually quite Spartan) fore to aft with smuggled goodies from the US. This is probably why they came by boat. No chopper pilot is going to allow enough unshared booty on-board. Then, when they do find the bodies out there, they should be stymied by uncertainty for a few more days, because they'll find six corpses instead of the five they'll be expecting. Poor ol' Cho's remains should make them think it's me. To help with the ruse I plugged two of the bodies with each other's 9 millimeters – one in the back. That gimmick plays to no specific scenario but throws enough horseshit into their preliminary forensics to give us some more time to get up the road north before any intensive search begins. Fourth, ... "" he paused, stuck, "screw it, I forget four. But, I do remember," he exaggerated, "we will need maps for our float down the *Aldan* and the *Lena* since that is outside the PLA's GPS high resolution coverage – their way, I guess, to discourage desertion."

"So, Vasily Yurovich, you're a common sight after hours at the library. What do you think? A razor and a few relevant atlas pages could do it? What say you?"

After Vasily's perfunctory nod, he continued, "We will all meet at Lev's hooch – via the wood bin -- not later than 2400 hours. Go ahead now, don't forget to bring your best broken-in boots and all the personal crap you want -- as long as it will fit in a matchbox," he said with a grim-eyed smile. "Lev and I have a body to hide."

Aleksey saw Lev smile knowingly as Vasily muttered, "Just bleeding wonderful," as he kicked the container door on the way out. It is just what Lev himself routinely did when in charge. Give your charges something specific to do at the end of a speech to preclude haggling over shit you knew more about than they did. He probably would probably accept Aleksey's monopoly on escape information and his position of *de facto* command. However, that could be temporary.

\* \* \*

"Shit, Lev, let's just put a chair in front of it," Aleksey panted pointing to the crate where they had put 100 kilos of Ivan the careless scout.

According to Lev, it had only been less than 100 minutes since the living version had awaited Lev's calls with a condescending impatience anticipating pleas for mercy. Instead, he had been impaled by a near perfect center thrust from Lev's parade ground saber, which had remained



tucked until the last second behind a straight, swinging right arm. The oblivious rookie had seen nothing ominous in the quick marching convergence of the two men and for that lapse, he was now interred at the end of the long queue of forgotten containers.

“I suppose we could get said chair from our new cozy corner,” Lev said. “I already feel strange – despite the logic of it – to be using our old hideaway as a graveyard. Just feels odd, as if somehow we’re pushing our luck. Our covert spot... it’s as if our secret shit is hanging all-out.”

“Why?” asked Aleksey, “are you thinking of staying here longer? This place remains secure until it begins to stink. That is not for two or more days considering the frosty nights. Don’t forget we want this guy discovered soon. We want to keep the body count at six FSB agents and their dead captive presumed to be me. It’s all the more reason why we must become invisible. I’ve not been seen alive by anyone that’s still alive. That’s great, so far. Better yet, it seems no one’s looking. Still, how long is that going to last? Soon Moscow FSB is going to notice the failure of the goons to report. Your boss could die. When, Lev Ivanovich?”

“Ok, not long,” Lev said snapping back. “I know, I fucking know,” he continued in a more resigned tone, “what I can’t reckon is why I give a toss. Saw all this sodding piffle every bloody day for weeks on end in the Ukraine. Somehow, though, this makes my skin wince. It’s too close, too personal, too sordid. I’ve killed people. I’ve fought all kinds, sober and blotto, pissed-off and just business, but, I guess, I’ve never, Aleksey Mikhailovich, killed by hand in a fight. Not somebody whose weapon was holstered. It is like... It’s like cheating in a fistfight. I never felt like a ‘dirty fighter’ before. No matter how bad someone got hurt, it had always seemed compulsory. ‘The mission, you know, sorry about your fucking broken arm, twit.’ And, I know these two sods had to be put out-of-our-way, but it doesn’t wear the same. Not legitimized in retrospect, like combat. It smells.”

With care, Aleksey reached out, gently stiff arming Lev’s chest and echoing a million Russian mothers said, “No medicine exists for the sickness of an undeserved regret. Sorry to blab on like that. Guess, I thought you were ok. Our asses on the line, and all. And the way we co-conspired to hard-ass Vasily Yurovich. Give yourself more slack, Colonel. ‘Sordid’ is just a bit too point blank. We cannot let it bore in that far. At least the KIA wasn’t a friend. I’m still not reconciled with the fact that Cho died on my watch.”

“Understandably, but you didn’t inflict his wounds. You told me he fell on his own.”

“True enough,” Alexey said, “but I never tried to find out *why* he fell in the first place, and maybe I let him stay too long at the dacha. Perhaps I could have taken him back sooner and perhaps have gotten him picked up by his people.”

“Don’t forget,” Lev said in a reversal of the consolation process, “we hypothesized, with some evidence, that the PLA may have known that Cho already had some grave brain disorder, and decided it was not worth the risk to evac a terminal case.”

“‘Maybes, could-have-beens’ – I shouldn’t have brought all this up again. The important thing to keep in mind is that these guys will kill us -- and do so slowly. We’re only feeling the back blast of doing it first without outright provocation. Problem is, you know we can’t wait for these assholes to hit first. I don’t need to tell you that if they get one hand up on you, you’ll be kissing your ass goodbye from a deep tuck.”

“Got it, old friend. But, I knew all of that. Don’t expect me to feel any better. I’m hearing an interminable background noise that feels as if it will be with me for life. That said, mere feelings shall not diminish my ability to stay this course. Just ignore me Aleksey Mikhailovich, and get on with it.”

“Ok, then,” said Aleksey, “the only thing for it is to keep your head down and your feet churning. Hope that sort of shit wears off. I’ve been hoping so for my own sake. If I allowed time to think about Cho and that broken-backed dacha of mine, the FSB mugs would find me face down in this stinking box. But, I’ll try not to do so and you too. “

The ensuing silence was broken some twenty beats later by Aleksey pressing both hands on his knees and rising in a once-more-into-the-breach manner as he said, “Well enough, help me bring the big one in here. It was a two-man job.”

Before Lev could move to comply a metallic clang spun them both around, ready for a fight, only to see Vasily’s head appear in the doorway.

Aleksey grinned with relief more than agreement, but wanted to know, “Why are you early? Got time on your hands?”

“No, I am as engaged as a chicken in a weasel pen. Dropped everything to tell you we may have to be out of Beliya well before we’d planned.”

“Smashing,” Lev’s eyes rolled, “precisely what we needed now. More reason to ping off the walls.”

Ignoring Lev, Vasily explained, “A militia sergeant, Igor Butstuckovich, or something, from *provincial* militia came all the way from Okhotsk to ‘see’ our own dear Aleksey Mikhailovich. Why do you suppose...”

“Well, shit,” broke in Aleksey, “suddenly every-fucking-body is fanning this fire: FSB comes for the grab, local hog smoochers lean on Lev, and now the worthless provincials -- who never gave a rolling rat turd as the whole People’s Liberation Army goose stepped barefoot across their doorstep – want in on the action. Bet you gents never thought your old friend Aleksey would become such a notable.”

Breaking his own pause, Aleksey asked, “Where did he go? Was he alone? Must we also eliminate him?”

“Hell no,” said Vasily waving it away, “he *walked* in from the east, alone just hours ago, and seemed willing to wait ‘til tomorrow when I promised to send one of Auntie Li Li’s kids to your dacha to fetch you. Assured him they were ‘legals,’ and then, I hurried off, upstream not in this direction. He just watched me go, so I have no idea, which way he went. Right? Looking back is guilty body language, eh?”

Hands up to forestall interruption he continued, “Wait, there is one more thing. Since he also seemed unaware of your FSB dust-up, I asked him if ‘Moscow’ was interrupting your sabbatical again, feigning ignorance of your ouster and fuzzing over whom exactly in Moscow I meant. Could have been referring to your old unit, right? Anyway, he just appeared puzzled and looked as if he had no notion of what the center had to do with it. Apparently, his boss sent him for you and that’s all he knows. Could be bullshit, but unfortunately, it’s also the template of an assassin who only needs to know who to shoot, not why.”

Aleksey tugged his chin back, glanced at Lev and in *sotto voce* said, “Gentleman and scholar, my friend Vasily Yurovich, I am impressed.” Looking back at Lev, “We are impressed. You tip toed past the devil and did us all some good with that little meeting. I will have to keep clear of this Igor pain-in-the-butt and we ought to get a move on, as Vasily suggests.”

“Looks as if we’ve just had our ‘midnight meeting,’” Lev added, “a dawn-light stroll is our next operation. Perhaps it would be prudent to leave Vasily (who is not in anybody’s crosshairs, yet) behind as our very own ‘lurker’ to cover our rear. What say, Vasily? Aleksey?”

Vasily stood up to go, “Certainly suits me.”

Aleksey nodded as he moved in behind the exiting Vasily. Lev fell in third and turned right with Aleksey to the new hideout while Vasily turned left toward the warehouse exit. Inside the cubby, Aleksey ignored the chair, went straight to his backpack and pulled out his US Army M9 Beretta. As he held it up to show Lev that they were now armed, both recoiled again to yet another unexpected sound. It was Vasily's raised voice addressing somebody called Igor "Kam-something-kov" and Igor's accusatory rejoinder.

"Ok, what *are* you doing here?"

"Helping a fellow exile find something for his boss," Vasily matter-of-factly replied.

"Oh, shit," thought Aleksey and followed the thought with a whispered shout of, "no," as he reached for Lev who was noisily moving square shouldered toward the sounds of the voices. Aleksey could only follow, staying out of sight, quietly chambering a round in the M9.

"Yeah," said Lev, beaming, as he interrupted Igor's interrogation, "Vasily's helping me find my boss's socket set. He's in a coma at the clinic and I wanted to recover the lost set as a gift to present when he woke up. He's been pissing and moaning for months since these shipments came in," Lev swung an arm toward the nearby containers. "Boss said the sockets must have been left by mistake in a container, under trash, wedged behind a support beam, or something. I *told* him we had checked, but honestly, we could have done better. No one would give me the damned container's number until Boss got laid up."

"You are Lev Vishnevsky?" Igor asked.

"Unh, huh."

"The other 'close confidant' of Colonel Krasnaya. Do you know where he is?"

"Probably arrested by now," said Lev, deducing that this provincial cop knew more than the others had presumed. Clearly, the man had the presence of mind to follow Vasily to the warehouse after his friend had put the militiaman off. What is more, he somehow knew Lev's name.

However, Vasily doubled down with the evolving fabrication and said, "Exactly what we had concluded, just before you showed up Lev told me about the five FSB agents snooping about. By the way, did you *follow* me here?"

"Five?" Igor interrupted excitedly, "looking for who?"

"Aleksey Krasnaya, was the rumor," Vasily responded evenly. "Apparently there were six of them altogether. They say the group left one man behind with a boat and the others piled into

the other boat. It was all done very quietly but the whole thing was seen by Beliiya's biggest gossip -- who just happens to fish a lot downstream. Anyway, we realized, then, they could have nabbed poor Aleksey and taken him on down the *Ancha* River and might be well on their way down the *Batyly* River to Yakutsk by now. Then, what Lev just learned minutes before he showed up here sort of clinches it. He heard that the agent left behind (Ivan...somebody or other) had also left in his boat. So, that guy was probably joining the other five somewhere along the *Ancha*. Right Lev?"

By now, Lev had gotten Vasily's drift and pitched right in, "Correct, but seems as if this 'Ivan' left today sometime near or after dark. Babushka Sasha, the postmistress, told me that she saw him leave and noticed it, because at first glance she thought the stranger was taking her mail-scow. (They are both Navy surplus, double outboard 1.5-liter jobs.) So, if the others did wait for him, they would not get as far as the *Batyly* in the dark. Probably not even traveling at night. Can be dicey if you don't have local knowledge of the waters..."

Lev allowed his monologue trail off. The provincial agent seemed oblivious to the story. In fact, Igor did take another tack. "You two are unusually calm about your 'confidant' Krasnaya's fate."

"Well," said Vasily levelly, "we don't have anything to worry about. Do we, officer? He *is* innocent. Is he not? Didn't Col. Krasnaya go all the way to your headquarters just last fall to report Chinese army infiltrators to your boss, the Governor? If he were some kind of subversive, they certainly would have detained him then. Don't you think? Surely, when the FSB coordinate with your provincial authorities this will all be explained."

Ignoring Vasily's disingenuous reply the policeman demanded to know, "When exactly did this FSB agent leave the dock? Where is the post mistress's 'official watercraft' right now?"

"Let me take you there. It's opposite the ferry landing," said Vasily, "although you probably don't want to try a trip downstream in the dark. Shall I tell Aunty Li Li's boy you are going to the Colonel's dacha on your own?" Thus signaling to Aleksey and Lev that he would be sending Igor in the deceased agent's FSB boat -- *not* the mail-scow -- alone.

The provincial militiaman's answer was to grunt as he turned for the warehouse doors. This gave Lev the chance to hustle back to Aleksey with his hands palm out in the universal "hold it" sign, "I think that will do it," he whispered. "That dumb shit is going to think he's stealing the

post office's boat – he'll call it 'expropriate' – and thanks to Vasily's quick mouth we may have some breathing space.”

“Or,” Aleksey said with some sarcasm, “our Igor Buttstickovich, could call in a chopper to chase after the FSB boats.”

“Be serious, Aleksey Mikhailovich, he knows nothing about the casualties at your place. Nobody gets fricking rotary-wing blade-time just for scooping some corporal's collar.”

“You're right, but we still have no idea yet what the hell he's up to,” he motioned for Lev to help pick up the other end of the big chair. He continued to speak as they lugged it, “Either way he is not going to find the arrest squad's boat -- not tonight, for sure, and probably not even in the daylight. On my way here, on foot, I pushed it back into that backwater pileup we call the 'beaver-dam.' Remember the dam? Anyway, unless he has been here before, he'll dither here and there looking for their boats -- hoping they haven't left yet. Then, finding no boat, he might even think he's at the wrong creek and waste more time. If we're lucky, sometime during this flailing around the gas will run out, because this is the boat with the short-ranged fuel tanks, is it not? I presume you used the water balloon method, correct?” As Lev nodded assent, he continued, “Eventually, he will find the mess at the dacha, but will have to walk back with the news. So, there is no way he is going to get back here before late morning. Maybe longer, if he decides at the 'crime scene' that I am already dead. You do recall that he will find *six*, not five corpses – the one in camouflage paint presumably mine. This could mean that Igor's big news from Col. Krasnaya's dacha might become gossip about an FSB massacre and *not* a manhunt for me, nor a call for the arrest of my 'co-conspirators'.” He took a big breath, “Though, that hardly seems like a worst case.”

He paused again, letting his eyes wander as he mulled over a sudden thought, “Ohh...shit, what if the cop concludes, instead, that the six corpses include not me, but old Ivan here?” He dropped his end of the chair with a thump and gestured toward the crate with a bouncing forefinger -- his voice betraying the first glimmer of fear.

Lev extended the logic of his thought. “Then he could sound an alarm, which would precipitate said manhunt and we, bloody well, ought to be down the road by tomorrow first light.”

“Without equipment,” Aleksey said, finishing his sentence for him, “or food, or GPS... We need to visit Cho's cave first. As much selection and assembly of your packs as I have done over last winter, you two must have some time to familiarize with the PLA gear and rig your own packs.

We may be stuck with what goes in them for at least a couple of weeks until we get to the next cache line.”

“ So,” Aleksey broke off and was grim when he resumed, “it may get ‘sordid.’” He was silent for another three beats and added, “again.”

Lev brushed off Aleksey’s concession to his own earlier qualms and said, “What? Smite the provincial sod on his return trip? That is not the same, Aleksey Mikhailovich, merely an operational necessity -- not exactly hand-to-hand gone bad. And, in that regard Colonel, I do trust you brought more firepower than that puny M9.”

“Yes indeed, Colonel,” Aleksey replied, “you will like what’s in my pack next door.” He gave the big soft chair a last tug into place and extended an after-you gesture toward their newer hideaway two containers to the right. “The militiaman’s timeline allows some bit of sleep. We’ll need it.”

“A hard lesson well earned, that,” Lev said. “When the wood chips fly the second thing you do after getting behind the door is start looking for a place to rest. I’ll take the couch.”

“Firepower, indeed, he did have a backpack with nothing but firearms, ammo and demolition,” Aleksey thought as his head settled onto the remaining easy chair. Two, each M4, 5.56 carbines sticking out of the pack were sheathed in bamboo to look like collapsed fishing poles. The two big bulges were 10 kilos of C4. “A 15 kilo pack and not even a pair of dry socks,” he mused to himself realizing once more how glad he was to have made the side trip to Cho’s stash.

However, he could no longer banish his chief anxiety of this day, which had otherwise gone so well. He wondered what on earth had possessed the provincial government to turn on him. And, why would they do so at such a colossally inappropriate time? It seemed impossible that such an indifferent bunch who had treated his PLA sightings with such good humored ridicule could have turned so hostile. Or, so it appeared. From the Governor on down to the militia sergeants these provincials were so openly contemptuous of Moscow’s authority; it beggared belief that they could now be cooperating with the FSB. The whole Province of Kharborovsk, he was fairly sure, didn’t even have an FSB field office.

Beyond a doubt, it was odd. He knew why the central organs on the “continent,” as everyone out here called it, were after him. He knew he had run afoul of the new post-war “realities.” Aleksey remembered how he had felt pressured by the unsubtle and hard-edged anti-Americanism to denounce his friends at IMI. The old Soviet style “objective forces” in politics were

creating calls for “intellectuals” like himself to return to “the center” to purge themselves of any “subversive influences,” if they knew what was good for them. He *had* pictured himself glad-handing around his old headquarters and at social gatherings in Moscow to give the new bosses the assurances they craved. They sought affirmation that he, in fact, had renounced those years of “friendly ties” in the USA. Actually, he recalled, as sleep neared, he had never explicitly decided not to do it. Instead, his summer dacha ever so gradually transformed into a year-round home and it was near the nadir of winter before he felt faint strums of the paranoia so endemic amongst outsiders under the authoritarian oligarchies.

These things he knew. The center had set him on this novel approach to outsider survival. What remained a stubborn mystery was why in the hell did Khabarovsk Krai give a damn? Two beats before sleep had slunk over him, the wake-up time came to mind and Aleksey set it early. He had stored sleep reserves from the prolonged sunny day and knew he ought to make time to play undertaker one more time.

Lev managed not to waken Aleksey when he went out to pee. But, he found him up on one elbow as he crept back in through the small gap between the heavy steel doors. “What’s up,” he whispered as if there had been others asleep.

“Simply something I’ve been meaning to say,” Aleksey said continuing the unwarranted whispering. “We have been treating Vasily Yurovich a bit like a strap-hanger. It’s the ‘civilian thing’ we ground pounders have, I guess. But he is damned bright. Did you notice how fast he was off-the-cuff with this nasty Igor surprise? It’s almost scary how quick the guy can be. And, it’s not just glibness. He solved a big headache for us just now. Maybe even saved someone’s life, and it seemed as if he did it in a blink. Do you suppose he had thought it out before hand or did all that very astute bullshit just click into place on the spot? I am so glad I let him in on this whole post-war mess months ago. Don’t know about you, Lev Ivanovich, he’ll be getting a little more respect from me from now on. Furthermore, he’s not just another bright bulb. He’s a lifelong *hiker*. Make that a *mountain hiker* who grew up in the Urals. True blue country boys always make the best field troops.”

“Indeed” yawned Lev, “he is a full step up from your average candy-ass who’s never seen a round fired in anger. He was not just ‘fast,’ he was as cool as a witch’s whichie-pingo. That demeanor sold our codswallop as much as what he said. Did you see sodding Igor’s eyes light



up? Then again, he did seem excitable and a bit slow to get on board when you told us how buggered we were. Seemed so unconvinced about our plans.”

“Actually, that’s just more proof of his intellect. If you think about it, his hesitance came from a lack of hard facts. Remember that I never showed him Cho’s cache. For him it’s still only hearsay. Likewise, he never saw any of the ordnance as you did. Surely, he believed I was on to something useful, but can you really blame him if he didn’t fully realize what a gold mine I had stumbled onto? One must admire a guy who demands rigor.”

“Ok, roger-all-after ‘what’s up.’ Is this all you are keeping me awake for?”

Grinning again for only the second time all day Aleksey said, “Yes my friend and hero of troop labor. Go back to sleep. I’ll get up in one-three-zero from now to brief Vasily. Meanwhile I’ll prep the casket a tad since I’m all caught up on sleep from sitting behind your house the whole damn day through.”

“Brief? Prep what?”

“Preparations to insure they *do* find our deceased friend here by the time the FSB cavalry arrive. We want them to be able to account for every one of their thugs in the arrest party so they will conclude that poor Cho’s remains are my remains. Then we can have more hope that the lazy asses will start coasting on the A. Krasnaya case. The brief is to give Vasily Yurovich deadlines and a rendezvous. I’ll know more detail by your wake-up time. Sleep now.”

\* \* \*

The *Ancha* River flowing west by Beliiya was a braided stream. It sagged gently southward around the base of a large mountain sporting steep inclines from base to crest and permitting movement to the north only at its confluence with the *Batyly* and up the creek flowing south to Beliiya along the eastern flank of the mountain. It supported foliage on each side consistently denser than the rest of the Taiga. Its westward flow wound gently but often. It rolled over shoals, around sand banks and split to surround islands -- some with ample scrub thickets lush enough for a pleasant picnic. The treacherous main channel could support small power craft and shallow draft barges as far upstream as Beliiya. This village was the end of all logistical pipelines and only this river traffic made it marginally viable since any settlement in the RFE had to be reachable by boat. (At €2,100 per hour to fly a helicopter, no community could expect to survive on air support alone.)

The south bank was the most traveled on foot and Lev searched for the militia corporal there. Aleksey, to remain unseen, broke brush on the opposite shore. With no prior coordination, the two old foot soldiers kept each other in sight and stopped on hand signal to listen and scan the terrain in front of each other with binoculars. No one moved until each had signaled the “ok.” If the corporal was in any posture but deliberate ambush, the odds were excellent that they would uncover him first and make a quick end to the grave concern he represented. They discounted an effective ambush by this urban policeman who had given no sign of a military background. Even then, an army veteran would have had great difficulty surprising Lev.

Aleksey marveled again, at how agile his fellow hunter still was in early middle age. Unlike him, his friend had the standard blond, pale skinned, blue-eyed Russian look. Despite the references to his size, Lev was only imposing compared to his two wiry friends. Vasily and Aleksey were lightweights deferring in size to a middleweight – a weight class the Lev had, in fact, boxed in at the military academy. He could still squeeze down to it with some serious work. It occurred to Aleksey that the remainder of this warm season would get them all back down to their fighting weights.

So far this new day had gone well enough. He had had no problems locating and briefing their stay behind accomplice and had covertly returned to the warehouse, promptly enough for the two of them to start downriver on time. Vasily was now aware that he had to meet them not later than 1300 hours at “Auntie’s Island” and that all of them had only 51 and half hours from that time to leave Beliiya before Aleksey’s demolitions detonated. He had even remembered at the last second to get assurance that Vasily’s has left his ever-present dog at home. He could see how it might be helpful on the trail but holing up in tight places (such as Cho’s cache) would be untenable. Dogs had too many needs.

However, as he walked, Aleksey began having difficulty convincing himself that he and Lev had not missed the provincial cop. He reasoned that their target would need to have left the dacha, for Beliiya, by the unlikely hour of 0330 in order to return before they had started their search -- if indeed he had gone there. However, if Igor never saw the dacha, there would be no alarming of the citizenry. Moreover, if not so, then he ceased to be a concern. He would never find Aleksey, because they planned to go full-time underground by 1300 hours today. Hence, they would either get him on this pass or forget the nettlesome shit. Nevertheless, as they came abreast of the creek leading south to the dacha, Aleksey’s tension ticked up a notch.

In a blink, it got even tighter before easing. He had lost Lev. The view in his binos had turned into an undifferentiated wall of green, but just as suddenly, his friend crashed out of a clump of brush with his M4 leveled on something further inland. In another pulse, Aleksey's anxiety evaporated as Lev's target swung into his 50 mm field of view. It was their objective, Corporal Igor of the Khabarovsk Krai militia, with his hands aloft approaching Lev saying something Aleksey could not decipher from the far side of the river.

Next, his emotions ping-ponged from relief to perplexity. Aleksey was transfixed for what seemed a long interval as he watched the strange behavior of the two men. What should have been over in seconds became an extended interaction that beggared belief. Any hint of hesitation should have been alien to an infantryman like Lev. Still, *nothing*. He had always been in awe of his friend's speed with a weapon. However, instead of the flash-bang of a taut shot group, Aleksey saw Lev's carbine go from his shoulder, to his hip, to the crook of his left arm, muzzle down, as the stand off changed from a shouting match, to a tense argument, and ultimately to a relaxed chat. As Lev ambled away up the creek toward the dacha, Aleksey leaned back against the nearest tree and slid down to his butt. There was nothing prudent to do, so he hid near the dinghy he'd used to cross the main channel 24 hours before and waited. Lev would have to find him...if, that is, either of them lived through the very odd morning.

Unlike Lev and Vasily, Aleksey was good at waiting. He used such downtime to map contingencies step by step. Why not? This meticulous approach could be what had made things work so well so far. Removing and replacing blasting caps every day, rotating grenades and claymores outside, renewing sand-bags every season and stocking a plentitude of ordnance, all these were the minutiae which underpinned the defeat of the FSB break-in and permitted him to secretly assemble a crew – never wanting for the right tools. In the same way, assembling gear, electronics and weapons from other caches -- down to and including rotating escape clothing in three piles so it would remain suitable to the season -- would underpin the upcoming escape from Russia. He was still refining, although it had already been war-gamed geographically, militarily, and temporally to a fare-thee-well.

Vasily often found this predisposition tiresome and sometimes funny. He was a much less linear thinker. His multi-dimensional matrix of disconnected cognitions flashed valuable insight at breathtaking speed. However, since no one else had yet achieved the preparation success that

Aleksey enjoyed, the others continued to rely upon his methodical exploitation of every free moment to corral the contingencies.

So, he was still corralling about the timing of the impending hours yet to be spent pilfering poor Cho's legacy, when Lev splashed across the shallows stopping at the sandbar on the other side of the boat channel. There he awaited Aleksey who laid aside his ruminating to hear Lev uncork for him the mysteries of the previous moments.

As he paddled the tiny boat within earshot of his friend, Lev held his hands palms out flapping downward in his characteristic "hold-it" gesture. "Don't start, my old friend, until you have heard that it is good news. I can imagine how bad it must have looked from your side of the river. First of all, I am reasonably certain he did not see you. He gave me his condolences as he announced to me your death. Seems our friend the captain visited your abattoir and concluded as you had hoped."

"Captain?"

"Yes, he said his mission was too delicate for a corporal, but he lied in the village so as not to alarm people who might spook you."

"How in the hell did you decide not to fire before he could tell you all of this?" Aleksey said by way of also acknowledging the plausibility of the story so far.

"He pleaded 'surrender' and claimed to be unarmed before I even saw him. Seems as if we both underestimated this RFE militiaman. He popped a shockingly professional ambush on me and could have spoiled the rest of my day with just a pistol, if he'd been the assassin we had presumed. And blow me," Lev plowed, on gesturing not to be interrupted, "he was not armed and was alone. (Canceled Li Li's boy guide.) Yes, before you ask, he says he got the mission from one of the Governor's deputy heroes. A wee bit too late though, since he was instructed, get this, to *warn* you about the FSB. He was originally hoping to get you to accompany him east, overland to a helo rendezvous, but none of them seriously expected you to accept the offer." He smiled, "You know what they say, 'seek help from the militia and get your arse arrested. They know the saying as well as anyone else."

"So," Aleksey said, "are we to hear his sweet sounding words and let him go? Did you? Where is he now?"

Give me some slack, dammit, I hope you know me well enough to know that I always tie up loose ends. Captain Igor Kamikov is perched in the fork of that old dead tree. You can see him

there over my left shoulder.” Lev did not turn but fixed his interrogator with a stony stare which drilled ‘as-I-said’ back at Aleksey who pushed zoom on his binos and stared down the 35-meter shot. Lev elaborated, saying, “He moves and we plink his ass and he knows it.”

“What you will be happy to hear is that there’s no love lost for our FSB friends at provincial headquarters. So, he’s got no interest in helping them take it out on Vasily and me. Said he wishes us well in whatever dodge we are up to, and advises us to make our way to Okhosk where his folks will not help the FSB with ‘any petty shit like finding AWOL federal exiles.’ Our deal was that he takes the FSB boat in the creek over there on the long slow route home -- minus any working comm equipment. (Ironic isn’t it that we can finally find advantage in the absence of cell phone networks out here.) I reckon we could easily make sure that he *does* go down the *Batyly* -- still basically bare-assed with too little fuel to come back against the current. He’s so confident that his bosses will be grateful to have deniability about this mess; he’s agreed to leave without the capability to spread the word. Ergo, he is out of our hair, we keep Khabarovsk government at least neutral and just maybe no one learns exactly what happened at the dacha until the first chopper gets here from Yakutsk. Imagine how that could help us time-wise.”

“Excellent point, the regional office of the FSB will not be expecting to hear anything from that snatch detail,” Aleksey’s sarcasm thickened, “knowing, as they do, how long it takes to ‘interrogate suspects’ and ‘collect evidence’ (euphemisms for looting my dacha and bouncing me around ‘til I’d be ready to sell-you-and-mamma-too, as the saying goes). So hell yes, let’s do it. Let him go – bare-assed as you put it – by slow boat to Anya, Khabarovsk, wherever. Even if it’s a scam and he borrows a radio at a gas stop, the nearest downstream one is in Ust Maya at least 30 hours from here. That is about as much delay on the news as we can expect.”

“Agree,” Lev said with a grin, “bet It’s more than 30. He’ll have to churn upstream on the Aldan on only one motor for the last 40 kliks.”

Lev paused as Aleksey held up one finger in a just-one-more-thing sign and said, “By the way, did our new friend the captain say why the ‘warning’ instead of a steel jacketed 7.62 round?”

“Uh huh, something vague about cover-up and a letter from ‘the central authorities’ that sounded too much like an order suggesting that you not leave custody upright. Something the Governor -- he says -- resents coming from, ‘muscovite *apparatchiks*.’ See what I meant by happy-to-hear? Aleksey Mikhailovich, hero of Soviet troop labor, the correlation of forces are reverting to your favor.”

“Seems so, for now,” said the ever-wary Aleksey, “but sorry to hold you up with that question. You need to get your ass in gear before Igor Andreovich over there reconsiders, and this whole damn flea circus takes flight.”

\* \* \*

“Hard to believe you hadn’t scheduled a shake-down of our hiking gear,” said Vasily as he puffed in the lead of the threesome over the crest of the last ridge for the day.”

“Check that,” said Lev, “I have been wondering how I would bloody well have felt to have been a half day out on the road march with my boots rubbing like this and these weird waterproof pants floating me away on the river crossing. Bless you my son, for extracting this concession from our master planner.”

“Concede the point,” said Aleksey the “master planner,” “cannot wrap my brain around how I managed to forget something as basic as new equipment trial in the field. Guess this stuff no longer feels new to me and I probably mashed events together a bit while overestimating how short time was going to be. Then again, oh great grunt master, how do we explain that it was our resident civilian who thought of it? And, I might add, did so soon enough to act on it. “Also,” he thought to himself, “how useful in postponing the hour of reckoning. Too close a look at the Chinese GPS might reveal a little too much about the actual escape route.”

The climb brought them to a spot Aleksey had discovered years ago where he had a clear line of sight to his beloved dacha over a kilometer distant and where he had lounged, high amongst his beloved outcroppings, to admire same. As they milled about settling down for the surveillance, Lev changed the subject to something more pertinent that had clearly been troubling him for a while.

“It has been a blooming pain in the arse staying so scrupulously out of sight for so long. We’ve been at this for four and half hours so far and it should have taken closer to three and a butt at worst. How the hell did the PLA avoid being seen? It is so bloody tedious to stay camouflaged, covered, concealed... That constant *maskirovka* couldn’t succeed over the long haul with so damn many of them spread across this relatively open country. One would think that hunting camps, river traffic, stray hermit cabins like Aleksey’s or something unexpected would have disclosed these infiltrators once or twice a week at least.”

Aleksey's short answer was that the Chinese Army GPS receivers included a feature, which provided very high-resolution satellite photography. It was essentially a copy of the US civilian satellite terrain maps that have been around since the early twenty-teens. If these satellite views could be updated daily – and it was reasonable to presume that the People's Republic could make this sort of labor intensive stretch – then each road-march crew could see such hazards in their path in advance. “Those commando crews could bob and weave around shit with less need to stay so scrupulously out of sight from ground surveillance. In such a *maskirovka*-free zone they would also have had little reason to worry about the high res overhead look-down that we could face right now. (You realize we must presume that the FSB might be able to task special satellite surveillance over my place and Beliiya, no matter how unlikely that may be in practice.) However, once we leave this likely ‘hot zone,’ we will be more free of the need for tight *maskirovka* and able to walk more in the open. Then we'll only need to worry about keeping ridges and tree lines between us and whatever dangers we spot over breakfast. It will be less accurate than it was for the PLA. Since the fighting ended, the PRC cut back on sat map updates. Last time I checked, it took six days for the update to spot a three-meter evergreen I rolled into the open over that cliff behind the dacha.”

He paused for a ten count to watch Lev scan the next ridge to the east where his shed still smoldered. This spot, which offered a rare full view of the “crime scene,” was also at a safe stand off. In addition, it was under a rock overhang, which would emit no overhead heat signal, visual sign or radar return of their presence. It was a near ideal place for a trial run of an overnight without a fire. However, there was no need to experience the whole of darkness in place. They also needed a trial of night road-march. Therefore, they would head back to Cho's cave four hours after sunset to use the lighted cache to maximize time remaining for re-packing.

“That said,” Aleksey continued, “there were bound to have been a reasonably large number of Russian's sightings of Peoples Liberation Army troops. All you have to do is look at the huge numbers and the time they took to cross any given line over the Taiga. The Russian Far East is empty, but not *that* empty. From the *Lena* to the sea traversing some 3,000 kilometers to the Bering Strait with at least 100,000 grunts – however dispersed – there was simply too much going on to believe they were not seen by somewhere by someone. Like me,” he smiled.

“But, no one believed them,” Vasily chimed in, “as no one believed you. Correct?”

“Well, there was more to it than that. I believe the vast majority of sightings went unreported. What was so unusual about seeing a gang of Chinese in the pre-war RFE? That’s all they appeared to be to me, at first. Not obviously PLA. Even if you saw the whole five man group...”

“Used to be every-damn-where,” said Lev grumbling over Aleksey’s matter of fact recitation, “before they were expelled, been in towns where they’d outnumber us. Still too many declared ‘legal,’ in my humble opinion.”

“But only by provincial practice, not federal law,” added Vasily.

“Even in a group,” Aleksey said, repeating himself for emphasis to get the floor back, “they had looked as if they’re on some kind of business. Never any weapons visible at distance. I thought the first bunch I saw were contractors. They were walking right under this very cliff, and looked to me as if they might be an oil company survey crew. It was only after I saw many more that I got seriously suspicious. By then, I had started keeping track. Seeking them out. How many of our working countrymen are going to have the time or inclination to do that? Some but not many,” he said answering his own question. “What is more, how many are going to stand-in-line to call someone in real authority. Or, how many would – as Lev put it– take the risk of ‘seeking the militia’s help only to get arrested.’”

“So you say,” said Vasily, “that there may have been many sightings but very few reports, and even fewer reports that were believed, if we consider your experience, for example.”

“Oh, were it so simple. A few of the listeners -- the few at the top – *did* believe the testimony of the persistent few. They probably even *expected* it. You’ve heard me say it before. ‘The fix was in,’ as the Americans say. Or as we say it, ‘Every power was hidden. No order was ever spoken.’”

“Ok, people in our circumstances do reflexively tend to insist,” replied Vasily, “that entrenched corruption explains all failures of the state. In something this big, as you say yourself, aren’t there too many interests banging against one another? Three provinces, maybe four, between the Amur and the Bering Sea, which are, after all, subordinate to Moscow. How do three RFE backwaters keep the Kremlin -- and let’s not forget the Russian Navy -- in the dark?”

Lev leaned outward toward the east, held up a hand for quiet and made another slow scan with his binoculars implying without a word, that this was still a military operation, which intellectual



argumentation, however absorbing, should not impede. Making note of the lengthening shadows he then seized the stage to reply in part to Vasily.

“I can answer about our great Russian naval forces,” he said. “They detest assignments in the RFE and act as if they are living on offshore islands -- far offshore. The entire NATO army could have paraded in goose-step past their bases and they would have been oblivious, as long as the marchers were *inland*. As a kid, I lived on a sub base and seldom set foot in the nearest town. It’s hard to imagine that a base commander would consider doing anything with a local civilian governmental request for support except send it back to Moscow center, (where we all know it would have died an untimely death). As for direct reports of PLA presence, no mere citizen would ever have been allowed to step foot on one of those super-secret bases or to speak with anyone higher ranking than the gate guard.”

Aleksey picked up the discussion, saying, “Lev is right, our navy was never a player. Pacific coast naval installations are very different from the Chinese ones I grew up on. By the same token, the Army focuses on the Sino-Russian border and never offers much of a glance northward. As for the provincial government and municipalities, it’s easy to understand how they might be led astray – not acting in concert, you understand, but turning a blind eye and leaving the Kremlin *unenlightened*, shall we say. Out here loyalty has been curling steadily down the toilet since before the turn of the Century. Since then relations with Peking have become warmer, and more crucial to its economy. Both of you know that. What you may not know is that loyalty to leaders on the continent has gone right under the treads in the last five years. My other circle of friends in,” he stage whispers, “Washington, U-S-A have kept me abreast of developments in the RFE which have not made it into *our* news of late. Apparently, disloyalty has become local policy. Secessionists, who were tolerated but ignored for the previous 20 years, have lately been rehabilitated as valued activists whose critiques of the mainland have acquired a robust legitimacy. Village, town and city councils have been evolving into the de-facto electors of far east-coast governors. These elected groups who have become old style Soviets in all but name, have been getting their nominees routinely ‘appointed.’ Two years ago Magadan, so effectively ostracized the continent’s selectee for governor that the Kremlin relented and had their man replaced.

None of this should surprise you two. It’s simply the continuation of the Soviet Union’s dissolution. Not very different from the breakaway of the Baltic States and the fervent though less

effective independence movements in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, etc. Shit, even the 'stans' have bubbled over with open resistance to the center's overweening interest in their local affairs."

To be helpful, Lev said, "And, your point about PLA infiltration across our land is what?"

"Point is, it's not too difficult to imagine," Aleksey said, "that men beholden almost exclusively to local groups – who saw their treasuries more contingent on Peking – would be persuadable, let's say. I am guessing, but it seems plausible that a stretch of the Mediterranean coast from Antalya to the Israeli border is packed cheek-to-jowl with villas of former RFE governors, their deputies and extended families. Making all these people wealthy beyond their dreams would have cost the equivalent of a teacup compared to the ocean of money the People's Republic spent on the undertaking overall. Moreover, we do know that at least two governors – our own and Magadan's – have been succeeded since the war. Anyone know if these fellows and their minions are still in this country? I've not heard a thing about them since they left office."

"Superb analysis, Aleksey Mikhailovich," said Lev, "but one should take care about overstating the broader implications. Elections, alone, even *fair* elections do not automatically bestow legitimacy. There were probably other non-political factors at work here as well, such as the mechanics of the actual exercise of power. For instance, did the Kremlin perhaps also decide – without explicitly saying so – that they could no longer extend their awesome (and very expensive) police apparatus north of the trans-Siberian rail corridor into the RFE? If so, what you are seeing could be a fragile state of affairs. If need be, the center might resurge."

"Perhaps so," Aleksey said musing about how easy it was to forget that Lev may have been the only non-PhD in the trio, but he did have a graduate degree in history from a very respectable University in St. Petersburg. Maybe not a Russian "Oxford" but close enough. In society's important institutions, his school's post docs did not defer to Moscow U. graduates, or Harvard or Oxford for that matter.

Vasily now jumped in to say, "Ok, ok, so the PLA had help, maybe even active shielding from the provinces, but doesn't that simply highlight the issue of *satellite* surveillance? I've been dubious about your assertion that the PLA could 'walk in the open' under overhead 'look-down' or whatever you called it. Not when I know full well that from up there cameras can see whether your windshield wipers are on. Now I wonder even more about *our* ability to evade detection outside of

your so-called 'hot zone' around Beliiya. They know we are inside a geographical circle of a predictable radius. Why won't they track us whichever way we go?"

Both Aleksey and Lev leaned in, mouths open, to answer. Seeing this, Aleksey leaned back and gestured toward Lev palm up, "I, uh, we knew you would zero in on that warm piece of technological raw meat. But that meat, dearest Vasily Yurovich is a lot of chewing for this late in the evening," Lev said tilting his head toward the setting sun. "You know we both respect your inquisitive style, but we are getting into a crunch for sleep."

Then Aleksey said, "We have to wake up in four hours, because, as you said yourself, we must break-in this gear in full darkness. However, you can believe this. You should always feel free to challenge our military verities. People die like flies on the sticky sap of presumption."

As he succumbed to the great relief of prone repose, Aleksey replayed the entire situation for the first time since his last bed-down. It was only day two but it seemed to him as if they were loitering around this dangerous area just begging to be caught. Beyond all belief, he was back at the "scene of the crime." How perverse was that? The counter-arguments – that he was over a kilometer away, and that it was *not* a crime, and that they were on patrol to locate an enemy -- could not quell the anxiety induced by the upsurge of that old dictum.

Too many times someone or another in the trio had traveled to and from Cho's burrow. Lev had gone as far as the *Batyly* by boat with Igor and walked back to Cho's. Aleksey, himself, had led Vasily from Auntie's Island to the lair, and this night, all three of them had hiked out of that refuge and were soon to be headed back there in the dark – more vulnerable to detection by thermal imaging -- although the incipient drizzle would mitigate that danger. It was even possible that months ago someone had seen him rafting the wounded Cho back to his cache. All three had assured each other that no one had seen them. Considering their skills and experience, there was merit to all the claims. After all, there were so very few people in this countryside and, as far as they knew, no one had reason, yet, to be searching beyond the village for them.

Furthermore, the forty hours or so from the attack on the dacha was not enough time for the FSB to get its act together. It was hardly enough time for them to confirm that there was something wrong. Even if they had somehow determined that not hearing from the arresting detail was more than a communications failure, those bureaucratic bumblers could not yet have acquired helicopters, equipment and men sufficient to outfit a reinforcement operation. Not to mention developing the briefing for a jaunt to such an obscure location, which none of them would have

known from the backside of the moon. This case could never have warranted the priority that it would have taken to muster even a 72-hour “rapid response” team from scratch.

Despite his personal knowledge of the FSB’s serial blundering, those convictions were often eroded by memories of just how ruthlessly efficient those agencies could become when the authority of the state was threatened. There seemed to be a threshold of concern beyond which the security *apparatchiks* became flashing fast, vindictive demons possessed of omniscient intelligence and breath-taking competence.

Aleksey’s thoughts reeked of insecurity, notwithstanding all the logic underpinning their relative safety. The matter of his own case’s priority had brought to mind just how much deeper and multifaceted his unease was. Questions ricocheted around his mind like machine gun fire down a sewer pipe. Why any case against him in the first place? Why were Lev and Vasily sought out so soon? Why had Russia again turned on its own people over a war it did not even fight? Why were individual “subversives” more important than the disassociation of entire provinces? How would the militant autonomy of the provinces play to US interests in this new Cold War?

At the rock bottom of this embryonic despair was not a hedgehog of pointed apprehensions. It was the *unknowing* of a smothering fog of inconsistent inputs. He had been blotted out in a pea souper alone on his first sailboat. He could not see his own bow seven meters away. From such isolation, sounds of alarm resonated more deeply. Distressing noises became profuse and more nonsensical. Just like those plunging in on him now. “All American connections, a crime.” But, where did that come from? Who says it? What is a “connection”? “Crime” by what law? Treason? For shit’s sake...

Things, corporeal things, could manifest from such a fog – from any direction. Objects bearing tiny fragments of conflicting information that only confused one’s piecemeal picture of the reality beyond the small bubble of visibility. Lev’s inexplicable exile to Beliya was one such fragment. Vasily’s similar banishment to the RFE was another. “They had been tried and exiled on the pretext of the most trivial of political ‘deviances’ within mere weeks of the end of the war. Poor Lev had been only a part-time consultant to a British think tank. He had attended two conferences and agreed to one BBC interview... for Pete’s sake,” he thought. Vasily had merely been one of a dozen working on quantum computing and only two of the scientists had been American. That had been in January, and for six months, they spared Aleksey until yesterday. Sometimes he was able to convince himself that government agency incompetence and his great

remove from Moscow explained it all, but apparently he was not convinced enough to be dissuaded from making the most extreme preparations for the most violent case.

Aleksey's reporting of PLA infiltration brought another fragment in from the fog. Provincial officialdom's dismissal of him could have been confirmation that Moscow was really after those collaborating with the *Chinese* infiltrators in the war. However, those rumors turned out to be local ones. Only villagers seemed ready to postulate individual guilt by association with China. On the other hand, the official national news intersected that narrative at another skewed angle. The Russian Federation haughtily dismissed US claims of any Russian involvement and focused on evidence of US military unpreparedness as the reason Alaska was caught off-guard. The Russian national media had regaled their audiences with the dubious findings that American militia forces from the Idaho National Guard were the first US ground forces on the scene around Fairbanks.

His tumultuous distress over the dissolution of representative government in his country continued to keep him wakeful for yet another round of fog peering. The mist's opacity in this new direction took the form of outraged indignation. "How could they? How could so many forget so much about Stalinism and deprivation in the Cold War so soon?" There were no safe means of communications enabling someone to even ask close friends about how urbanites now perceived such things back on the continent. He fell asleep wondering how he would have explained his own perplexity about his own country to his American friends.

He slept the sleep of the thousand-year Sequoia, until the distinctive blattling of helicopter blades reached his corner of the moonlit Taiga.

\* \* \*

Lev had Aleksey by the wrist and was physically pulling him upright out of some soporific abyss by growling a whisper directly into his ear. "It's an Mi24 coming at us from the west, sounds low, not treetop but less than 500 meters," were the first words to sink in.

Vasily topped it off with a louder and angrier, "What the fuck?"

"Mi24 Hind, old jalopy, so it's likely a hand-me-down to the FSB from the Army. That's what-the-fuck, over..." said Lev. After a brief pause to confirm the alertness of his listeners, he said, "a combat aircraft, traveling low from west to east. It's big enough to bring pee all over thee and me."

Now fully roused, Aleksey asked in a whisper, "Think they have thermal?"

“Good point. They could have inherited earlier generation FLIR sets along with the airframe. If it is Front Looking Infrared -- however old -- it would behoove us to get further back under this ledge to place something between the pilot’s line of sight and us. And, we’d better keep it that way until it’s over that next ridge east of here, although they do sound as if they’re going too fast to see much. They’re just getting somewhere at speed, not searching,” he paused, “yet.”

As he spoke, the pitch and cadence of the Hind’s blade slap intensified and Aleksey spoke loudly for the first time, “They always sound right overhead when approaching,” he said matter-of-factly to no one, almost shouting the last few words into the din.

This stray comment was preface to a silent interlude wherein three long stares locked on the chopper’s retreating exhaust. It went from just south of overhead straight to Aleksey’s dacha. They had watched that spot for so long they knew exactly where it was in the darkness. However, the Mi24 did more than overfly the dacha. It flipped on a bright white searchlight and played it over the dacha as the helo made tight circles heeled inward around the grisly scene at the ruins.

Reverting again to whisper, Lev broke the silence, “The dog shaggers didn’t even follow the bleeding river. The pilot flew by Sat-Nav directly to the coordinates of Aleksey’s place. Iszz not a good sign *effendi*.”

“They may not have landed there tonight,” said Vasily, “but we now bloody well know where they will be going at first light.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Lev, “but we also know it’s *not* Cho’s cave. We need to get our arses over there *mach schnell*.”

“Agreed. We are *not* ready to start our trek to the Lena from here,” said Aleksey. “Let’s move. No more bobbing and ducking *maskirovka* to stay covert. No time. Adding over his shoulder as he climbed out -- at the double.”

He could not fathom how wrong he had been. If this, what else had he missed?

\* \* \*

“Toss me three more packs of that plastique shit, will you, my man,” called Lev to Vasily, bent over a wooden case covered in Chinese characters. “Cannot believe,” he said as he stretched to catch a packet sailing across the low space in his general direction, “that Aleksey Mikhailovich calls it ‘C4’ like the Americans. Isn’t that foreigner crap what got us into this shit in the first place?”

“Speaking of foreigners,” said Vasily, “Lev, did you ever meet this PLA officer who owned this place? I’ve wondered if Cho ever opened up to anyone other than Aleksey.”

“No, Aleksey Mikhailovich told no one about the Lieutenant until after he’d died. Apparently, you and I both visited the dacha while he was there, but he hid on the couch under the escape hatch. Have I got that right, my sly old friend?”

“His wish,” said Aleksey without looking up. “A trust thing.”

“Indeed, but you could have used a hand hauling him back to his hideaway. Wasn’t he mostly incapacitated by then?” Turning to Vasily Lev added in a more serious tone, “Bet you haven’t heard that story, yet -- one hell of a slog. Our Aleksey Mikhailovich showed his colors as a true friend for all the care he lavished on the man. No wonder the poor soul confided so much in his final days.” Then realizing he might have gone to far, Lev smiled and added, “Hear he’s nominated for the Nobel...”

“Fine,” said Aleksey -- faking irritation, “say whatever crosses your feeble mind, but do not look away from that pack while you babble. We were out of time half an hour ago.”

“You are right,” added Vasily keeping his own eyes locked on his work, “but, we are moving along at a nice pace. It’s only 1135. You said we are now three and a half kliks from ‘point look-over.’ That’s nine-minutes per kilometer. Not bad for after EENT. It was black as the inside of a goat’s ass in a mosquito swarm.” He paused, and when no one picked up the banter, he did so on a more sober note. “I know it’s obvious to military types and you both agree, but can you-two let me in on why we are not simply holing up in here. You kept it a secret from the whole village and even me all these months. Surely, no one else is going to find it.”

Lev took the ball at this juncture, clipping his speech like a power-point chart, he said, “No holing up. Trap us here way too long. Imagine river patrols and island pickets. Could unleash the population of Beliiya on a deep search. If the FSB find any signs of us – say Auntie’s island, only two kliks from here, for instance – an expanding concentric circle search from there could find this hole. Blimey, they could even bring your own bleeding dog nearby and she’d find you. That’s also why we cannot wait for first light today. If they come by water, they could be at the creek leading to Aleksey’s place by 0400. (We calculated that starting from the helipad in Beliiya and traveling by boat in the dark.) So, we cross the *Ancha* before 0400...”

“That’s only four hours to reorganize our gear,” said Aleksey interrupting. “This way we bypass Beliiya before the village wakes up. If my suppositions hold true – this time – our state

security pukers should reach the conclusion shortly that the sixth body at the dacha is Col. Aleksey Krasnaya and any significant search efforts should ease up thereafter. In the meantime, we must presume they think I am on the loose with you-two gents, and we gotta presuppose they will be doing an air search in addition to snooping the vicinity of the crime scene.”

“Hope the hell this supposition is better than my estimate of the reaction time for that FSB follow-up team. Cannot fathom how they got here so stinking soon. Or, *why*, for shit’s sake.”

“So you-two sorted all this out,” said Vasily, reasserting his place as the original interrogator, “while we stumble rushed here from point look-over?” His eyes still casting back-and-forth between his layout and the surrounding paraphernalia of foil packaging, C4, ammo, and canvas like web gear.

“Yes my son,” Lev said with a smirk, “it’s called military short-hand. You heard every word of it, but it probably never stopped between your ears. Aleksey Mikhailovich cooked our time-line. I figured goon-time from their LZ to ETA (landing zone to estimated time of arrival) on the river. We batted a few speed-of-transit estimates back and forth. (I still prefer less than 5.5 Kliks per hour at night on *this* river.) And, piece-of-cake, it’s sorted. ETD’s (‘D’ is for departure) and ETA’s for our night march. Oh, you should also know that exact estimates about moving on further down the road went unspoken.”

“This is going to be one fucking long hike,” said Vasily exhaling audibly and raising his eyes to the ceiling 20 centimeters overhead.

“Not to worry. You are too quick a study to be left out for long. I give it a week until you’ll be kibitzing ETA, NLT (not later than), and OP’s (observation posts) in cadence with us.”

\* \* \*

Aleksey led because he alone had routinely walked this north edge of the little *Ancha* River. The trailing pair could barely see him through the murky drizzle and foliage. However, they froze instantly when his hand shot up in a closed fist, the universal trail sign for “stop and shut up.” He returned the 20 short steps to the still motionless twosome, whispering, “I hear an outboard, low throttle, approaching.”

“Already?” Lev said, “we hardly started upstream. Think they’ve passed your landing?”

“Dammit,” broke in Vasily, “if not your dacha, where in hell are they going?”



“Wherever it is,” said Lev, “we need to get our butts further into this bush before they pass by here.”

“Ok, there’s another of my overlooks up this next ravine,” Aleksey said, “from there we can see my creek, Auntie’s Island and probably this ford. Stay *maskirovka* and watch it, there are brambles and loose rock.” He cocked his arm out and pushed his hand forward, fingers extended and joined, silently saying, “march.”

For the second time this night three sets of binoculars carved silent stares over an empty landscape, this time through the insipid half-light of a dripping dawn. These were the moments near BMNT when one can supposedly discern a human silhouette at 20 meters with the naked eye. Their 7X50 binos did much better and what they saw next churned up a thumping mix of astonishment and dread.

“Those bloody pig licking shit-heads are going straight uphill to Cho’s hole,” said Lev in a head wobbling whisper. I count at least six.”

In blank silence, synapses popped rapid fire and pre-frontal cortex neurons lit like pyrotechnics. Finally, after an excruciatingly long interval, Vasily dove to the heart of the matter. “If they can know this, what else do they know? Where we are right now? Watching us from a drone?” “Not likely,” Lev said, “otherwise they’d be climbing this slope instead. If they could get priority to use this kind of imaging time, they could surely get it in real time. Who would bother with anything but a live feed in a search op against moving targets? Come to think of it, who would give expensive RPV flight time to anyone in RFE this time of year? When could one have flown low enough and stay unobserved? We have had this kind of low ceiling virtually every minute except for the nightmare-day when Aleksey Mikhailovich blew away five and I skewered one of those tossers. I believe it’s more likely someone followed us to Cho’s.”

“‘*Virtually*’, is the operative term. What about last night? Remember the moonlight?” Vasily said quickly, butting in.

“If so, that’s a horrible prospect. It means these pukers have enough pull to get RPV time to fly *above* clouds for hours on end just to catch that measly half-hour cloud break.”

“Ok then, what about the snitch? Who could it be?” asked Vasily.

“Later on that,” replied Aleksey, “let’s not overthink this thing. Let’s just concentrate on our next step -- premised on the worst case, which is that they now believe I’m alive. Whether it’s because the thermal imager showed three fuzzy blobs on its screen or because some asshole

identified us matters not right now. Action analysis is what we need. I say the only bright side is that they are on the other side of the river.”

“And, they will surely stay over there and even send some of those apes to the dacha,” Lev said. “If they do manage to find Cho’s hidden entrance, they will still have to get help. They’ll need major cutting tools, or demolition to get past the PLA locking system. And, lest we forget, they’ll be seeing the fake radiation danger signs for the first time. Russians are so conditioned by that symbol, they’ll suffer some serious pause at that alone.”

“So?” Aleksey asked, “being stopped at the door doesn’t necessarily stop the broader search.”

“Roger that,” Lev replied, “but the search party will be smaller and given the choice, a single search team will go *downstream*. Simple logic and anyone following us would point them that way. Right?”

No answer.

“If they saw me taking Igor down to the *Batyly* and if they saw our shake-down hike which also started out to the west, they would register those movements as recon for our escape. Scant chance anyone in pursuit is going to expect us to go upstream much less to go north when we leave the *Ancha*.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Aleksey, “the logic is flawless, but it is precisely the sort of astute conjecture that got us into this fix, something that we had presumed as late as ten minutes ago was nigh impossible.”

“Great, then what’cha got, chief?” asked Lev with a note of sarcasm.

“Nothing new, we should go as Vasily implies. Plan ‘A,’ *i.e.*, upstream past Beliiya and north from there as far as we can get...”

“And ‘as-far-as’ means what? Collapse?” asked Vasily wondering aloud.

“Sleep check,” said Lev whispering a bark.

“You are both right, but there’s nothing else we can do until we bypass the village. Follow me.”

As Aleksey got quietly out in the lead, Lev leaned on Vasily’s shoulder and whispered in his ear, “You are ok on sleep, aren’t you?”

Vasily nodded his assent and said, "Six or seven hours after I left the warehouse on the first night, then two hours after packing in Cho's cave and at least one and a half at point overlook. And you?"

"Not nearly so much," said Lev with a sigh.

"Yeah, what *were* you doing outside when I woke up?"

"Not so confident – for some silly reason – about security in there. I guess it did cost me some snooze time. And, that walk back from escorting Igor downstream did not help. Keep an eye on me, will you. If I start acting weird after this latest shot of adrenalin wears off, presume that it's sleep deprivation. Who knows? We may have to make some sacrifices to security, because ol' Morpheus *will* have his due."

"You can be assured I understand."

Some way upstream from their FSB encounter and well beyond Aleksey's creek, the fugitives wisely rested. They had fallen into the nearly universal military road march rhythm of walking 50 minutes and resting 10.

"So," said Aleksey once they were all flat out, feet up and Lev in deep sleep, "let me resurrect the question of 'who' for a minute. Don't suppose I need ask about what sort of people we suspect were following us, if that – in fact – was the case."

"Well," said Vasily with a sly smile and a slight head twist, "we can be reasonably certain whom Lev would point to," aiming his smirk toward the sleeping form at his side. "We may never learn who saw us but he will somehow *know* that it was some Russian woman who told the authorities. 'It's the women', he'll tell you, 'who made Stalinism possible, sitting invisibly in their stairwells, hearing everything and repeating too much...'"

"Or something like that..." Aleksey intoned to finish the thought. "He has never forgiven what happened to his grandfather."

"And, it was hard to disagree – at least in part – with his rants along this line," Vasily said. "The women of this country had the worst of it in the Civil War. It's difficult to blame them for squelching any male initiative – right or wrong – that might re-ignite the killing. At some point one can see that so many – particularly the most vulnerable – gave not a shit about anything but stopping the carnage. And, there is some merit to his notion that such a propensity to inform-to-keep-the-peace was passed on from mother to daughter for the last two generations. It is also plausible that

it was even easier in the later years when the really gruesome retributions of the revolutionary era had moderated...”

“Fine,” said Aleksey interrupting, “we have already agreed to disagree on this subject in general since I believe that male informants needed little help. There’s not a bottom to what men are willing to do. However, now that you mention it, Lev’s ostensible theory excludes the biggest gossip east of the Urals who is *not* Russian. Furthermore, she’s got four young and very ‘busy’ boys always on the lookout for a coin or two. They spend more time on the river and hills around town than the rest of the population combined.”

“Aunty Li Li,” said Vasily filling in. “Very feasible. As a foreigner she could want to stay on the good side of feds who are the only ones likely to deport her.”

“And, all she had to do was tell the one person who had multiple channels of communications with federal agencies, Anna Dimitrovna, the postmistress in her lil’ comm shack out back. I know what you’re thinking, ‘she’s a Russian woman.’ But, don’t say it, she’s first of all one of the ‘authorities.’”

“It does make the big surprises so far seem a bit less ominous, doesn’t it? Call it one positive note to help us nap. Shut-eye coming up, ten *long* minutes.” And with that Vasily half-rolled away.

\* \* \*

It didn’t happen the first time until they were just across the river from Beliiya. Of course, that was when they could least tolerate it. Lev, too far behind the other two, said, “Hold up, just a minute.” He dropped to his butt and started to pull up his socks. He was starting to unstrap his boots when Aleksey encouraged him back to his feet and got him moving again.

On his routine visits to town, Aleksey had passed by Beliiya’s far side many times. Usually he was certain that no one had seen him. There was plenty of cover in the thick riverside foliage. However, just one short encounter with a stray citizen who was hunting mushrooms or kindling or a place to hide contraband, or anything like that could severely damage their chances of keeping their pursuers focused *downstream* while they turned hard north just beyond the village.

The second time, Lev plopped down without a word, again, tugging vigorously at his socks. This time he did so more noisily and was more adamant about staying put.

“It’s this bloody awful cross-cut terrain,” he said, “blooming clean socks this morning dammit. Two pair. When the hell are we getting to that north facing side? Too much work, this. Up, Aleksey Mikhailovich, up, not across.”

“Are you shitting me?” Aleksey said, ““This is downright alarming. ‘Cross-cut terrain,’ my backside.”

“He’s exhausted, Aleksey Mikhailovich,” Vasily said pulling him aside. “Told me earlier that he was operating ‘outside the envelope’ on sleep. He knew it could endanger us all. Believe he was telling me that whatever the risk, we’d have to minister to his weirdness or we’d be in even more danger. In retrospect, it seems he knew this was coming on.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Aleksey said spitting the words at his feet.

“Can we get him somewhere out of sight and let the poor bastard sleep?” They were now conferring *tête-à-tête* with their backs to an unheeding Lev.

“Ok, dammit all, no choice... Actually though his babbling about going ‘up’ is worthwhile blather. From here the best place to avoid and encounter and hide under something is straight up-slope, off this flood plain. No one in this village wanders uphill.”

They pleaded, in ever more urgent whispers, to keep Lev upright. They dragged and half-carried the heavier man – staying concealed under the vegetation despite the cover of the rain – to a ledge where he could crawl under canvas onto his dry sleeping bag in a crevice where two big boulders leaned together. Aleksey and Vasily found some minimal shelter up-slope under a rather large fallen tree, which had slid down across two one-meter sized rocks near the outer edge of a cliff.

“Lev was right. This could jeopardize the whole escape. In 5 ½ hours the ass end of that warehouse is going to pop,” said Aleksey to his new bunkmate. “He will need more sleep than that. Problem is, I have no idea how all those people are going to react. The plan was to be far enough up this north branch not to care. As long as there was some chaos and they found our friend Ivan, it made no difference.”

“So, what are they going to find, Aleksey Mikhailovich?”

Aleksey was ninety percent of the way through his account of how he had positioned the agent’s body inside an apparently locked container with booby trapped doors. He was hoping that witnesses to the aftermath would jump to the conclusion that Ivan had foolishly tampered with his

explosive lock in an attempt to escape. He was just about to explain how he had insured Ivan would be identified when they heard the helicopter lift off in the distance.

Now for the second time in the last 24 hours ears locked on the approaching beats of chopper blades. This time only two pair of eyes stretched outward as Lev's breathing continued without a hitch, three meters below. "No worries mate," said Aleksey in a failed attempt at Australian accented English, "it could be any damn thing. Could be leaving the area or just ferrying people and stuff around..." He paused as the blating blades changed pitch and rolled northeast of Belliya turning more in their direction.

"Or..." said Vasily, "they could be searching for me and Lev. Could have a little something to do with finding six corpses near a blown out dacha."

"Good point my friend. Even if they believed their primary target, i.e., me, to be dead; they might inflate the significance of losing five agents into a major attack on authority in order to get higher priorities on surveillance assets. They could – in this instance – perhaps manage to keep the helicopter here, on site, with unlimited blade time far longer than we might like.

"But limited on this site by getting enough fuel all the way out here."

"Check. I'll concede that chopper surveillance could be the lowest threat," Aleksey said raising his voice as the aircraft neared overhead.

As if on cue they both pulled their heads back and legs up gathering rainproof coverings further under the tree as the clatter overhead rose to aural whiteout. "Even so," Aleksey said picking up his point as the blade noise receded, "that could slow our next movement. Even if they use it only for transport, any circling for takeoffs and landings could bring them over us repeatedly. Combine that with intensified thermal coverage at night and satellite imaging during weather breaks – not to mention drones -- and our next 10 to 15 kilometers could be a real bitch."

Ignoring that point, as not a decision in his purview, Vasily pushed on to another issue, "How do they actually get this higher priority? Radio right? In the absence of mobile system towers and due to the prohibitive cost of sat phones, they will need SSB to reach Yakutsk reliably, won't they?"

Vasily held up a hand to forestall interruption, "But my point was, if you recall, it was an SSB that Lev 'liberated' from thug-Ivan's boat. Was it not?"

"Indeed," Aleksey replied in agreement, "it was an SSB, but if you are implying that we might intercept their transmissions, there are two problems with that – power and encryption. They

damn sure are not going to be transmitting in the clear and we would have noticed if Lev had been lugging the requisite batteries. (That's some dense shit for a backpack.) What's more, the new designs make the scrambled transmission sound more like background static. We would have to listen a long time just to do the crudest sort of traffic analysis. To what end? Not much that I can imagine. I'd planned to toss the thing into a river. Plenty of those."

Vasily popped up on one elbow as if he had heard something fascinating, "Ahhh, Aleksey Mikhailovich, I have been meaning to ask you about rivers. Won't we be making some more crossings?"

"As many as two or three a day for the PLA," said Aleksey. "It's a good question. I have a lot to tell you both. Even commando Lev will have new PLA 'tricks' to learn," he added as he half-turned to his side and laid his head more comfortably on his arm to face Vasily. It was a familiar prelude, edging into his expository mode.

Vasily jumped in before he could start, "PLA tricks? We won't have that kind of support. They had engineers, cables, boats, and that sort of shit. Did they not?"

"Not at many sites, not at the times of crossing, my estimable friend. The PLA had some 20,000 five-man crews spread across the width of the RFE and perhaps stretching as much as 400 kilometers back. Engineers, disguised as contractors, prepared ahead but they set up no task – as well as I can surmise – that five men could not handle all on their own. It's entirely logical; it was simply not possible for such a huge array of infantry to schedule meet-up times at so many different places. The key to keeping such an enormous undertaking covert was letting each crew find its own path (within certain temporal and geographical boundaries of course). Twenty thousand unique routes made by crews that had to keep moving meant that all groups had to be as self-sustaining as possible..." Aleksey palmed the air between them gesturing a self-interruption, "however, I really need to back-up a bit and start closer to the beginning."

He dropped his hand and rotated briskly to a cross-legged crouch bending his neck slightly to keep it under the big tree, out of the drizzle, "There are all kinds of rivers between the *Amur* and the Bering Strait. None, however, are on the scale of the *Lena* and her tributaries (one of which, the *Tyry*, could be our route west), he said emphasizing the parenthetical comment and giving Vasily a pointed look as he did so. "Most of the rivers resemble the *Ancha* and the *Batyly*, slow moving braided streams, which permit hasty crossings – like those we practiced yesterday

evening. This means, of course, that we wade at fords and swim narrow channels too deep to wade. But, there are...”

“Cold as Baba Yaga’s tits, too,” interjected Vasily. “We will have days when it’s too cold to dry out on the move. Also keep in mind, we have heavier packs, now and there won’t always be driftwood handy to float the gear as it was on our shake-down.”

“True, damn cold,” said Aleksey, “and when that’s the case we light fires, which can be hidden from overhead detection in daylight. For the packs, we cut wooden floats near the crossings with demolitions. Hasty crossings are the main reason we are carrying so much American C4. We can count on plenty of trees and driftwood on riverbanks of the RFE (if the PLA haven’t already stripped all the shores clean). We use the same wood to make hasty rafts when we can’t free swim. That’s what the funny looking folding plastic ‘entrenching tools’ are for. As you can imagine, they will be used a lot more for paddling than digging.”

“But, as I was saying, the PLA had to face wider, deeper rivers fast moving enough to force them to make more deliberate crossings. A deliberate operation had three basic options: swimming as a group pushing all the gear on a single wooden float to cross the narrower deep channels, (I’ll get to your freezing Conkoes later); or, paddling a log raft to negotiate faster, wider rivers – our kit includes ingenious inflatable outriggers for one-log rafts; or, using a PLA underwater cable system to hold a raft against a current too strong and wide for free rafting. However, our route to the Lena – as you can see on your atlas cutouts – won’t encounter those wide, deep, fast ones until we drop into the Lena watershed and at that point the plan is to be floating down rivers not crossing them.”

“We can handle all three options,” he continued, “thanks to some of Cho’s handy items specifically designed for this mission in the RFE. Lucky for us, the People’s Army was chasing spring the whole way to Alaska. They spent some serious cash to prepare those small crews for unpredictable high water virtually anywhere along the track. Even placid braided streams, like the *Ancha*, can turn into torrents in spring melts. You recall how it flooded a few weeks ago, do you not. Well, in some years it comes later and it’s been a lot worse than what you witnessed.”

“Interesting, so spring comes some time later across each more northerly latitude and the Chinese troops stayed in springtime all the way,” said Vasily.

“Well almost. Above the Arctic Circle one would suppose they transitioned straight into fall as they crossed over into Alaska. This ‘endless spring’ meant they could equip for much more



temperate weather than most people associate with the east of Siberia. I can hear it now, 'Siberia for Christ's sake...' my American friends would have said, 'are you shitting me? Even in summer, it's too short. Two Corps, my ass. Across tundra in that God-awful climate, no way.'"

"That is a big part of why the PLA was able to surprise military professionals every-damn-where. We *all* forgot to check seven more times whenever someone says, 'It can't be done.' The full length of the trek is not even as far as it seems to most people. You know, do you not, that the PLA's starting point at the *Amur's* northern bend is on the same latitude as Alaska's Aleutian Islands?"

"Very plausible, never noticed," Vasily said with gathering interest.

"Now where was I?" Aleksey continued in mock confusion. "River crossing equipment right? The double fist-sized package, I asked you guys to pack, unfolds into a flexible Kevlar-like fabric suit. It's a one-piece, stretchable one-size-fits-all thingamajig. According to Cho, it's a partially inflatable dry suit. Hands and face stay exposed. (That's why I insisted on the packing of multiple gloves and a balaclava.) Apparently, we'll also be able to flood various chambers and inflate others to float horizontally enough, he insists, to allow one to make a good strong swimming stroke. Cho's experience was that it's miserably wet and cold on a long swim, but not debilitating."

"Nothing but fun times ahead," added Vasily with a yawn.

"Stay with me, young friend. We are getting to the physics part." But, it was not to be. He was lecturing about how quickly one could section a 30-centimeter tree and cut off its limbs with a diamond-crusted wire saw when he realized that the youngster had dropped off. Vasily was far closer to hearing his own dreams than attending to Aleksey.

Nonetheless, the teacher in him continued to work his memory on the subject to remind himself about what he had left unsaid. He felt guilty about not having yet told Vasily about the dangers of the blasting caps, which his civilian companion was already carrying in blissful unawareness of the risk. Aleksey was straining to list all the other crucial matters that may have fallen through the cracks in the rush to leave. That mental stretch took his weary frontal cortex over the threshold into sleep. All three light-footed miscreants were in deep slumber less than a thousand meters from downtown. No one had set watch alarms. The coffin stuffers of state security would handle that.

\* \* \*

The drumming tempo of quickening thumping in their inner ears yanked them all up to dizzying adrenalin spikes. It was so loud, so close that all -- but Lev -- were in a cognitive disarray that froze heads back full and locked eyes wide. It was straight up. Lev knew he was under a landing helicopter, but not why. His confusion arose from being alone. Shocked that he was going to die alone, he jerked his eyes outward not up. His unbelieving gape landed in a Mi24 Hind cockpit not 25 meters away at eye level. Five hours of sleep, however, had served him well. Lev oriented in two blinks, realizing that he was on a ledge and looking into a combat aircraft descending down the face of his cliff. The aircrew was looking away and down, unaware of his gawking presence and that of his two recovering friends, whom he had discovered on the next ledge up ten blinks ago. Simultaneously, all three scuttled under more concealment and watched the still deafening helicopter descend toward some as yet unknown target on the ground -- somewhere below. Three pounding adrenalin pumps eased a bit as the trio became more certain that they were not the target.

Shortly before they saw the running man on the ground, a helmeted, flak jacketed figure leaped head first from the far side cargo door. That green shape had shouldered a carbine in firing position and held that posture through a five-meter drop and three more jolts to slow his slide in what had become the standard commando rappel. By the time the camouflage clad rappeller landed the running man had stopped, turned and was walking both arms aloft toward the figure who was now clearly a flight suited FSB crewman doing a commendable impersonation of a Russian infantryman.

What happened next was almost as stunning as the recent rude awakening and eerily familiar to Aleksey. The rifleman shifted his carbine to his left hand keeping the muzzle up and reached out his right hand for a shake. As they clasped and the target lifted his head, the observers recognized a smiling Po Cheng -- Aunt Li Li's eldest.

Vasily stared at Aleksey, who gazed down at Lev who was scowling at Vasily. All three looks whooped a silent, "What the fuck?"

"Quarry befriended. Second time in one day," said Aleksey as Po Cheng waved the chopper off toward the airfield and walked away from town with his new chum who they deduced was a senior NCO.

"Ok," whispered Vasily in Aleksey's ear, "where the ruddy hell could they be going?"

“From the look of it, to get vodka,” said Aleksey who saw Lev look their way confirming his deduction by tilting his extended thumb back toward his open mouth. “Seems our infamous Aunty is their source for more than information.”

Aleksey’s head dropped with a sudden thought as he looked at his watch and whispered in a pleased voice, “When they find Ivan’s body – in 22 short minutes – the FSB are going to search every-stinking-where for the missing gear that Lev took from his boat.”

“And the little SSB,” added Vasily with a sly grin.

“Yes,” said Aleksey, “in all likelihood her larder is not too far back up that trail where Cheng led the crewman. Wouldn’t it be ironic, old friends, if our kindly guardians of state security were to find a stolen radio behind the Vodka?”

“Hard evidence, no less,” said Vasily still smiling.

Aleksey kept his eye on his watch as the minutes flipped by until the container coffin blew. He and Vasily used the time to brief Lev on the plan and to decide what criteria might apply to permit their departure. As Vasily was making a good case for leaving during the chaos immediately following the detonation, Po and the scrounger NCO appeared below lugging bottles into the trees back toward Beliya insuring that Russia’s ubiquitous national lubricant would await the thirsty crew upon their return.

“Damn,” said Aleksey, “I was hoping to see their reaction after the charges went off.” But, turning serious again he expressed agreement with Vasily’s proposals by immediately implementing them. “Good, I’ve got less than 20 minutes until ‘fire-in-the-hole.’ I’m going higher to clamp a pair of binos on that warehouse. You two find Li Li’s storehouse and plant the radio. We’ll meet at North Ponds behind this hill not later than 20 minutes after the blast. Questions?”

\* \* \*

There was just enough visibility through the intermittent drizzle to make out the roofline of the warehouse and the southeast side of the dock in front of it. Aleksey couldn’t move around much to see more. The steep terrain forced him to straddle yet another fallen tree to get this restricted glimpse through a gap in the tall hillside trees. He rested one elbow on a branch and went into an eyes-wide-wait that allowed his rested mind to replay the situation.

As he was visualizing what might happen if the charge fizzled, he mentally pictured constables and agents banging away at the container door, which would still be locked. In a flash,

it occurred to him that Cho's locked cache would be even harder to pry open. These FSB were far away from rams, drills, pry bars and the usual breaching equipment they were accustomed to having at hand. Not to mention that it would also be difficult to locate. Finding the aluminum alloy door in the boulder pile labyrinth around it was not a given.

This new possibility made a nice addition to a gratifying list of ruses he had planted to distract their pursuers. Assuming his enemy's point of view, he mentally ticked them off: an excess of bodies at the dacha; the inexplicable bullet wounds; the missing boat; that unaccounted for boat motoring down the *Batyly*, then up the *Aldan* to the *Maya*; the likely reports of an unidentified seventh stranger (militiaman Igor) snooping about on the day of the incident; the location of Agent Ivan Timofeyovich's strange demise; the missing pages from the village library's atlases of points West; and soon-to-be-found presence of agent Ivan's SSB radio in an informant's possession... He was still theorizing about the length of delay these deceptions would impose on the search party when the anticipated far-away pop interrupted his thoughts. He strained but could only discern a disappointing trickle of black smoke through a passing denser wave of the misty mess. For a full three minutes, the tableau in his binoculars could have been mistaken for a dreary impressionist landscape.

Aleksey scanned what little he could see of the other sectors of the settlement and grew more concerned at the lack of response to the unprecedented explosion. This hamlet was so tiny and so secluded it was hard for him to credit such silence in the face of such a surprising event.

Then as the mist thinned a movement flickered in the left periphery of his field. It was the small ferryboat of all things. Someone must have diverted it downstream from its usual landing. Before the vessel was fully alongside the warehouse wharf two familiar shapes jumped off, and sprinted to the large windowless structure. "Cheng and the errant crew-chief," Aleksey said to himself and he cast about to see how many villagers would join the two men now that they had broken the ice.

No one came. They were too frightened. Beliiya remained a still life of a bedraggled, treeless cluster of shacks and blank eyed barracks sinking akimbo in the mud. As minutes passed and it appeared that the warehouse had swallowed the only human response to its injury, the ferry slowly backed away to return to its pendular track, leaving in its wake a barking, bouncing dog behaving like a passenger who had missed the bus. It had to be Vasily's mutt. He had disciplined the companionable beast to stay in Beliiya whenever he left town, and it became a major pain-in-

the-ass to the remaining inhabitants until Vasily returned. Poor dog was in for a long frustrating wait beginning today.

As he left his perch to make the rendezvous with his crew, a new interpretation of this situation presented itself to him. This eerie episode could be a positive outcome from several points of view. Someone would find the corpse and promptly report it, heaping more on to the FSB's confusion. The terrified villagers, shut inside their buttoned-up dwellings would be unlikely to see the escaping trio. And above all, the population's apparent state of terror would make them unhelpful to the feds. The people, of course, would not be overtly "uncooperative." However, the information about team Krasnaya and the events of the last few days, which he had expected to flow freely into the laps of investigators, would, it appeared, not be so easy to collect, after all. It was yet another nightmare for their antagonists and a dream come true for them. Reflexively he thought, "Too good to be true." But, the words also brought a frisson of superstition. Too often, the phrase itself became all too accurate.

Shaking off all the mental gymnastics, he hurried to tell his troops that the result was unexpected, but perhaps fortuitous. They could finally "squat" in the old Russian tradition of pausing atop one's luggage at the outset of a long journey.

## IN THE “PEOPLE’S” FOOTPRINTS

Walking the gentler incline of the *Ancha*'s northern tributary, they looked to Aleksey as unmilitary as the actual PLA soldiers he had seen crossing the Taiga. The PLA's everything-proof boots hid under the dirt colored uniform trousers and the darker army jackets looked as most others did poking out in small patches between all the straps and belts that it took to carry so much gear. Their weapons disappeared under rain gear muzzle down hanging underneath by shoulder straps. Civilian wet weather jackets in classic yellow and orange did just as much as the civilian wool lined flap caps to cloak the military character of the group. They looked lumpily outfitted against the elements -- very much like every other RFE resident walking more than three kilometers from home.

The dense overhead tree cover in dripping low overcast, created a welcome sense of security. This shelter from surveillance, however temporary, was the sort of respite that prompted animated chatter amongst the newly rested escapees. That comfort and the relief brought on by foiling the pursuit had released a flood of dopamine that gave them stuck-on grins of the sort seen only on adolescents in the throes of delight. Aleksey, however, remained uncharacteristically quiet as he grappled with his conscience. Despite sharing the grins, he could not help weighing the degree of his own guilt at this turning point. His thoughts wandered back and forth. Could he forgo the opportunity to properly explain the PLA's integration of satellite photography and GPS? Recent events made him feel so much more vulnerable than expected. If he explained nothing, his death or incapacitation might deprive the other two of the PLA's life giving resources. However, a working explanation of its operation would necessarily involve deceiving close, nay, intimate confidants. But then, providing the wherewithal for Lev and Vasily to discover the *actual* direction of his planned route would be too contentious, time consuming and disruptive. Such a revelation at this early stage could also endanger their lives. Furthermore, it was not only a case of *should* he, but also *could* he pull off such a deception. It was not in his nature. But then again, indecision was just another way of deciding to withhold some double-edged know-how. His gait became a gloomy trudge as the weight of the inner struggle bore down on him.

The deception, if perceived by his friends as betrayal – not an impossible reaction – could cost him dearly. They could make for Batamay, anyway, without him. As a twosome, their chances out on the Taiga were better than his. However, he was sure some “authority” would

catch them in the town or on the *Aldan*. There was really no way to hide on the big rivers from successive overhead surveillance passes no matter how camouflaged the raft and in the sophisticated milieu of a port town like Batamay their amateurish spy craft would give them away.

All of that was well-reasoned analytical argument, not quite able to tamp down the glowing coals of unease threatening to spark a volatile mist of alarm drifting so near his brazier of a brain. His fear of single-handing across this empty landscape was visceral. He had ventured solo from his dacha overnight on many occasions on the last several years and was intimately familiar with the dangers – lovely but unhelpful flora populated by fanged fauna in an expanse devoid of humanity. No help would be forthcoming. No communication. No handy refuge. No passersby. The topography was as unforgiving as the open sea. One simple mistake that impaired your mobility and you would face a slow death in a matter of days.

He was unable to suppress the upsurge of a heart-bred buzz at each return of the unwelcome memories of his own close calls. For two days dragging home the pain of a fractured forearm, he had been beleaguered by the thought of how much more helpless he would have been, if it had been a leg instead. He would never forget how easily it could have been so. Another instance, above a 300 meter drop on a single footed five-centimeter ledge, his time in jeopardy had been much shorter but far more intense. The welling realization of what one too many drops of sweat on his hands could have done, or the stark awareness of the existential consequences of three millimeters of too much boot twist still rebounded through his brain to this day. Thereafter, he had not failed to leave his exact whereabouts with Lev or Vasily. Without at least that slim precaution, he would never again confront the Taiga unaccompanied.

As Aleksey should have foreseen but had not, it was Vasily who dragged the reluctant prevaricator into the open. The scientist only needed to play for a bit, in his artfully rigorous way, with the hand-held multipurpose GPS instrument. Like the PLA, each member of this crew – not just its leaders as in all other armies – had a device of his own, (and unlike the PLA troopers each escapee also had a back-up version of his own). Vasily's tinkering led predictably to questions, which went initially to the more talkative Lev. The heretofore "omniscient one" on military matters interrupted the query flurry with an abrupt deferral to, "Aleksey Mikhailovich, it's his patch. He's the Chinese reader, and while this lil' machine is digitally coded, the content is language based. I may speak a smattering of elementary Mandarin and know maybe 80 characters. But, you'll need

Aleksey's expertise to decipher the PLA's 'militarese.'" Vasily's sudden turn back toward Aleksey forced him to jettison his indecision; and for now, put the men on a new footing for better or... not.

As it turned out, Lev had more detailed questions about terminology and specific functions than Vasily who was more confident of computer aptitude. Of course, they were walking during most of the explanation. So, it was only during the obligatory ten-minute breaks and at mealtimes that the trainees could dabble with the keys and see the screen changes. (Practical application in this course was on your own time.) Lev's main concern was content, primarily the language in the dialogue boxes, while Vasily stuck to software -- fixated on the variety of 'screens' portrayed. Neither had the opportunity to try out Aleksey's examples as he spoke, which is always the best way to follow IT instruction. This shortcoming only postponed the reckoning.

Despite earlier misgivings, Aleksey was pleased with his coverage of the instrument's multiplicity of functions from memory. Questions were many, but fired at him single-shot, not full automatic from two sides at once as they could have been. He skipped lightly over the limited Internet connections, which was about the same as was available on the average smart phone -- something that had been available to both of the political prisoners until their relatively recent exiles. Time, weather, measures, currency exchange rates, etc. were in Arabic numerals attached to intuitive icons and hence needed little or no translation. On the other hand, the PLA's substitution for latitude and longitude was an odd map grid, which bore little correlation to that traditional system or of the Russian military grid. It demanded a detailed description of Aleksey's inscribed translations of selected Chinese characters and of an accompanying glossary of unmilitary Russian terms he had to use therein. He knew this would be cumbersome for them if something happened to him. He also worried that his indelible ink renderings on the plastic might not survive the wear and weathering of their trek.

His walking monologue included a brief sketch of his previous description of the satellite photo mapping system. In the process, he learned from Vasily that it appeared to be a virtual duplicate of the Chinese civilian application, available globally since the late teens, which had made some Shanghai entrepreneur millions by offering tourists frequently updated high resolution sat-maps and on-screen positioning of waypoints. For background context, it seemed worthwhile to mention that this waypoint depiction capability was the PLA's method of issuing road-march orders. The trekking crews apparently maintained safe dispersion by following these centralized daily orders about each day's destination.



“Imagine,” he said, “the HQ with such a crew-tracking database setting waypoints for 20,000 groups a day, and the highly trained thousands of human inputs it would take to refine all that computer generated data – day in and day out for months on end.”

The tricky part, he recounted, was how the PLA crews could inform headquarters of inevitable course changes. A crew that was forced to deviate to avoid being sighted or perhaps that was carried too far downstream in a river crossing could have been in dire straits unless they were able to designate a new overnight location. If not, they were likely to receive an impossible order to reach some unreachable waypoint on the following day. According to Lt. Cho the PLA HQ had mapping and data base integration sophisticated enough to make this calculation rapid and routine. Aleksey had to confess a failure to understand how such a back-and-forth of data went undetected by the infamous N-S-A of the U-S-A, which was alleged by most to be capable of reading the entire electromagnetic spectrum.

Vasily, who had anticipated such a capability and given it some thought, offered his own hypothesis. Agreeing to its necessity and considering it technically feasible, he speculated that the NSA probably could not carefully monitor every frequency on that entire spectrum. So, in his view, it was possible to transmit in some seldom-used frequencies, perhaps in the light bands. The Ultraviolet range or X-rays, for example, could carry such an encoded, simple message to a satellite receiver. Something as short as a four-digit identifier plus a two-digit direction and a three-digit distance would do to convey who and the unforeseen location. If the troops had the discipline to restrict such crew transmissions to a very few cases of real emergencies, that would have reduced this kind of traffic, in an unoccupied medium, to a level that could go undetected for a longtime.

“Well, in my opinion,” Lev said at this point, “from what I’ve heard so far about this giant strategic turning movement, the PLA had to instill a truly unprecedented level of discipline down to the most junior ranks to get even this far. Getting from here across the Bering Strait and then across hostile territory in Alaska meant achieving small unit independence and individual self-discipline that may have reached a whole new realm in the military art. I’ve been thinking that if all your suppositions about this war turn out to be true, then the Chinese People’s Army may well have crossed into a new watershed in military history.”

His big grin widened, elaborating for Vasily. “Even as a ‘hard’ scientist, you can see that the history of military formations has been a steady progression outward. If you also grasp the

reality that it takes hard – even harsh – control to keep humans facing death in some order while in harm’s way, you will be closer to understanding the nexus between discipline and battlefield success. Disciplined units – almost synonymous with victorious units – have evolved from very close arrays that used shoulder to shoulder lines, a few paces apart fore and aft, like a Greek phalanx to maintain cohesion. In their day, Greek officers were raised to ‘know’ that their hoplites could not face the terrors of close combat any other way. In that culture, even the bitterest opprobrium was apparently insufficient, *after the fact*, to cement the phalanx. Leaders ‘knew’ they needed proximity and on-the-spot verbal and physical abuse to prevent desertion that might break the ranks. This was key. One man managing to flee *could* (and too often *did*) precipitate a rout.

Over the centuries, in Western warfare, this became the one crucial factor in victory. The unit that marched on you inexorably, and stayed intact after you delivered your worst, was terrifying in the extreme. That infliction of sheer terror by dint of hard, cold discipline was often more essential to winning than the killing. It became a truism that breaking your enemy’s cohesion – his formation – was tantamount to defeating that unit (especially if you got behind him). Then breaking multiple units in larger armies led to successes in major battles and multiple defeats in the field caused entire nations to succumb.

And, my scholarly friends,” the historian continued, “the hard kernel at the heart of this way of war was ‘standing fast,’ which, in turn, was equated for two millennia with *proximity*. However, as weaponry became more lethal, greater dispersion came to have more merit. The spreading out of formations crept into use, ever so slowly. The phalanx gave way to the Roman maniples and so on through the linear formations of Prussia to Bonaparte’s *battalions carré*. As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century shoulder-to-shoulder lines were still standing up to muskets and cannon. The British ‘thin red line’ still won by marching at and then over their enemies despite suffering greater casualties. Even the WWII units, forced to spread out by tanks and artillery, kept 30 men or so in sight and under thumb. More important to my point, even the most widely dispersed troops still moved as platoons and companies. It took at least captains and lieutenants to decide how and when units moved from A to B. Only they had the annotated battle maps, and surprisingly, they were too often the only ones who could read them.

Now it appears everyone can, in the PLA at least. They have spread the phalanx out to five-man crews kilometers apart. Every swinging dick has his own Sat-Nav and could reach the unit’s objective by himself. From where I stand, it looks as if they spread 100,000 commandoes

across the whole damn RFE and sloshed the mess across Alaska. If true, it's very gobsmacking hard to believe. If the PLA did move this way to the infamous Shaw Creek battlefield, if they fought in crew-based larger units, which moved as autonomous crews, then perhaps, the operation was *not* a one-off deception exercise. Just maybe, the ever-widening standard for military formations *has* evolved one more increment. Consequently, from now on, anyone who cannot muster this new level of discipline will be ass-for-grass on the battlefields of the future. Your fatherland's hot balls on cold steel. Ehhheh... comrades?

How the bloody blither did I get off on these parts anyway?" This last assay sunk into a dense foam of silence – a mute response to the redundantly rhetorical.

Using this disquieting digression as cover and capitalizing on the pensive blank stares all around, Aleksey seized the moment to slip in his subterfuge. He mentioned hurriedly and almost parenthetically that he had reduced his translation of characters for GPS directions to just eight compass points – the four cardinal directions and the bisections of those sectors (*i.e.* southwest, northeast, *etc.*). He noted in passing that more directional accuracy was superfluous for them, since they would rely on coordinates and satellite photos. He did *not* mention that his Russian names replaced Chinese characters in such a way that the compass rose was rotated 45 degrees eastward. Hence, a Russian speaking crew which believed that it was following an azimuth northwest would in fact be walking due north.

The casualness of his aside did nothing to forestall the internal consequences. Aleksey's thoughts, once again began to ping off the walls of his mind. "Lev and Vasily had come on this endeavor," he thought, "with such alacrity and were hanging-tough with such grit that they might be less upset by the long-way-round trek to the northeast than he had presumed." Suddenly he found himself reconsidering – yet again. Perhaps he could change the translation annotations back. He then decided that he could put off such a decision until tomorrow. If he did change them back, the upshot would be to bring the "northeastern alternative" to a head sooner, but then, that might not be quite so relevant until the northwestern route to Batamay should be taking its sharp turn west more noticeably in a couple of days.

"And, after all, why dance *with* the bear?" He recoiled inwardly at the startling awareness that the last ping may not have been entirely silent. As he relapsed deeper into indecision, he was beginning to grasp how draining these cerebral detours had become. So, with the ultra pragmatic self-discipline that was his trademark, he dropped it entirely – mid-stream. And, in order to prevent

yet another fallback he opened the topic of when they would bed-down tonight. No one else seemed to give much of a shit, but he kept at it to suppress the upwelling of moral muddling that plagued him.

“So presuming the drizzle doesn’t stop, I say we go until dark to put as much distance today between us and the hounds as possible. How’s 2230 hours sound?” Aleksey asked rhetorically. “That will be a little less than 25 klicks and will give us enough twilight to make camp. Hence, no fires, and it will require us to find overhead cover so there’ll be no chance of a thermal signature. No telling how wide they might swing a UAV, (if they get a bird, and if the low ceiling lifts overnight to permit...)

He waited for feed-back and getting none pressed onward, “Ok, Lev Ivanovich, intrepid champion of the oppressed, do you think you can handle a six-hour night tonight?”

“Why?” Lev asked, more curious than disapproving.

“It gets us on the PLA’s daily routine -- up early enough to make good on the ‘Peoples’ daily quota of 35 kilometers while still encamping early enough to make fires. That timing allowed Chinese troops to work their camp when daylight made thermal signatures irrelevant. They dried out, maintained gear, cooked, washed and prepped for the next day, etc. As actual darkness descended, they would be done for the day. So, when the thermal background cooled enough to have revealed them as so many moving thermal signatures – however faint that may have been -- the PLA troops would have had nothing remaining to do but lie still in their sleep. Moving thermal blobs on thermal imagery receivers of the type created by routine camping activity might have tripped alarms in satellite strip surveillance algorithms. The PLA’s road-march timetable would have radically minimized such detections.”

“Good enough,” Vasily said joining in to break up another extended monologue, “the constraints of darkness seem relevant to us but why a daily 35 kilometers? If we hauled-ass, we could make more. Don’t you think?”

“Probably. And, perhaps we should, over easy terrain. Thirty-five was their *average*. I am sure there were days in the mountains – like those up ahead – when they made only 15. Did I mention that they also had a two-day weekly cushion? They based their 35 klick per day goal on a short five-day week. It seems exceedingly prudent to me over the long term – obviously the case over the span of time from the *Amur* to the *Yukon* – but hardly something that would have constrained a fit crew simply having a string of slow days.”

“Yeah, yeah, they were brilliant,” said Lev, in an annoyed stage whisper, “and later I’ll have a few things to say about that myself, but right now we need to think *maskirovka*,” he gestured in an arc forward toward a lighter overcast and wider openings in the trees auguring more open terrain. That would entail spreading out, and harkening to the other demands of that big one-word for tactical discipline, which included cover, concealment and deception. There would be no more chatter until camp. The higher altitude of their ascent and the higher ceiling both suggested much greater vulnerability to optical surveillance.

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“Point taken,” grumped a still annoyed Lev from under his tented sleeping bag, “the ant-like comrades of the yellow horde may have been on target about march discipline, camps and fires, but I would not relish shitty nights like this five months on end.”

“We are hearing this from our hero of the fatherland who has been out of his warm bed -- what -- three nights in a row,” said Vasily in a smirking interruption. He was unwearied and still seated as the others murmured from their pillows.

“Yeah, cheeky lad, I have had years of practice at being miserable, and many more years of making others miserable to call upon,” said Lev in a throw away line to get back to the main thread questioning any Chinese ascendancy. “I’m still trying to understand how China -- of all the great powers, with virtually no combat experience in over three generations -- could be the one to discover the means to inculcate a new standard of military discipline. I mean, come on, they had tens of thousands of these troops running about unsupervised, no one in charge, on full bellies, no less. Granted some legs of this march, in spring, had to be downright pleasant. Yet, the long-term objective would have demanded that they move-out smartly week in and week out. I, for one, know how hard it is to get young soldiers to focus on anything remotely long-term. If they did pull it off, (and it does look as if they did), it is damn sure unexpected from them. It’s not so much *what* they did, (someone was bound to). It’s how *those* buggers did it. Sure did not see that one coming,” Lev said with finality as he rolled his back toward where the fire should have been.

“Well, in the big picture, you said it with the parenthetical comment about some great power ‘bound to’ do it,” said Aleksey filling the conversational void. “A *sole* superpower’s prolonged ascendancy practically guarantees that some great power in the second rank will

eventually aspire to the pinnacle and muster the economic and military wherewithal to innovate. Talk about incentive... They are practically *forced* to.

However, more pertinent to the somewhat insulting question of specifically 'how' they did it, the answer could be threefold: training, training, and more training. Lieutenant Cho – lately of that very same 'horde' – said that their *years* of preparation in western China (Xinjiang) were worse than the RFE transit itself. But, there were a few more direct incentives than it might seem at first. The descent of winter with no prospect of warm shelter short of Fairbanks was one. The enormous array must have developed a momentum all its own.

Keep in mind that the 20,000 or so PLA crews -- spread out though they may have been -- were inside a finite space. Even this Taiga has limits, especially east to west. I refer, of course, to the toad of all marches: the maintenance of *interval*. I calculated that if crews kept a two-klik interval all-around, the force could fit only 100 crews abreast in order to squeeze by the width of northern Khabarovsk Krai. If they had extended their array any further west, the westernmost crews would have dropped off into the *Aldan-Lena* swamp-valley..."

"You sure as shit don't make 35 kliks-a-day in that muck," added Lev helpfully. "It's not your hot swamp either. Mosquitoes drill your head while your underwater gonads ice over."

"I'm also betting," Aleksey said taking the floor back, "the People's Republic did not want any units to be caught very far over that provincial border. Very unlikely that Yakutia – as big and rich as it is – was on the PRC 'leash.' Ergo, if a 20,000-crew array was 100 wide, then it had to be at least 200 crews deep, or, at two kliks apart, that's 400 kilometers long. Such an assemblage, therefore, would take 11-12 days to pass any given latitude. That's enough time to give troops at the rear incentive to reach the final objective on time, or else, you see, they'd be joining some kind of 'operation frosty balls' as it got later and later in Alaska. I'll even bet the PLA told them that there would no be no parkas or mukluks in the Alaskan supply points – wherever or whatever those were."

"So you determined that it was *only* 200 kliks from Okhotsk to the *Lena* bluffs?" Lev asked rhetorically without rolling over in his cocoon. "You'd think the PLA generals could have monitored bunching up by satellite. Unlike the voids imaged by the American's or the Russian's broad-strip surveillance, the Chinese brass would've known what to look for and where." Immediately thereafter, he answered his own question by saying, "but then, how would they punish any transgression? Certainly not by moving their fat arses out of their comfy HQs."

“Correct, my discerning comrade. Interval was not the generals’ biggest whip. It was something else that will concern us just as much – *food*. The whole point of all these very costly cache’s, (and I understand, even some special deliveries by air) was that the men would not be overburdened with too much food and expendables. The honchos allocated just enough to get to them to the next one. Cho said that was normally 14-day rations or 10 days walking (with weekends off), which totals 350 klicks or so between stores. Dragging ass resulted in going hungry. The rations might seem generous enough to us, now, but you burn a lot more calories out here on the road over the longer term.”

“Their rations were still there when they did make it, weren’t they?” Vasily asked.

“Oh, sure, no one was supposed to starve. Those fat aluminum cylinders you’ve seen in the caches may have been shared by three or four crews, but each was allocated its own code-locked set of compartments. Don’t ask me who had what codes, or who had master codes or how that distribution was handled. Cho never said how the logisticians did it, but evidently the post-operational cover-up detail – his assignment -- had unrestricted access. You’ve seen everything all open in Cho’s cache and you know that I ‘requisitioned’ shit from four others up and down the *Ancha*, so I believed him when he told me that his GPS handset (now mine) had all the locations and codes for the whole stinking RFE.”

My larger point is... It was keep march-order or go hungry. Not to disparage your very valid observation earlier, Lev Ivanovich, there *did* have to be an unprecedented level of discipline during this operation. That was most astute, but, my compliance conscious friend, it was not all inner-directed self-discipline and small group cohesion. The *apparatchiks* of the People’s horde imposed an appreciable degree of coercion to keep up with spring as it ebbed up the RFE.”

“Ok, got it,” said Vasily in the pause. “What about the part where you said food was also our ‘concern?’ I presume we are carrying the same rations.” Noting Aleksey’s nod, he said, “can I infer from your discourse that we are 11 days from Batamay? Seems further than that.”

Thinking, “Ohhh shit,” but saying, “actually... what I laid out was a heavier load for you tough-guys – 16 days of food. But, your deduction was sound. We probably could not make it, if we *walked* the whole way. I estimated that we could make better time floating downstream – about 125 klicks per day considering 24-hour days. That estimate included two half-days for raft building – by the way.”

“About?” asked Vasily with a load of skepticism in his voice, “don’t imagine I want to hear the margin for error on that analysis. Were you figuring big current on the *Aldan*, let’s say on the order of 10 kliks per hour?”

“Not quite. More like five and a half. If you got up to 10 kliks per hour, I presumed you’d also encounter over-falls, rapids, etc.” Overleaping caution, Aleksey added, “That’s precisely why I picked the *Tyry* instead of its parallel southern branch closer to Belliya. No sign of sudden drops in elevation downstream of our planned launch point.”

“Doesn’t sound like much room for error,” said Vasily, giving up, as he too slid under covers.

“Welcome to the taiga, comrade ‘continental.’ But then, perhaps we might make seven kliks per hour and have a day to spare. Who knows?” He rolled away from the non-existent fire, and as that parting shot’s trajectory fell to earth, the exhausted troika spun softly into a vortex of sleep. Like collective narcoleptics, their stupor hurtled past sleep stages and quickly settled into prolonged stage four. For the third consecutive night, this rapid plummet foreclosed the usual pillow-time retrospection. That should have troubled every single one of these seasoned outdoorsmen. They all believed in the axiom that one always posts a sentry. No exceptions.

\* \* \*

Day dawned as if a film had changed genres between scenes. Morning’s light dissolved the night’s black screen -- flash lit by strobes of pandemonium -- into mist-tufted stillness of mountain shade backlit by up-slopes in the direct sunlight. The rock bound waters dribbling from the grass-lipped pond was disconcertingly cinematic. A fully eclipsed horror feature had given way to the *joi de vivre* so reminiscent of Mikhalkov’s “Burnt by the Sun.”

Such a stark change should have eased their protracted apprehension about the beast’s return. Instead, they all felt a residual exigency, as if they might still be unable to shoot the bloody thing until it was drooling on them. Remembering the “office shrink’s” admonitions to stop anxious thinking – “serial association” she had called it – Aleksey did what she told him. He let the field of view in his binos drift slightly from their predetermined search pattern. He saw a pool ringed by several moss-covered ledges where larches battled black-crackled white birches for room – so much so that one-of-each slouched immodestly over its own reflection. On the far side, a granite wall dived straight into the water. On the nearer shore, three dark evergreens speared up from dun



colored grasses bordering the burbling trickle from the miniature lagoon that was the source of the stream whose valley they had climbed all the day before. They were at one of those rare spots where a stream bedded valley turns into a gorge. This not-to-be-believed campsite, chanced upon in the darkest shadows of a sub-arctic twilight, was on a perfectly human scale. The whole setting made him smile, and – as promised by “Ms. Psycho-babble” – the smile itself slid free the knot that had held his thoughts in such a thrall.

Returning to his over-watch, he could see Lev’s relaxed posture from fifty meters across the stream and that helped him too. It made the tedious concentration on his half of the mutual cover a bit easier to endure. They had split to opposite sides of the brook staying in full view of one another. The idea was to insure that they would see the midnight intruder in time to riddled it with 5.56 slugs. Vasily and Lev secretly hoped to hit the road before it’s half-ton, flea bitten ass cracked the horizon. Aleksey, though, fully expected they would have to kill the poor creature that day. He had decided to go along with it, as much as it pained him.

However, he could not help smiling as he recalled their outbursts of outraged indignation at his reluctance to “murder” the animal. Further recollection of Lev’s sarcastic suggestion that they paint F-S-B on its ample backside so Aleksey could bring himself to kill with more alacrity, raised a chuckle. Vasily who could not see his smile, did hear the snigger – or so he thought.

He immediately took great mock umbrage, “Very damned funny. You gonna join in the witless humor, now? I was thinking the only reason you went along with this hunt was to separate us so you could keep colonel wise-ass’s butt intact. Now you?”

Aleksey took his eyes off the binoculars just long enough to assure himself that his seat mate was not entirely serious, and snapped the optics back in place on his turning head to conceal a spreading grin.

“So,” he asked, wondering aloud, “no real surprise, where else does a 500 kilo brown bear get his blasting caps anyway?”

“All right, dick-wit wonder, let’s give it a fucking rest. It’s worrying me to see this pathological need you-two have to drag this humorless shit around like some dead rat on a string.”

“Ah yes,” Aleksey replied, persisting with his head still turned away, “the blameless cap-box in the hydrating breakfast bag. How could I forget?”

“Indeed, a move that was almost as clever as popping-off four shots in the dark that were more likely to hit me or Lev than the fucking bear.”

“Have you forgotten the flash?” Aleksey dropped his voice, seeing Lev perk to their sounds. He raised his hand to signal no-worries to Lev, and then pressed on with a sardonic smile. “Yes, just slaver a food bag with sausage grease, sprinkle in a few blasting caps and you, too, can have your very own dancing bear... Tell me, how does one get the fatso to pop the caps?”

Refusing to rise again to the bait, Vasily changed his demeanor to reply in more serious whispers, “Strange you should ask, I do have a theory about that. Perhaps, no one saw the big turd until he was lapping up his first mouthfuls of my breakfast. Hence, he already spilled the caps at his feet. When you, or me – whoever – woke up, we scared him shitless. So, when he whirled around to bite the laundry bag in the foot of my bedding, his hind feet must have stepped on the caps. You know the rest – popping caps and flash banging nine-millimeters. You know he did shake my empty sack before he dropped it. Lucky stroke, that. And, he may have hauled ass out of here so fast because he had a pistol slug in his ponderous posterior, though that is less likely considering the circumstances.”

“Yes,” whispered a more serious Aleksey, “I’ll concede that pistols can be for shit. I realized years ago that it’s often better to *throw* the half-assed things. Sometimes, I’m damned if I know why I bother to lug one around.”

Aleksey handed the binoculars to Vasily, “Your turn for a while. Watch the dip right behind Lev’s right shoulder.”

Then in a more conciliatory vein, he continued, “I did hear something *before* the uproar. That’s why I had the 9-millimeter in hand. At first, I was not sure what I was hearing. Sounded like a man – one crunching footstep at a time – stepping at long intervals. Never would have guessed it was a quadruped. Did you have any idea a bear would move so slow? Only one foot at a time? Anyway, because I presumed some asshole had us at gunpoint, I was trying to find my pistol without making a noise. So, I’d just touched steel when the big fucker dropped something and thrashed around. (That might have been the cap box.) Before I knew it, caps popped; you squirted by me, cursing; Lev was yelling ‘what-the-fuck;’ and I was seeing a huge mass in the muzzle flashes. Don’t even remember pulling the receiver back.”

“So neither of us is quite the half-wit it may have seemed at first?” said Vasily.

“Apparently so,” Aleksey said to mark the lull before he resumed. “We were damned lucky. Got a big lesson with no casualties. Got to buck-up. We’ve had so many good breaks

since the center came after us. Not to mention, this is a smack-in-your-face reminder of how hard-  
assed our timeline is. Dealing with this very kind of mouse shit must have delayed the PLA crews  
too. Our lil' Chechen fire drill makes the seemingly easy five-day-week look a lot more demanding  
now."

With that, they mutely turned with renewed intent to the scan hoping it might somehow find  
their quarry, so this debacle would not cost them more precious daylight. Soon thereafter, any  
remaining cheerfulness evaporated with the encroaching shadows of a looming overcast, which  
darkened their little basin in advance of the remorseless daily showers. Oh, so good for security  
and so bad for morale.

As good friends can, they remained comfortable with the long hush, which followed.  
Eventually however, it occurred to Aleksey that this might be a singular opportunity to put to rest a  
nagging question. Trivial interruptions had thwarted it too many times already. Therefore, with his  
"long answer" on the tip of his tongue, he asked Vasily, "Have we ever finished the explanation  
about sat surveillance? Last I recall, I was postponing a reply to your question about why the PLA  
groups would not have been identified by satellites."

Keeping his eyes plugged into his binos as they roamed around Lev-and-vice, Vasily  
said, "Go on." He sounded like he could use a sound track to keep him awake. He had apparently  
forgotten how much of hunting included hours and hours of unremitting boredom.

"Well," said Aleksey sounding a bit oratorical, "as you know the higher the resolution of  
any imaging device – be it a camera or a telescope – the smaller the field of view. The RFE is an  
extremely large field to view. And, its enormous area is of vanishingly little interest to both  
intelligence and military types who fly the satellites. Americans don't even know the difference  
between Siberia and the RFE. (They'd probably call it 'East Siberia' or some such shit.) Combine  
these two realities – size and indifference -- and it becomes ever more unlikely that foreign bosses  
are going to allocate resources; like highly trained photo interpreters, or IT geeks to pore over  
photos of something as devoid of military threat as the humanoid desert from the *Amur* River to the  
Arctic Sea, especially east of the *Lena* River basin. Personally, I cannot conceive of squinting  
conscientiously over thousands of two klik squares out of a known 6.2 million square kilometers.

But then, you might logically say one could design an algorithm to analyze the imagery  
with computers. Right? If so, what would be the discriminating criteria in the algorithm? One  
could consult the Essential Elements of Information kept current by the intel community, and use

that to build a key list of search criteria for relevant objects, which might be visible at reasonably high resolutions. But what EEL (or key list) would conceivably designate five random men walking as 'militarily significant'? Likewise it's just as infeasible that any algorithm – extant before last year – would be designed to count-up five-man groups with a view to designating a larger number– let's say 200 – as 'militarily significant.' By the same token, it's virtually *impossible* to imagine any sane military man – *before the war* – suggesting they spend scads of rubles to find 20,000 such groups. Who on a thousand Politburo staffs would have foreseen even 5,000 men strolling across what's considered some of the most formidable terrain on the planet? So what I'm saying is... while an intel satellite *can* image trekkers or even a single man, I submit (and the PLA obviously agrees) that sat surveillance *systems* had no means to conclude that such a sighting was 'militarily significant' enough to report. It's like counting ants.”

In retrospect, he could picture what Vasily must have been thinking as he had said those words. Probably went something like, “Uh, oh... I got it, but, oh shit, he's not stopping. It's common sense. Sats can see tiny, little shit well enough, but as a practical matter would never bother to *identify* it or look for it at the highest resolutions. Fine. Next subject.” Belatedly, Aleksey also realized he had probably been incapable of shutting-up at that point – he had been much too carefully prepared. Vasily had coughed, wiped his lenses and even gestured toward Lev, but to no avail.

“If you were to scale a small football pitch to contain half-centimeter fire ants spread out proportionally to 2-meter soldier-size, the dispersed ant groups would be five meters apart. At that level of dispersion, you could get 200 fire-ant groups on a 50 by 100-meter pitch. Now, of course, anyone *can* see a half-centimeter fire ant in the grass. You might even notice five fire ants walking five centimeters apart. If you are fearful of fire ants, you might even find ten more groups. But, from this discovery, who in the flea-flicking world is going to envisage that 1,000 fire ants advancing on it in a 50-meter by 100-meter formation would threaten his village? Who Vasily Yurovitch?”

“Ok... very astute. No sweat from satellites. Got it, thanks, Aleksey Mikhailovitch. And, by the way,” Vasily said quickly to impede more of the surveillance lecture, “what's with all this American military shit? This M4 feels like a toy compared to the Russian AK, and even Lev's huskier M16 looks flimsy. What? Does the PLA have superpower envy? Why equip commandoes with this crap? Sure doesn't seem characteristic of the arrogant Chinese intelligentsia I've met.”

“Very perceptive, Vasily Yurovich, I’m sure the ranks didn’t like it a bit, but the logic of using US materiel for this operation was overwhelming. Think about it, the PLA knew they would be logistically isolated on the Alaskan battlefield. They needed to be able to steal American supplies and use everything interchangeably. That applied more so for mortar ammo. Can you even picture what a pain it could have been to hump something so heavy so far? Then, of course, there was the possibility that someone finding the PLA caches sometime before the battle. Storing another Army’s gear in them would disguise the source. It is something that could have been especially important for PLA stores inside Alaska – however it was that the sly bastards managed that trick.”

“No shit,” said Vasily passing the over-watch chore back to Aleksey, “they couldn’t swarm Chinese ‘contractors’ all over Alaska like they did back here before the war. Even those naïve Yankees might have been a touch suspicious with that many foreigners digging holes everywhere (even though they say that western Alaska is just as deserted as the RFE). What do you figure? Did we have about 5,000 so-called ‘contractors’ around here?”

“Yeah, just a rough guess-estimate, cranking in all the logistical crap for 20-man labor crews on three 60-day tours putting in three of those aluminum cylinders per day, it would take about that many. And, don’t forget, there was a great deal of looking-the-other-way by provincial authorities. You’re correct, there’s no way the Chinese could have pulled-off anything remotely like that on the other side of Bering Straits. In truth, I have no stinking idea how they handled logistics over there.

On the other hand, we do know the PLA had no choice but to pre-position in Alaska. We know they did use indirect fire weaponry – big mortars (100-plus millimeter) – some crew served machine guns, and, of course, the shoulder-fired anti-air rockets we heard so much about. That requires many tons of ordnance. You don’t lug that shit around with infantry commandoes. Goes without saying, that during the battle, the US Air Force and Navy would have shutdown any hope of last-minute resupply by sea or air. Something for historians to sort out, because from what I’ve read the Americans these days are surprisingly incurious on the subject.”

“Or, they have classified the whole topic in good Stalinist fashion to cover their over-exposed asses,” Vasily added.

“Ahhh, Vasily Yurovich, my scholarly colleague, aren’t we getting handy with the esoteric military jargon? And, It’s an excellent point. Somebody in the Pentagon missed something big

indeed. But then, they had it coming, didn't they, by promising their people 'national *security*'. (I presume you know the subtle comprehensiveness of the word in English.) That is tantamount to calling for protection from every damn thing. A lot more demanding than 'national *defense*'. Ironic, isn't it? You promise people 'security,' then you gotta be on the lookout for potholes in the arctic tundra. Then when you fail to spot them, you have to cover your ass – for fucking ever.”

He stopped suddenly and raised a hand for silence as he saw Lev rise slowly to a fully seated firing posture to take aim at something in the direction of the pond. Four binocular lenses slewed about, in vain, for Lev's intended target. Aleksey concluded it must be on the water's edge just out of view from their position.

“Here we go,” Vasily whispered, elated.

Aleksey took his binos down and looked quizzically in Lev's direction. It seemed odd to him that the bear would have gotten around them. It had not.

In less than five seconds three quick reports cracked the tranquility of the setting. In that blink, they were freed to breakfast and get underway. Lev raised a thumb upward at them and dashed upstream with Vasily close behind to inspect the kill. Walking dejectedly onto the scene Aleksey was taken aback to see a 30 kilo, not a 500 kilo carcass at their feet.

With predictable dismay he said, “What's this gratuitous horseshit? Needed to prove you could hit a fucking mountain sheep, at what was it, 75 meters? A female no less.”

Lev turned to Vasily with one palm pushing up saying, “Did I not tell you what he would say?” Turning back to Aleksey, pleading for a ray of good sense, he added, “The wild goat is an effortless bear banquet my kind-hearted friend. He eats this meal instead of hounding us, and we get to walk quietly out of his life.”

After some chastened nods of belated comprehension, an ambivalent Aleksey looked at his watch and ambled away, head down with his GPS handset. The sacrifice of the sheep for their own selfish reasons was cringe-worthy, but he could not help being grateful that they would make today's destination with daylight to spare – for a change. He took the lead without a word while Vasily undertook the superfluous chore of spreading entrails about, presumably to insure their stalker would not bypass his gift.

Lev closed the gap to normal speaking distance behind him to say, “Let's cut this *sukhar* crap. If we had told you beforehand, you know damn well you would have given us a bucket-load

of grief. I really hated keeping our intent from you, but thought the semblance of accord would save us all a lot of time in the end.”

Aleksey thought, “Yeah, me too. ‘Accord’ *über alles*.” And, aloud, he said, “Ok, got it.”

Nevertheless, he made no attempt to change his taciturn demeanor. The appearance of a sulk would lend him the quiet time he wanted to make another of his storied lists. Not hard for him to appear to, “Prepare in fair weather for foul.” This absentminded professor tack came with an ominous pulse of introspection. He would have to watch out for the others perceiving him as becoming less *sukovaly* and more *sukhar*. In his native culture that meant lapsing from mildly aloof to coldly unapproachable – something of a life-long struggle for an introvert like him in the warmly emotional Russian milieu.

However, it was easier for him to shake off that mental shiver, because this day – with its unpromising start -- was turning out just fine. Finally, it was a token of normalcy. It promised to stay within the parameters he had pictured for the daily routine of a PLA crew. What’s more, he could make-up for hitting the trail too late, by doing a map recon of the their upcoming route on the hoof.

His “normalcy” lasted mere minutes, though. Delving more deeply into the satellite photomaps of the road ahead put a scuffing on the luster of his day. His high-resolution close-ups could have been from months ago, but they revealed the *Batyly* River, two days away, looking more like a creek than a river. Not good. The north to south river, which turned east to west across their path, must have dwindled considerably as it neared its high altitude source. The problem was their actual northeastern course was taking them across a much smaller stream than Lev and Vasily would expect.

As Aleksey again spiraled deep into contemplation of the many possible consequences of revealing his true intent, his amygdala inexplicably prioritized his auditory cortex and overrode the cognition churning his frontal cortex. This caused his consciousness to flash a memory from a heretofore-ignored dialogue between Lev and Vasily. Lev had been saying something like...”Sheep guts? It’s enough to gag a maggot...” and then, “...see something back there?” His memory replayed Vasily replying dismissively with something indecipherable, but ending in, “...who’s dogging our trail.”

“See what, back where? He’d have the devil of a time,” thought Aleksey, “figuring out why that shit popped into his brain. Too damn much going on.”

\* \* \*

It was not as bad as the roaring had made it sound. They had been hearing the tumult for quite a while before the flood came into view – milk chocolate swirls on pewter canvas barreling by at a sprint. As they stood agape above the south bank, Aleksey was pleased that the others would see the upper *Batyly* at least resembling a river. And, the delay it caused would not be nearly as bad as it had looked at first glance. However, reflecting philosophically, he remembered the good-news-bad-news jokes his American friends told on occasions like this.

Aloud he said, “Not so bad, gents. We made about 32 of our 35-klik daily goal. I had hoped to cross this evening and then camp over there to fire-dry before the background cooled. But, it’ll work nearly as well to cross in the morning. Who knows, it may even recede overnight. This is probably a late snowmelt. It’s higher here than in Beliiya, which, you should recall, had its version of this about six weeks ago.”

Lev nodded and rolled his eyes to indicate his acknowledgement of the obviousness of the little speech.

However Vasily saw fit to amend the plan. “Shouldn’t we use some of the extra time to get a head-start on the rafting? We could search for a downed tree or two. Maybe blow down a big one and get it in the water -- at the ready. Seems, we could do it and still have time to dry out before dark.”

Disappointed to lose his free time, Lev groused, “Might be wasted effort, if the water level drops and leaves our work aground. Who knows? We might even be able to evaluate our new Chinese dry suits in a swim. “

“Very fucking funny, Lev Ivanovich. Have you forgotten so soon? That fat-assed ursine brute chomped my bedroll and punctured my inflatable shit. Quite sure I mentioned that lil’ detail. Consequently, my pretty pink ass expects to be floated ‘high, dry and handsome’ until we get to Batamay.”

“Point taken,” said Lev – eyes still rolling.

“Uh—ohh,” thought Aleksey going blank as things got worse.

“By the way,” said Vasily, “will there be any of those PLA supply canisters between here and there? Does seem a bit soon to have reached the next cache line, but I have been wondering if maybe the staging might have differed the further West they went.”



“Gallopig goat shit,” said Aleksey to himself, “what a great opportunity to disclose the real destination...” but, he could not speak. Not here. “If not here or now? Where or when?” Not a thought contested the grumble of the river.

Even the blunt Lev sensed some awkwardness and an urgency to fill the void. He unfurled his now-hear-this voice and in frag-order cadence said, “Vasily Yurovich, follow the bank up river. Look for a better crossing site than this one. I.D. loose logs in or close to the water. Don’t go further than a klik. Be back in 30 minutes. That’ll be 1600.”

“Aleksey Mikhailovich, you got the downstream recon.” He pause with mock drama and added with a smirk, “I, gentlemen, will sit on my ‘fat ursine ass.’” After another brief pause he added, “After I take all our shit back up the trail to the rock overhangs we admired, and start a fire there. See you at 1600 hours.”

Aleksey, speaking as he lowered his pack at Lev’s feet, smiled to say, “I’m officially recommending that you write the river-crossing S.O.P. for the PLA’s next operation.”

Returning the smile as he gathered their packs Lev said, “I’ve been wondering why I didn’t get asked before. Standard Operating Procedure is one of my many specialties.”

Once Aleksey got above the undergrowth clogging the stream bank and settled back into his road-march stride, Vasily’s unwelcome question came back to him -- slathered in a sludge of guilt. He had never looked for caches west of the *Batyly’s* longitude. It was bad enough to fabricate a westerly leg of this trek, but worse still to find that it might be more feasible than he had envisaged it. He had suspected that the PLA might have used the *Aldan* River as a quick route north, perhaps for special support troops, such as engineers and headquarters elements. With the considerable river current under them, such units could easily have outpaced the rest of the force to prepare the way, or to catch-up, if they had been among the late starters -- not hard to visualize rear echelon types designing an easier way for themselves. The accelerated first stage of the operations would have brought them close enough to the *Aldan’s* headwaters.

In the first few days the PLA’s support forces trucked, heli-lifted, and barged the whole force north during the annual “spring crush.” That year, the operational troops, in mufti, had replaced the usual mob of Chinese civilian transients: contractors, legitimate merchants and the quasi-legal multitude of “bizness men” with their “bizness” in their suitcases. More people than ever before had been coming since the opening of the new (and only) bridge across the Amur. It had facilitated a major deception operation to get around the federal border troops who could not

be co-opted as easily as their provincial counterparts. Those officials had been open to the usual petty bribery but had *not* been willing to admit foreign combatants *en masse*.

That surge had concealed a wide variety of intrusions. It was not hard to visualize how plausible it was that the western-most inroads to the north could have gotten a corps support command to the *Aldan*. However, he was unable to imagine how they had managed to get it downriver – crossing most of Yakutia – undetected, since Moscow’s reach *did* extend across the entirety of the *Lena-Aldan* basin. Cho had made it clear to him that the enormous Yakutian Republic’s officialdom was not nearly so obliging as the smaller provinces along the coast. Somehow, the PLA must have concocted a deeper cover for those units – if they existed in the first place.

Therefore, he was reasonably certain that there were no PLA supply points West of the *Batyly*, although he still might find some between his crew’s route and that valley. But, why look? Why refine the lie with yet another pointless fact? The very thought made him hear himself confessing, “That’s right, Vasily Yurovich, learned scholar and dear friend that you are.... It’s too dangerous to float down the Aldan to the Lena and out of Russia.” Sounded so damned easy, maybe in his head – that is.

\* \* \*

The crack of the blast was over-loud. It felt too demanding of attention as it snapped against his nearest ear and ricocheted from the boulders of the tight ravine. The aural intrusion was not as obscene as it had been last night. In the long nautical twilight that same clap had an ear splintering quality that could have invited far-ranging scrutiny from every state organ, which could possibly do them harm. What was worse, in Aleksey’s view, the evening tree cutting charge brought down a piece-of-shit trunk and had to be repeated – a sad lesson to be more selective for single log rafts. Kinks that put the useful mid-section awash defeated the whole purpose of dry rafting. The wasted effort got them off to yet another slow start and Aleksey understood how they might well starve while dallying with these avoidable “learning exercises.” After all, they had a limited number of meals to get to them to the next cache on his planned route.

This realization struck him with a flush of newfound respect for the PLA’s preparations. The professional soldier in him re-remembered that in war the simplest things are extremely

difficult. Training, which practiced the easiest, seeming mindless drills repeatedly, was, in fact, the best way to avoid drowning in a swamp of “simple shit” during combat.

“Got to hand it to our predecessors on this trail,” he said to Lev as they waited for Vasily to cut the last few limbs of the fallen tree so they could pull it ashore with pre-attached lines. “This river crossing crap is proving to be much more like shearing a pig than we expected.” The well-known punch line, “Lots of squealing and very little wool,” he left unspoken.

“Is that the royal ‘we’ Czar Krasnaya? I have been wondering from the very beginning how we were going to make-up for all those years of PLA training. It’s a typical conceit of us officers that all the arse-over-elbow fire drilling is just for the troops. From what you’ve told me of Cho’s stories, the PLA officers sucked as much shit, or more than the enlisted folk. Bespeaks the best kind of prep -- hence, our own persistent tendency to trip over our own ponchos. Maybe we’ve been a twee presumptuous to think we could *so easily* follow in the footsteps of our comrades of the ‘Red Tide’. The positive side is that the beaten down Russian masses -- not unlike ourselves at the moment -- do seem, somehow, to emerge upright from the piles of pig-shit the universe repeatedly dumps upon our sorry, unprepared asses. We’ll learn, Aleksey Mikhailovich. If necessary, we’ll wait it out, friend – heads down and following the left foot with the right one. And, then again.”

“Unless we starve first,” said Aleksey and making that impulsive comment worse by adding, “we’ve got to get better at this...”

“Why is that? Surely we’ll fuck-up something up ahead, but this is the last crossing? Is it not?”

“Yes, check that. Disregard all after... ‘starve.’”

“We *are* floating down *not* across?” said a concerned Lev pushing the boundaries of due deference to a fellow professional.

“I said. Got it. Didn’t I?” Aleksey said pushing back across the gulf where senior grade officers reigned on their islands of presumed (and mostly earned) competence.

However, he knew that protocol, which creates such a comfortable space between military men, depended on a larger context of relative order. Like propriety in the larger society, it can disappear quickly in crisis – something, which was just around the corner all the time in their present circumstances. “Order” in their little polity could be fragile indeed.

"I say we attach the outrigger to this beast from shore. See the grass ledge downstream of the rocks?" Lev said acknowledging Aleksey's stand by changing the subject in a voice loud enough to include Vasily this time.

"Nice notch," said Aleksey also speaking inclusively. "Never occurred to me to cram det cord into saw cuts that way. Wonder if the PLA thought to do that?"

They tied, strapped, inflated and waterproofed their gear in silence with one eye on the flood still rushing by their little slough. Everyone acknowledged that it had gone down overnight but it still approximated river-size and the current still looked formidable. It would be their first "free float" traverse and it no longer appeared quite so straightforward a task.

When the raft was ready, Lev hung from an overhanging branch and tested the outrigger ties by trying to push it under. After he had dropped on it, they balanced load, pushed off and hand-over-handed it out, pulling on half submerged shrubbery.

## **RIFTS**

Aleksey rose from a near sitting position over the fire, "Well, that did not go so well. I cannot fucking believe how cold that shit is -- liquid ice to brittle your bones."

"One forgets the beastly pain," Lev said, "only twenty seconds under and it bloody well *aches* all the way through. How many of these crossings did you say the 'rolling red swarm' made?"

"Many tens, but not a hundred," Aleksey said, "it's obvious they could not have trampled their own tails in a rat-fuck like we just executed, and still have made it to Alaska."

"Hey, not so fast," said Lev, "the crossing itself was overly long but uneventful. It's a bit like flying. It's not the flight, but the taking-off and landing that gets one. Who knew that far shore would be so damn dodgy."

"Hey," added Vasily, "more to the point, we are still three live bodies, all gear intact and our powder is dry. The sorry aspect of the whole maggot wrestle is not what we screwed up the transit, but that we didn't need to do it in the first fucking place. Look," he swung his arm back, "the water's gone way down. See that submerged 'bush' we pulled on? It's a little tree now for shit's sake. But, let's not beat each other up over this. We will not be screwing that goat again, anyway."

Lev shot a quizzical glare at Aleksey. Locked in a mutual stare-down, neither spoke.

“What now?” Vasily growled in his not-your-insider-shit-again plaint. He had just raised his extended forefinger to emphasize his frustration when he stopped and cocked an ear back toward the stream.

Before either Aleksey or Lev could ask what he’d heard, Vasily sprung up, spun his back to them in one agile motion, and sprinted upriver toward the near bank, opposite their inauspicious launch.

“Did you hear anything?” Aleksey asked from the far side of the heat-beaming bonfire. He shared with Lev no inclination to follow their friend.

“Could have been a wolf cub.” He took his weapon. “But, it sounded more like a dog crying. I’m not sure. A *bear* cub? Hope the hell it’s not that.”

Lev broke the edgy hush, which had followed his suppositions. “Ok, not to become too girly-feely about this, but you are getting a touch too squirrely about this impending river crossings shit. You should see your face. It’s jolly creepy. So stranger, what have you done with my cerebral, composed old friend?”

“Well,” Aleksey said with a long exhale and a tingle of great relief, “or starters the *Batyly* over there has gone down so far, because this far upstream it’s really more of a creek,” pausing to make a there’s-more-wave of his right hand, “i.e. we are not where you think we are.”

“Lost?”

“No, not lost.”

“Per-haps,” Lev said accentuating, “you had better explain.”

Speaking warily to his suddenly wary friend, Aleksey did so. He recounted in some detail how his translation of the Chinese characters had shifted their course attained by 45° to the east. Without addressing why he did it or what other plan he had devised, he spelled out the nasty consequences of the *Lena* route and the advantages of creating greater remove from the FSB’s most likely search areas. He emphasized that they had not yet seen a single sign of a pursuit on their present line. He also emphasized that the detour had not yet foreclosed the westward option. Although they had passed by the closest water connection to the *Aldan*, the next river to the North was the *Tyry*, also running west and parallel to its southern branch; and while being longer than that first option, their present route would cross it. As he was starting to address Lev’s perplexed look, Vasily returned.

His slouched demeanor was so disconsolate he stole the floor from Aleksey who was shocked that his long dreaded crisis had been so easily upstaged. He flinched. His butt came off his rock and slid into the surrounding mud. “Shit,” he said, ass-wet but still transfixed.

Tilting back toward the river and anguished Vasily rolled his head that way and gnashed out the words, “It’s my dog.”

“Dog?” Lev said in as high a pitch as he had reached so far.

“Yeah,” Vasily said dropping his contrition for a defensive stance, “she has followed me from Beliiya and this is the first stream she can’t seem to cross on her own.”

“So?” Lev scoffed, “someone after her? Who, Stalin? Her wolf cousins?”

“She’ll starve.” Then, responding to the two blank stares, he added, “I’ve been leaving tidbits behind for her...”

“Like goat guts yesterday?” asked Aleksey with a flash of hindsight.

“Uh Huhh and I gotta cross back to get her ...”

Whatever Vasily said after that was drowned-out by the furious clamor of Lev coming unglued, “What’re you... shagging Lenin’s mother too? This is too bleeding much. We’re walking off-course for a bloody week and...”

Vasily counter-interrupted and they reeled off and away, lost in a rising swirl of macho one-up-man-shit. Although, Lev was lashing out more at Aleksey’s confession, Vasily – in ignorance of this “other news” – took increasing umbrage at what seemed like a personal attack. Despite their weight differential, the decibel and testosterone levels pitched upwards. In the back-and-forth blur an ironic flash of insight struck the guilt ridden Aleksey. He could cloak his own iniquity in the guise of peacemaker.

“Gentlemen!” He bellowed at the ongoing fracas in his best command voice, “give me a fucking break. The mutt *can* be an asset.” He lowered his voice as the uproar subsided and added, “She’s obviously low-maintenance and self-reliant to have come this far undetected. She’s a cheap early warning device. Hell, we could probably turn the whole stinking night watch over to her. That shit-faced bear wouldn’t have gotten within 30 meters of her.” Relieved at the becalmed reception of his bluff, he rolled up from the mud, looked at his dirty hand and added, “She’s a bargain for a mere one-half kilo of food per day and a spot around our fire. Besides, no one needs to return for her. The river is going down to creek size soon and she’ll catch-up...”

“Tell him, Aleksey Mikhailovich,” Lev interrupted in his most scathing tone, “why is the stinking flood dribbling down to a piddling creek? Tell Vasily Yurovich the nasty surprise.”

Having attended to the wiping of his muddy butt a few beats too long, Aleksey could not help but appear chagrined as he looked up to meet Vasily’s gaze. “What Lev means... His point is that... we are further east of the *Batyly* than you think we are. He let two seconds tick by in what he presumed was stunned silence and then pressed on. “The symbol you were shown for northwest is actually north and so on....” When Vasily gave an oddly mistimed nod, Aleksey changed gears. “It may be a bit late to be saying so, but the whole Batamay notion is unadulterated bullshit. Too damned dangerous. Crossing any part of the north-south section of the *Batyly* valley would have walked us right under FSB surveillance and inside their easy reach. Who knows how many agents are still looking for us – as we speak – up and down the Aldan and crawling all over...”

He had stopped mid-sentence because the whole character of their quarrel had flipped again. Vasily’s hangdog look had turned into a knowing smile and his forefinger was wagging to signal his turn to speak. “I had suspected you were heading east of the most logical track. Thought you might know something I wasn’t yet party to... If Batamay is ‘bullshit’ – as you say – *where* then? Frosty balling it over the permafrost to Ahh- merr-ee-kahh, are we?”

“Horseshit,” said Aleksey almost spitting, “you need to extract your formerly lucid cranial parts from your posterior sections. Fact is: temps in Chukotska in August vary from eight to 25 degrees during July and August when the PLA crossed.”

“Ahhh the infallible People’s Army again? Spare me. The facts – even with my skull anally tucked – are: Cho lied (or was lied to), and the PLA did not *march*. They were *ferried* to Alaska just as that American Admiral – what’s his name – Murphy so concisely explained.”

“Concise all right,” Aleksey managed to reply despite his shock. “You can say that again. He got a lot of time on the air but it was consistently short on facts, short on logic, and...”

“I am not,” Vasily cut in, “going on any bleeding arctic death march.”

“Those were daytime temps, weren’t they?” asked Lev. “What happens at night? And, what about the footing on permafrost?”

Ignoring Lev, Vasily plowed on. “This whole thing has us walking up a fucking dead end...”

That interruption was itself interrupted by Lev, “One of you wants east and one west. Whose ass is gonna be hanging out there?” he asked, rhetorically swinging his arms wide to imply the expanse of Taiga, tundra and sea.

Aleksey leaned back from the fray and let it roll on. His balm for the quarrel – command of the details – was at the ready, but the pot was still boiling. Eventually, when Vasily’s hyperbole got too far-fetched – insisting it was already too late to change directions – Aleksey seized the opportunity to break it up.

“That’s it. We are professionals. Are we not? We do not fucking *panic*. Listen carefully. We are *not* at ‘some dead end.’ Up ahead, the *Tyry* is still a viable route westward to Batamay. Its navigable section is not far west from where we’d be crossing anyway.” Turning to Lev, he said, “We bypassed the shortest water route west some days back, so backtracking now would mean more exposure and a longer trek overall. But going the other way, toward the *Tyry*’s source -- not far to the east -- is the easiest climb into the *Indigirka* watershed. That’s a downhill walk extending beyond Magadan Oblast. What’s more, we are *not* at some critical decision point. Considering where we are right now, whatever we decide -- east or west -- today’s march still leaves us in the best position. So, we’ve got a full travel day and an overnight to thrash this whole thing out.”

“He’s right,” said Lev sounding relieved, “as long as we don’t have to decide this minute, let’s give it a ‘professional’ overnight brainstorm. Tomorrow morning we’ll see who is chucked from the troika” he smiled wryly.

“Lev’s reference to iconic Russian folklore about sleigh riders throwing someone to the pursuing wolves caused an unforeseen tsunami of trepidation to wash over Aleksey. He went wobbly. His surroundings froze in place as he came unmoored in an airless rift over a gaping pit. The sleigh image had disinterred foul memories. His carefully considered scenarios of trekking alone had become shovels digging him into a deeper well of dread. The other two receded into a faint background as they pattered about. He heard Vasily delivering what must have been a parting shot to his last argument, but was unable to register its meaning. The upsurge of alarm, though, only preceded the crueler dawning of a more tangible awareness that he was nearly out there in the emptiness -- alone. For the first time the realization was being rendered in full. Limitless isolation was no longer merely a ghoulish abstraction but an actualizing prospect. Expecting his inner commotion to galvanize some sort of action only precipitated a more numbing thought. Action hell? He was in no shape to form a sentence.



Later, he remembered that Lev and Vasily had saddled up and meandered up the track, oblivious to his emotional breathlessness. He never recalled emerging from his stupor. He did remember lapsing into routine. Without preamble, he had found himself coiling his share of the drying synthetic line with his boots freshly laced and his rucksack shouldered. Gone from retrievable memory were the details of how he had become march-ready. First thoughts were wondering what material they used to make this 1.5-centimeter line. It was nylon pliable, polypropylene light and stronger than either; but *made of* what?

Hoping this one mental tailspin would purge him of further over-reactions, he fell into march order behind those whom he could only hope to retain somehow as allies. Some 30 meters up ahead, Vasily had been regaling Lev with his own version of the “facts,” when that monologue was cut short by a bunch of knee-high fur streaking by Aleksey. Vasily answered with incautious shouts of “Chili.”

As the long delayed reunion dragged on, Aleksey edged up the trail as if to say, “let’s leave them to it...” And, still shell-shocked by Lev’s earlier bitterness, and his own blank-out, he broached conversation with great care. First, pacing off hundreds of yards and then speaking from behind, he fashioned something as matter-of-fact as possible. “I’d thought the mutt’s name was ‘Beans’.”

Silence.

After an even longer interval, Aleksey risked another tack. “People think China is so damn far from Alaska. They tend to dismiss walking there out of hand.” Still seeing no response, he continued, speaking to Lev’s undulating back, “The northern tip of Manchuria is on the same latitude as the Aleutian Islands, but even military types think it’s a trip to the other side of the stinking moon. How easily they forget that Napoleon marched 400,000 soldiers to and from Moscow, and civilian pioneers convoyed rickety wagons across the steppe to Siberia. Don’t forget the North American pioneers with women, children and furniture. Their Oregon Trail was 3,500 kliks across their steppes and included mountains. Truth is; time was on their side. You can go a long, long way one step at a time, in five-day chunks, if you’ve got four months to do it. Need I remind you, old friend, it’s barely June.”

Seeming to take the bait, Lev grouched back over his shoulder. “Lot’s of time, but it only counts, if there are some bleeding supply points up ahead....” Then, breaking his thought with an abrupt, “Naww, stuff that.” He turned a searching glare on Aleksey, “Why?” he asked, “how the bloody hell could you?”

“Same reason that you-two left me out of your little goat hunt -- for your own good. No, better yet-- for *our* own good. ‘Virtue is what creates the greater good for the greater number...’ so sayeth your very own ‘Jerry’ Bentham, (or words to that effect). And maybe, for the sake of Baba Yaga’s chicken legs. Who knows?”

Then, jumping up another decibel, he added, “Neither of you’d have gone along – at least not without a time consuming knock-down-drag-out. I can hear it now. ‘Too far,’ you’d have said. ‘Alaska? Why not Cape Town? It’s warmer,’ Vasily would have said, or something like that. When I had to make my proposal, we had no time to argue, as you must surely recall, Lev Ivanovich. Do you seriously believe that we’d have gotten out of that silly container with even this half-assed Batamay-plan, if I had suggested a summer-long hike all the way to Alaska?” Aleksey raised his palm out at Lev’s backward glance, “But now, in retrospect, having experienced Cho’s lair, seen the ordnance, used the gear, and handled their dandy little GPS; doesn’t the long way seem a bit more plausible?”

Lev raised a hand, the back of it facing Aleksey and ticked it forward three counts. He led on to a nearby cliff face where they would have to await Vasily to conduct a climb – with a dog, no less. He sat down hard, his head turning to face Aleksey and said, “Ok, grant you well-meaning intent as openers.”

That concession sufficed to get them over the threshold from harangue to seminar. In calm professional tones, Aleksey re-opened his case. The PLA *did* trek, not ride to the Bering Strait and the three of them could replicate the feat. He argued his objections to the Murphy version of the surprise attack on Alaska, and reminded Lev of the evidence of his own eyes seeing the PLA’s passage through the *Ancha* region – evidence the Navy Chief, Admiral Murphy, did not have.

Aleksey had to concede that, logistically, this maritime alternative was not impossible. One could stretch out the round trips of disguised civilian ships over time. One could also preposition materiel, and of course, spread the force out to conceal it. It was even conceivable that covert riverine assets could be pre-positioned on the *Yukon* River and its tributaries as supply caches. He described how such a big operation could use GPS and the same PLA database manipulations to integrate the various phases over the months between late April and early

September. However, he stressed that the Admiral's emphasis on the purely maritime aspect of the approach phase made it all sound easier and less costly than it would have been. That interpretation glossed over the movement of a 100,000-man force from the Chinese border to the *Aldan-Lena* port complex in the vicinity of Yakutsk. Even with Moscow's collusion, that exercise would have been extremely difficult to conceal from the NSA. In particular, this was the case because those extensive river basins are far too swampy to traverse on foot.

"Ask yourself, Lev," he said, "with river boats inherently more visible to satellite surveillance, how does one deploy 20,000 five-man boat sorties, or 10,000 ten-man boats, or only 5,000 twenty-man boats. At what point do too many small boats trigger a satellite surveillance algorithm, or when do US spooks begin to see typical platoon sized riverine troop deployments reminiscent of the Mekong River in 1968?"

"I'll concede, a twenty-man boat sounds hard to hide, to me. Nevertheless -- staged over time and properly disguised as civilian traffic -- it's not any less feasible than tramping the PLA across the Taiga."

"Not impossible, perhaps," Aleksey made a "time-out" hand signal, "*however*, my main point is that such a feat would be every bit as *complex*, labor *intensive*, *expensive* and time *consuming* as the land trek, which Lt. Cho described to me. So, in that case, how plausible is it that the federal Russian state would buy into both great risk and enormous expense? It's not surprising that a Peking-Moscow connivance would look more plausible to Americans like Murphy than to us. You and I know that nation states have no friends. Nations have only interests. Tell me Lev Ivanovich; do you see a solid convergence of interests here?"

Treating the latter question as rhetorical, Aleksey slogged onward, "The Murphy hypothesis is so seductive because of the greater access to arctic passages. It made the idea look newer, faster and cheaper than it actually could be. From here, it's not hard to understand the media frenzy that sold the theory to a gullible and ill-informed public overseas. They surmised, 'Bad Russians conspire with evil Chinese to do something wrong just because they're both so inherently naughty.' This was especially so because Murphy's story included a super secret nuclear boogey-man."

He reminded Lev that the alleged objective of the whole invasion was supposed to have been the destruction of the anti-ballistic missile installations at Ft. Greely near Fairbanks -- touted as a "shared" ambition of *both* China and Russia. At this point, Aleksey had become emphatic and

appealed to Lev's more sophisticated understanding of strategic nuclear weapons doctrines. He contended that it should be obvious to anyone -- but frightened amateurs -- how little incentive Russia had to destroy a few easily replaced US ballistic defense missiles. Neither Russia -- nor China for that matter -- could have justified the risks of war with the premier military power on the planet for such a puny short-term goal. Lev nodded, grasping immediately how easily the US could have restored the installations -- silos as well as missiles. He seemed to agree, as well, that Russia had no great fear of the anti-ballistic missile defenses in general. He knew that the adversaries had preserved the strategic nuclear balance as far back as the Clinton Administration when the Pentagon had agreed to deploy the current, less effective ABM system -- in small numbers. Both knew it was not "brain surgery" to know that effective attack missiles cost much less than the ballistic defense missiles needed to shoot-down the incoming warheads. So, it had been relatively easy for Russia to deploy enough offensive systems -- some time ago -- to overwhelm the Alaskan based ABM. Lev also shrugged knowingly at the recollection of the infamous ABM Treaty's demise. Its quiet abrogation had not been a Russian surrender but a signal of the achievement of a long sought Russo-American equilibrium.

"Equilibrium indeed," said Lev, "postponement of a war so devastating we would all be lucky afterwards to be swinging sabers from horseback."

Nodding sidelong at Lev's contribution, Aleksey dropped two decibels and said, "So the recent Sino-American War was *not* about missiles in Alaska -- as Murphy insists -- it was about the annexation of Taiwan, as I've explained many times. Taiwan was something the People's Republic cared deeply about, while Alaska's BDM system was something Russia cared very little about." He held both open hands shoulder wide and widened his eyes to conclude. "Moscow could never have supported any such maritime operation, despite all the strong diplomatic ties. And therefore, the Murphy version of events is pure unadulterated dog shit."

"But Taiwan caved, Aleksey Mikhailovich, no shots were fired. Nobody but you seems quite so certain the takeover was coerced..." Lev said, as Aleksey interrupted again.

"Don't you think the timing was a bit odd? Come on, it was in the autumn, not long after the early-spring seizure of the Peng Hu Islands by the PLA Navy (a very 'coercive' measure), which itself followed the recent takeover of the inshore Kinmen Island group. It was in that context, my friend, and *within days* of the news of fighting around Fairbanks, that the so-called 'voluntary' accession of the ROC into the greater People's Republic occurred. 'Willing' my ass. Does not

sound spontaneous to me. It was a capitulation in the face of the inevitable. Sounds much more like a near perfect analog to the 1950's PLA intervention in Korea.”

“Korea? How so?” Said Lev looking quite curious now.

“Korea, you recall, when China attacked the pursuing US forces across the *Yalu* -- not to rescue the little ‘Korean brethren’ nor to protect their borders -- but actually to cover the PLA’s lightning seizure of Tibet. It’s astonishing in retrospect, but the entire world focused exclusively on the Sino-American fight and studiously ignored the violent subjugation of a whole sovereign nation nearby. That violation of all international norms at the time, upending a hard-won territorial status quo, was the true PRC objective in October 1950. The intervention across the *Yalu* was simply a strategic distraction operation – an end-run to hide the swallowing of Tibet. It was the mirror image of the PLA’s distraction operation in Alaska – in that case, to conceal the fall of the ROC on Taiwan.”

“Excellent,” said Lev, beaming, “don’t forget you are talking to an historian, educated in the Soviet system. The primacy of the ‘Tibetan annexation’ in China’s Korean intervention is practically the ‘standard’ historical interpretation at our post-grad level. I’m surprised a linguist – even one with a PhD – would have picked up on esoteric historical minutia like that. You have told me before that Taiwan was China’s categorical imperative for invading Alaska, but I’ve not heard the Korean analogy articulated in that context. Well done. Much more convincing to an historian.”

“Thanks, I’m guessing you already knew most of that.”

“Yeah, but like most of the educated world, I hadn’t made the connection. Seems obvious now, but only in retrospect.”

“Did not occur to me either – right away,” said Aleksey. “It’s something that popped into my head during some 0400 hours wakefulness. You know what they say, ‘lies don’t visit at ohh- dark-hundred.’ I had planned to broach it with you in one of our late night container soirees but this shit-storm broke over us before I could.”

“Interesting isn’t it,” Lev said, continuing his previous train of thought, “how one can recite chapter and verse, if asked about the Sino-American war, and provide an fluent outline, at another time, of China’s role in the Korean War, but somehow never properly associate the two events – despite their striking similarity.” Lev pause there and then added, “It is also very interesting that *no* Americans, not even academicians, have explained the stunning coincidence of Korea-Tibet and Alaska-Taiwan – to this day, mind you.”

“Glad you agree. By the way, speaking of the unheralded obvious, the well-reported mobilization of the PLA, PLA Navy and PLA Air Force during the war, which was ballyhooed then as a defensive mobilization, was, in fact, merely the discovery of the clandestine preparations for the amphibious assault on Taiwan. They had been underway for some time, awaiting the distraction of the US Navy by the advance on Alaska. Only the unexpected surrender of Taipei’s forces prevented the island from succumbing to an amphibious juggernaut.” Aleksey made a stop motion with both hands, “I know, I know, we have agreed to disagree on that point. You have made quite cogent arguments doubting the feasibility of a cross-straits invasion by the PLA’s Navy. However, I still maintain that only the US Navy could have stopped it. Its absence, while all wrapped up in the Alaskan melee, would have assured a PLAN victory. I’ll bet there are some old-fart, four-stars retired somewhere in the greater PRC who resent the hell out of the chicken-shits in Taipei for their precipitous surrender.”

“And I’ll bet there will be American chief’s of staff who will someday regret their propensity to let every US military service join full-bore in every little fracas remotely resembling a war,” said Lev who believed the US Navy should have been on-scene near Taiwan -- needed or not. “The Alaskan fight was a ground war – nothing more to it, mate.”

Aleksey heard Vasily and his new friend approaching, and not wanting to be seen changing the subject because of their arrival, he continued with a brief sidelong glance at Vasily to include him. “Whether or not it was objectively feasible, it’s plausible to believe that the PLA and the whole Central Committee believed it so. It was also not a one-off voodoo conjuring. This operation was a very straightforward strategic turning movement. The so-called ‘invasion of Alaska’ was the *secondary* attack – a diversion. Like any secondary attack, it could suffer defeat – as it did -- and not impede the main attack. AKCAM needed only to preoccupy the America’s Navy, which it also did -- in the process of being squashed by the full might of *all* services of the US military machine. Was it worth it? Probably, since that main attack’s objective – Taiwan – was also China’s national imperative.”

“Bullshit, I go with ‘Occam’s razor,’” said Vasily. “the simplest explanation is the most likely to be true. Arctic sea-lanes opened up for the first time in recorded history. Two great powers with common interests in a common enemy’s newfound vulnerability joined in a temporary alliance to reduce a common military threat. That’s it – the whole story.”

“Now, we need to get up this shitty little cliff,” Vasily continued without taking a breath. “We could all starve by yammering hypotheticals all day.”

Without another word all three saddled-up and Aleksey held out a length of netting he had planned to use for wild fruit they found on the trail, saying simply, “Chili’s hoist.”

“Oh no,” said Vasily, “this is the wrong time for her to be dangling five meters in mid-air. We’ll hump the long way around this thing and catch-up to you up ahead.” With that, he turned full stride uphill parallel to the face -- tisking at the dog to follow.

His abrupt departure from the brusque encounter left the other two surprised and amused as they re-focused on the climb. Swinging the grappling hook for a toss to the crest, Lev said, “Sure seems to have all the company he needs.” A wave of relaxed warmth sloshed over Aleksey. That aside was a first glimmer of renewed hope. The dark foreboding of abandonment receded a jot.

At the ridge-top, re-saddled, with third man and dog nowhere in sight yet, Aleksey unburdened himself. “What do you think is going on with Vasily Yurovich? I don’t understand this 180-degree flip. For months he’s listened to me go on about the PLA operation and not said a word to the contrary. I’m having trouble imagining what he believes I’ve been up to. Did he somehow think I made up all the shit about Cho and his story?”

“No, I think he may believe Cho deceived you and that you’re obsessed.”

“Obsessed? That’s a bit strong.”

“Yes, Aleksey Mikhailovich,” Lev said, “he probably thinks you’re a die-hard contrarian who’s a bit over enamored of his revisionist views. It was probably such a view of the war that ousted you from your lil’ *nefomaly* in the military intelligentsia. He knows that that elite coterie of insiders was important to you. It is not unreasonable to see you as a bit biased.”

“Dog shit.”

“Dog shit or not. It’s conceivable that he believes it to be true. And what is more, I believe he may not have brought up his skepticism earlier because he’s very much a pragmatist in these matters. As long as your proposals added up to a workable plan; as long as Cho’s gear was adequate; as long as the route mapped out and so on... You get it, right? Vasily probably saw no need to disabuse you of beliefs as long as we made it out of exile. Remember, his conflict with the authorities had nothing to do with the war – directly. His quarrel, allegedly, was only about free exchange of unclassified scientific data. I think it’s possible that Vasily gave not a rat turd about

any interpretation – revisionist or otherwise – of Russia’s recent military misadventures. However, when some historical viewpoint had an impact on this lil’ hike – such as crossing the bloody permafrost above the Arctic Circle – that could have been too much. It didn’t help that he was hearing notions that were completely out of tune with everything he’d heard before he met us. So apparently, he’s willing to risk trekking out here alone to take the shorter road requiring less faith in a totally new set of facts, which –come to think of it -- he has *not* the wherewithal to verify. Furthermore, even though your belief in Cho’s tale makes more sense to me, I’m still not sure that Vasily Yurovich’s conclusions are all that mistaken.”

Clinging to the greasy rope of hope in hand, Aleksey mumbled a non sequitur and added, “I don’t want to put my dick in someone’s soup, but he’s not really gonna be all that alone. Is he? He’s hiked alone for years through the Urals with that very dog, and the mutt’s got advantages over either of us in a number of ways.”

“True enough, as I’ve said, but not really conclusive. Is it?” Lev said, looking dubious as he turned to pick up the trek in the general direction of Vasily and his dog.

Once the threesome was reunited, Lev went solo with a running monologue. He recognized he was the swing vote, and was not about to let things lie. It became clear that he was leery of the FSB to the west and tended to see merit in the relative safety of Aleksey’s long-march northeastward. Unlike Vasily, he was more convinced that there were caches up ahead. He had seen the several other canisters looted by Aleksey, which for Vasily were only hearsay. However, Lev also expressed genuine reservations about both options that revealed a heartfelt struggle to keep the group together by finding a compelling, objective reason to choose a course of action viable for all. For him the basic logistics were a wash. The considerable lucre assembled from the PLA’s stocks could substitute – in Batamay – for the food and gear that the caches would provide on the other route. That seemed to leave the question of security and its corollary, safety, as the decisive issue. Could they survive undetected in the urban environment of Batamay and then get aboard a ship on a sea passage? Or, could they survive the ever wider crossings of freezing waters between the Tyry and Alaska, which he mentioned numerous times, did include 85 kilometers of open sea.

Vasily had an advantage in arguing the merits of escaping via Batamay. On his way into exile, his jailers had conveyed him and a dozen others by riverboat through that port. It had been a leisurely river cruise for the guard detachment. They had traded, drunk vodka, and whored at



every possible stop between *Akademgorodok* and *Beliya*. The prisoners had been kept in miserable confinement, but they saw more of the underside of the riverine route than other exiles who the center shipped like cattle to the RFE by rail and ocean steamer.

He expressed his conviction that tramp steamer skippers in *Batamay* were so desperate for cheap labor that they would trade passage for slave labor. They would even risk taking acknowledged escapees and undocumented emigrants -- knowing they could exploit them with impunity. Vasily explained how he had witnessed a ship's crew freeing a nearby group of convicts and barging them out to a moving containership. He contended that with money, food reserves, a plethora of gear and superior knowledge -- of geography, electronics and engineering -- they could overcome the exploitive machinations of any ship's captain. What would have been deprivation for others could become a 'fair trade' for them: money and skilled labor in exchange for covert transport out of Russia.

Lev's request for details about their safety in the event of a long wait for the right tramp received confident but suppositional answers, which were well examined contingencies, but not so redolent of actual experience. Vasily, for instance, knew less of the forger's craft than Aleksey had learned in an intelligence sub-course at the staff college. That exchange encouraged Aleksey to infer that Lev might be leaning more toward accepting the *known* difficulties of the long trek over the quicker route west filled with a multitude of *unknowns*.

As their climb topped the ridge heading downhill into the Tyry River valley, Aleksey sensed that they had gotten careless. He realized that no one knew precisely where they were along this crest and whether cover appropriate to the slackening rain and rising ceiling lay ahead. Fortunately, the general course was simple enough. It went from one east-west river due north to another parallel river over this one wide ridge. Uncharacteristically, he had chosen to let it slide. This one time all of them presumed the trail chatter to be more important than the strict march discipline -- maintained heretofore. Life or death. The dismal dichotomy had never loomed so starkly, so persistently for so long and yet had never seemed so amenable to verbal persuasion. Their previous experiences sideswiping obliteration had been in flashes of extremity cut between weeks of coagulating tedium.

He had planned to let the characterization of the *Batamay* option stand as Vasily left it -- tottering. However, Lev spotted an unexpected hazard in this option and clamped down on it like badger on a rabbit. He posed the likelihood that the expiration date on Aleksey's ingenious ruses

might have passed by this time and that could make the FSB more focused. He queried the possibilities: What if the forensic lab results had excluded Aleksey from the dead around the dacha? What if the missing boat had turned up sans fugitives? What if forensics uncovered from Cho's cave revealed how well equipped the trio were? What if the security organs had scoured and monitored the *Batyly* (South of the *Ancha*), the *Maya* and *Aldan* until they found them free of escapees? If any replies were "yes," then that would allow them to put more agents in fewer places. Their pursuers could be concentrating on less likely avenues to the *Aldan*, like the western *Tyry* and on urban centers like the Yakutsk-Batamay port complex.

Vasily missed nary a beat assuaging Lev's concerns with a lucid exposition of the miasma of corruption the FSB would have to penetrate to get any traction with a search operation in the anarchic chaos of that city – surging in size by thousands per month – where money was king. He pointed out that the presence of ten thousands of foreigners driven by greed and not intimidated by officialdom made the situation for fugitives safer still.

He capped his description of this refuge-in-unruliness with a first hand story about how his own jailers had narrowly averted their own ruin. They had herded their charges into a storage container, which they had presumed to have "legally" expropriated for the "needs of the state." Hours later, upon their drunken return, they had barely been able to scrape together enough money and concoct adequate promises of future "services" to ransom back their prisoners who had been held hostage by a well-armed gang that the local authorities had refused to constrain.

Lev dropped back five meters and fell in-step with the taciturn Aleksey -- struggling to appear less desperate than he was, "What say you then, Aleksey Mikhailovich?"

Keeping his delivery as even keeled as possible, Aleksey said, "Depends on how stupid you think the FSB can be. We must be careful about presuming they have done enough due diligence across this wide-open Taiga to be able to concentrate resources, and at the same time, also presume they cannot find their own asses on home turf like the Yakutsk vicinity. Over-estimation of an enemy has its own downsides. But, your points have merit, given time, the FSB will eventually move into a more set piece defensive mode, but when? I believe the feckless spies will take the easy road and do first what they do best. That means blanketing cities. It's their great strength. They have always been adroit at closing egress – be it from a building, a city or a country. I am convinced there is a plausible and imminent danger that the FSB are waiting for us in Batamay. Admittedly, they may be just as apprehensive about Okhotsk, but they *can* cover

both. Maybe I take six KIA more seriously than they do. Guilt perhaps. They could be coasting and letting the case agents stay busy catching the mice. Conceivably so, but I fear it's not. Cities are where we're in danger of underestimating them."

Despite Lev's none too subtle grimaces at the imponderables of doing an "urban hustle," he attempted to remain evenhanded. Refusing to let their great debate drift, he re-opened the discussion with and insistence that Aleksey revisit crossings. It was clear that Lev's qualms were undiminished about freezing, fast moving water and open seas.

Citing his sailing experience, Aleksey began his answer cautiously by admitting that any passage in a PLA rubber boat at sea -- exposed to thousands of miles of fetch -- could become an odious ordeal. As bad and as prolonged as it sometimes could be, he reminded his listeners that it was seldom fatal. Even the US military had admitted that at least 90% of the 90,000 PLA in Alaska came, intact, by inflatable craft. Aleksey emphasized those crossings had been accomplished by troops under the pressure of a deadline, something they themselves would not face. Unlike the PLA, they would be able to await a favorable weather window. He noted that the American press had had a field day filming the remains of the PLA's rubber vessels and bemoaning the unexpected sophistication of the gear salvaged from the wreckages. Pursuant to the point, he added something that his skeptical listeners had not yet heard. Despite being a stay-behind excluded from the PLA's sea passage, Cho had trained with the boats. In recounting anecdotes, he had noted how surprised he had been that the boats' forward motion did not depend exclusively on rowing. To him it was unlike the People's Army to provide its "grunts" with so much mechanical advantage. The boats apparently have not only sails but also inboard propulsion powered by fuel cells. "Lavish," he had said, "and, strange indeed."

Seeing Lev's questioning look, Aleksey preemptively explained his unique access to US television with mock seriousness. "Yes, I *did* have sat TV through the first half of the War, before the RFE went 'spectrum dark.' And *no*, I did not invite my dear fellow exiles to watch...." he smirked. "Respectable, hard-working class dachas cannot abide lay-a-bouts watching hour upon hour of 'Bay Watch' re-runs. Not a good idea for you two to have your heads stick up above the masses in that little *obschina* of Beliya. The ruthless scythe of egalitarianism might have deprived me of porters for this little jaunt."

Conceding a restrained grin, Vasily said, "Yeah...the truth will out."

"No, seriously, even if we rowed the whole way, the key is the 'weather window.' The GPS gizmo has an excellent weather band that could save our asses out there. With decade of weather history, detailed climate data, and ocean current charts, we could pick the most favorable course and start time to improve the odds of avoiding a pissy outcome. For example, by using it, we might find that the fall south-westerlies were too strong and coming in sooner – as has occasionally been the case since arctic climate change kicked in. Who knows? In that case we could even decide to go to Wrangle Island instead. There, we could hook a ride on one of those American eco-tourist ships that have flourished since the US seized that worthless rock in retaliation for our supposed part in the war."

"Then you expect us to believe," said Vasily, "that the PRC will still be sat-casting such weather minutiae globally. It's esoteric, beneficial as hell for some narrow purposes like ours, but useless to the public at large. That shit is only for local transmission to fishermen."

"Not so, at all," said Aleksey, "as a security measure, these weather broadcasts were deliberately started long before any PLA operations began, specifically so the data would *not* be associated with anything military. They might change the frequency, but stopping it right after the war might have alerted military experts everywhere to the *other* operational usages of civilian satellite transmissions. You do recall that the PRC's real-time, high-res sat mapping and GPS notational technology – like this data – was hidden in plain sight. It's available to the whole world's population – very damn few of whom would ever use photo maps of obscure hinterlands like the Magadan Oblast, which are still snapped weekly in the same great detail as downtown Shanghai." Having nailed down another plank of credibility, Aleksey finished the ocean crossing briefing with logistical details such as the listing the contents of the special boat caches and how they would locate one.

Next, he moved on to the matter of big rivers. Again, after admitting the undeniable difficulty of such formidable crossings as the lower Kolyma River, he recounted Cho's description of the riverine engineering work done concurrently with the installation of the supply caches. He had related how his "cache diggers" had often stopped along rivers in their "contractor" helicopters to pick up mud-covered "contract hydrologists" who were ostensibly pricing estimates for Sino-Russian dam projects. In fact, these engineers were rigging ingenious underwater "cables" made of a new, strong, limited stretch, ultra-light filament that made traversing strong currents much safer. They designed the system to enable the PLA crews to hook in with the grappling hook end

of their combination tools and thereby control their transit. The cables were laid at 45° with the flow, which resisted the current just enough to bring the crews to a point no further downstream than the width of the river. He went on to detail how the cable material would stretch only a predetermined percentage of its length to allow the arresting lines to reach nearer the surface as boat crews pulling on them moved over greater depths. The innovative feature of the cable was that the stretched length would recoil to its original dimension and settle back into the river mud – leaving it untouched by the winter ice. Hence, the clever devils could use a fall installation the following spring. Happily, Aleksey noted this likewise made the cabling available to them. Furthermore, they highlighted the near shore locations in the ever-versatile GPS handset. Better yet, the cabling would only be necessary if they chose the more northerly route nearer to the river's mouths. Along a route nearer the rivers' sources, the widest channels would be minimally hazardous, 200 to 300 meter transits, which did not need the cabling. The real problem with these narrower braided rivers was crossing the wider riverbed with its numerous winding channels -- risking more exposure to the cold and FSB surveillance. It was counter-intuitive, but the higher altitude streams were just as elaborately braided as the wider expanses in the flatter terrain to the north.

“Ok, ok,” said Lev circling an extended forefinger overhead, “looks like Vasily's found a spot for our 'take-ten' for this hour. We also need to pause the 'tutorials' for a map check. I'm getting itchy about where exactly we are headed. We'll belay the seminar long enough to pick a far-shore site for the fire. With all the hurry-scurry back there I never got dry...”

“You've been *dry*? Anytime recently?” said Aleksey with a grin. “I've forgotten what that feels like.”

“I stand corrected, ok. I have yet to get slosh-free. I long to return to the default state of merely clammy. And as I about to say, I'm bloody bone weary of being soggy cold. So, let's squat...quietly,” Lev said raising his voice to include the already seated Vasily.

Moments later, never lifting his eyes from his own tiny screen Lev launched an at-large query to his similarly fixated friends, “How often did we estimate these sat maps had been updating since the war?”

“I saw five boats still at the Beliiya post-dock a week after everyone knew the number had dropped to three” said Aleksey.

“But, then on day-one of this flea circus,” added Vasily, “I saw aunty Li Li’s fish traps on-screen only three days after I had watched her set them up.”

“So, the best we can say is that right now what I’m seeing on-screen is *not older* than a week but, of course, it could also have been uploaded a nano-second before I opened the app...”

“Why’s it relevant?” asked Vasily.

“Not sure. Take a look on your own instrument at the 200-meter scale. Go about two knuckles upstream from those two teardrop shaped islands in tandem. It’s midstream on that big north-south kink in the *Tyry*. Could that be a helo rotor blurred across the heel of that boot shaped cove? It’s conceivable there’s a fuselage under the circular-looking-smear, something we cannot make out because the pines underneath are so dark.”

“Fab-fucking marvelous,” added Vasily, “we won’t even know whether we should be shitting our pants or not.”

“That’s not all,” said Aleksey, “there’s two figures on some floating object midstream about half a klik up from that.”

“I see it,” said Lev chiming in, “so, if the blur is a chopper, he could not have missed the boat, raft, whatever in plain view.”

“Just a sec...” said Aleksey, “I see it now. It *is* a boat – overloaded with boxes, bundles, and crap. Also, possible there’s only one guy plus a tall sack-of-shit sitting on end. Who knows? Either way, it’s entirely plausible that we’re seeing good news. I mean, ‘good news’ if the chopper’s an FSB observation bird and he’s confirmed the sighting of a couple of ‘innocents’ – trappers maybe. Better yet, if he also managed a brief chat, in which the ‘trappers’ verified that no one is on the river upstream as far their home base, wherever that is. A scenario along those lines might indicate that the FSB could’ve checked off this section of the river, and won’t be back.”

“Or then again,” said Vasily, “maybe it’s an airborne wolf-counting research team.”

“Yeah, or some kind of bad news we can’t ignore,” said Lev, “if these hypothetical ‘trappers’ didn’t feel so innocent, they could have reflexively dodged ashore when they heard the helo, thinking they were dodging the taxman. So, if the chopper crew never did confirm an innocent I.D... another chopper will be in our future. What’s more, they could show up with ground-pounders on board.”

“Yes, ok, got the point,” said Aleksey. “worst case has the upper hand here. I say we camp further back off the river, in this pine stand against this cliff,” He said pointing carefully at his screen with the tip of his knife.”

“Roger, that will work.”

“Check.”

Aleksey often thought afterwards that there must have been a lot more to say about the impending split up. However, any need to say more disappeared in a most unexpected way. By pure chance, they had blundered into a very busy spot, considering they were traversing one of the most uninhabited places on the planet. In addition to a possible chopper and an actual boat, they came upon an aviation wreck halfway to the campsite. It did not take long, after the surprise wore off, to ascertain that three things were undeniable. It was Chinese. It was not piloted. In addition, it carried PLA supplies. The payload was a cylindrical miniature of the containers they had found in the other caches. The trio picked through familiar compartments and found the usual spares from socks to C4. More noteworthy was the food they found aplenty. It was the dregs of the PLA troopers' preferences, (a distaste the threesome had begun to share), but there was enough to replace what they had eaten since Beliiya. The find gave them added flexibility. They would no longer have to keep the 35 klik per day pace to make the next cache line.

However, their happenstance with the supply drone was to become more meaningful than just the additional food. First, Lev was convinced that it was a cruise missile, because some of its surviving features closely resembled captured US missiles that he had inspected years ago at the War College. He had also concluded from a hasty airframe analysis that they were in the presence of a controlled crash-landing, not a wreck. Secondly, Aleksey was pleased to hear his own conclusion about the “wreckage” confirmed. It was one of those “air delivered” emergency supply missions that Cho had mentioned in passing. At the time, it had not seemed relevant enough to his own purposes to ask for details, but now it all made sense. The occasional missile sortie was covert enough and could carry around 700 kilos. So, it could supply multiple crews per mission and had a good chance of avoiding detection, if the PLA restricted the number of flights.

Thirdly and most important, the encounter at these map coordinates cleared up the mystery of why Chinese traffic accident characters were scattered at random across one of the sat map displays. The fact that one of these symbols covered their current location showed that the symbols marked those emergency missions and that meant that they now possessed the precise

locations of the PLA's emergency supply missions, which happily splattered across small scale map displays all the way to the Bering Strait.

Later, Aleksey realized that his revelation about the map markings had a more profound impact on Lev than he had expected. Vasily's doubt about the existence of PLA caches beyond the *Tyry* had planted deeper reservations in Lev's mind than he had displayed in the debate, and now those misgivings had swiftly evaporated. After the missile find, the fateful "wither-to" debate slumped unnoticed into the trailside mud. Quietly – almost mysteriously – choices congealed.

No one explicitly announced a decision. However, Aleksey was sure he knew how it had turned out. His panic induced dread of walking the Taiga alone steadily drained from his over active amygdala. He noticed it. He hoped, though, that that feeling, itself, was *not* some sort of atavistic survival mechanism, which created overly optimistic mental mirages. Gradually he felt freedom from unceasing pulses of anxiety, not unlike returning to a warm woman with time on your hands. Soon, that sensation let his mind wander autonomously into some tranquil nooks of times lost.

As Aleksey drifted away an old image revived. He saw himself in a familiar paneled library conducting a broad overview of a book proposal. Across a thick oak table, as he pictured it, the forum would become intrigued by this amateur's fresh take on military history. They would hear a revisionist argument but not an extreme one. His audience would not encounter any flurry of new sources and facts. No need to experience tedious suspension of disbelief and entertain early stage disillusionment. Not so his conclusions.

He wanted to make the case that the war in Alaska was not the result of some one-off trickery, but a classic harbinger of change in the nature of war. It had been merely a characteristic early engagement between a sole superpower and an innovative aspirant. Challenges from second tier great powers had recurred often enough in military history that the premise would hardly shock his well-informed listeners. He could contend -- without too much fear of contradiction -- that some key small wars had become historical markers. Some portended great change.

He hoped to say, "One need only cite the recurrences: Philip's civil wars against the Greeks, presaging Alexander's unseating of Darius; Hannibal's early Iberian campaigns, preceding the twelve year reign of terror he inflicted on Rome;" Aleksey planned to elaborate his favorite example, "The American colonist's nation-at-arms defeat of the British Empire's aristocrats with up-



from-the-ranks officers, which anticipated revolutionary France's *'leveé en masse,'* enabling the subsequent Napoleonic conquests."

It would surprise no one, if he were to retrace the evolution of the nature of warfare as it intertwined with the rise and fall of history's military superpowers. However, he expected most publishers – even the military specialists – to be a bit taken aback by how often newly risen superpowers had suffered serious reverses at the hands of upstart innovators. This would appear novel only because most of these defeats – though well known to military men – had not unseated the top dogs, and most people had typically seen them as tangential. He would explain that these setbacks were hardly experienced so lightly in their time. While seldom fatal, these debacles – frequently occurring in the first half dozen decade's of a superpower's ascendancy – were, in the main, traumatic. Furthermore, as he hoped to demonstrate in his monograph, more often than not these surprises had signaled change in the nature of war itself.

He saw himself conceding how difficult it might be to make the causal connections between the initial combat innovations and the ensuing widespread adoption of change. The time lines could be long indeed. However, he could express confidence that the weight of evidence was there. The phenomenon recurred with such uncanny regularity that it would prove persuasive. However, in order to disarm the understandable skepticism, which one ought to expect from such prestigious listeners, he would also have to say, "We do know full well that correlation is *not* causation, but there is great consistency in the process. After superpowers arise, an historical mechanism slowly engages to cause the next great change. This mechanism lends rigor to the pile of correlations. The dialectic here is an adversarial struggle between the newly arrived superpower and its unreconciled rival (or rivals) amongst the great power peer group. He would call it 'plausible determinism'."

Initially, of course, the aspirants for the pinnacle sought ways they already knew to reach the top. However, those in the ranks of the recently defeated (or, those who had judged their nations unfit in the first place) soon discovered that the advantages of superpower status are self-reinforcing...

Aleksey smiled at his own drifting reverie and seized the instant to glance around. He had missed nothing. Lev was still contesting Vasily's objections to Lev's assertions about the "alleged crash." Aleksey allowed the steady jounce of a downhill stride to lull him back into his power-lunch.

"A superpower," he rehearsed to himself, "would necessarily use its new-found power and consequent surplus of wealth to create ever greater military might – focusing predictably on those very capabilities, which had given it the wherewithal to succeed in the first place. So much so that competitors soon recognized the futility of the contest. Nowadays they face challenges against the US just as hopeless as any late 18<sup>th</sup> Century challenge to the British Navy or a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.E toe-to-toe clash with Roman legions. One might as well have sought to outspend the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish Empire as to aspire to overtopping the US by conventional blitzkrieg and mechanized warfare."

"However," he thought smiling at the next thought, "that very futility was the key to the historical mechanism. That thwarting of challengers was actually the driving force that gave great power rivals every *incentive* to innovate. It is this powerfully driven urge to innovate that has caused upstarts to find ways to change how victories can be achieved on great power battlefields. They have, in fact, found ways that don't necessarily seek to overpower the dominant military, but often devise means to make the sources of the superpower's strength *irrelevant* to their form of combat.

If the new techniques were successful, *and* the sole superpower failed to respond with more relevant countermeasures, then the effective innovations could be scaled up to major engagements threatening the hegemon's standing – Alexander's defeat of Darius at Arbela; Hannibal' slaughter of the Roman army at Cannae; England's decimation of the Spanish Armada; Napoleon's rout of Austrian forces at Rivoli, and Germany's introduction of Blitzkrieg before Dunkirk, which underpins conventional warfare to this day. These upstart innovations have amounted to a built-in brake on unconstrained dominion by any single military for over two millennia. The process is somewhat counter-intuitive, but a sole superpower's exercise of its own power *necessarily* generates the change that will eventually lead to military reverses. He might consider crediting Paul Kennedy's imperial overstretch argument at this juncture.

He would want to particularize, here, with examples, but knew he had buried his lead. Instead, he would have to get to the point about his own special knowledge in this arena: upstart China's employment of a strategic innovation against the US homeland. With ease, the Chinese had blown a sprocket from the tank of American supremacy. The US lack of reaction (denial) showed that they are chasing mice unaware that both treads are in jeopardy. America might fight its next war with a great power like a herd of turtles in a buffalo stampede.

That assertion, he imagined, would require a more detailed explanation of the mechanism's other moving parts. "First," he thought, "significant threats unveiled in small wars went largely unheeded because of willful ignorance. Arrogance blinded superpowers and caused excessive attachment to the military methods and devices, which had originally delivered them to the peak.

Second, changes in the nature of warfare were so frequently ignored because challengers developed them at a very low profile. They scaled down transformations and cautiously tested the new methods in tiny, far away conflicts. Some were brief, almost secret. They hid others in plain sight and portrayed them as regrettable necessities. Hannibal's early clashes on the Iberian Peninsula, before crossing the Alps, honed his war machine. However, at the time, the activity was seen by the Mediterranean world as merely colonial foot stamping -- simply his means of finding solace for Carthage's loss of the First Punic War. In another case presaging WWI, the 1905 Russo-Japanese War rehearsed a vast new assembly of stupendous military might. However, it was so studiously ignored that not only the British superpower, at the time, but neither of the participants appreciated what far-reaching consequences..."

Abruptly, Aleksey's cerebellum took over. It yanked his attention from his pleasant waltz of reminiscence, and splashed him into a maelstrom of synapses bristling with emergency nodes awakening his frontal cortex. It was all assholes and elbows out there. Lev and Vasily were scrambling for cover. Aleksey's ears told him why and he sprang to it as the glow of his favorite reverie quenched. Despite the hooves of crisis trampling his brain, he retained tiny blips of yearning for that elegant boardroom as if it might be his last visit there.

The harsh buzz was from an old prop driven, remotely piloted vehicle. Heads snapping in many directions indicated that none of them had yet spotted the airframe. As the distinctive chain-sawing came in low and all too near, Lev signed his sighting of it. He jabbed three fingers, extended and joined, at eye level and jerked that hand left to right pointing slightly down. Once again, they were looking from above on one of their pursuer's aircraft. It must have passed behind the treetops beneath the military crest, only visible through narrow openings for a few seconds, because neither Aleksey nor Vasily ever saw it.

Only after the widening doppler beats signaled the RPV's retreat upstream did the trio bunch together from their well-disciplined, hence unconscious, spread. They sat close for a full twenty beats, wide-eyed, awaiting Lev's disclosure about what he had seen.

“Old model. So old I’ve forgotten the designation. But, old airframe does not necessarily denote old optics. Could’ve been flying so low in order to look sideways at this tight valley to see what doesn’t show from higher overhead, which itself might bespeak sophisticated gear on-board.”

“Or, it could mean it’s a final check-pass,” said Aleksey, speculating, “insurance for operators to confirm that the valley has been clean combed.”

“Could be, but we should stay put, anyway. He could have seen something. I dunno, maybe a tree flickering when our fat asses dove out of sight. If so, that RPV could snap back on us at very low level and catch us breaking cover. Or, worse yet, the bugger could circle back high and out of earshot – over this low ceiling to double check with millimeter radar -- which could be practical, in this instance, because operators would know right where to look (for confirmation not acquisition).”

“Check,” said both listeners in unison.

“But, if he was that low,” said Vasily, “wouldn’t he be susceptible to shoot-down? I thought you guys told me that that’s why we wouldn’t see ‘low flyers.’ This one seems even more vulnerable because it’s slow.”

“Always possible, if you get a good angle on it,” Lev said, “we’ve based our *maskirovka* on the presumption they won’t risk it. It’s probably aviation policy in peacetime. But, in point of fact, it can be a tough shot – you know, trees, ridge-lines...other ground clutter, not to mention surprise sightings. Shit... Aleksey never even saw this one much less got off a shot. Am I right?”

“True enough great *old* warrior, which thou art. However, it could also be a sign that they’re desperate enough to take the risk, and grant an exception for this search, because they haven’t seen diddly for so damn long.”

“Or, it could be old optics,” countered Lev, “in an old air frame and some low level staff weenie is ordering a flight at low level just to see any bloody thing. Maybe he’s also doing it with no priority at all, because nobody cares, since he’s flying a decrepit, low-cost piece of rubbish.”

“Possible too,” said Aleksey, “but, we oughta sit tight even longer than Lev recommends. Worst case is that it’s a bird based downstream at Yakutsk. Whether suspicious or not, it will have to fly back over us simply to get home.”

“Roger,” said the other-two – again in unison.

“It’s a fucking chorus,” Aleksey laughed. He got a chuckle in return despite their much-puckered anal areas.

\* \* \*

The parting occurred without a word. Vasily handed over both of his PLA GPS handsets, which he no longer needed and could endanger the other two -- if the FSB caught him. To say interpersonal interaction was taut was to be too subtle. Three sets of nerves were wired rigid enough to make mandolin strings seem floppy. Last night, under yet another outcropping far inland from the braided channels of the *Tyry*, an extended reticent hush had been broken by some seldom-told bedtime stories. Folks in harm's way assiduously avoid anecdotes, which companions might construe as boastful. However, this night Vasily whispered of recurring expeditions alone in the wilds of the Urals with Chili -- time and again under-clothed, ill-provisioned, and menaced by wolves, bears and even those who hunted them. He had gone to great pains to reassure his departing friends -- marinating in guilt despite their certitude about their own choices. Vasily's confidence that he and Chili were as safe, and as capable on the Taiga as the other two was impassioned.

"More legs, better ears and one great nose," he had said.

However, as he nodded to them wordlessly and clicked the "let's go" command at Chili, Aleksey and Lev remained unpersuaded, although neither of the garrulous duo could locate a single appropriate comment for this contingency.

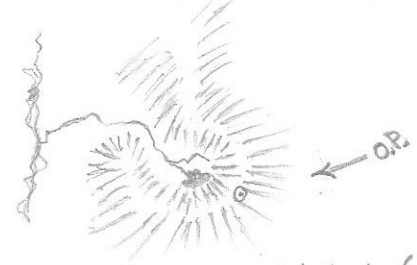
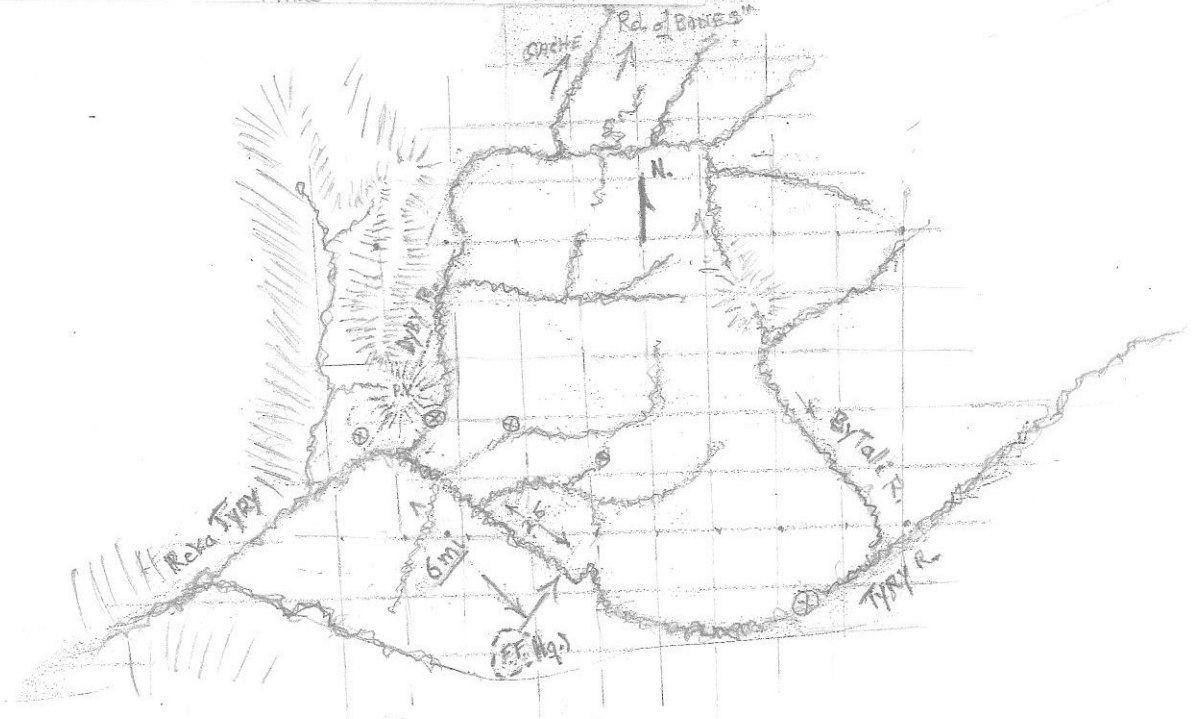
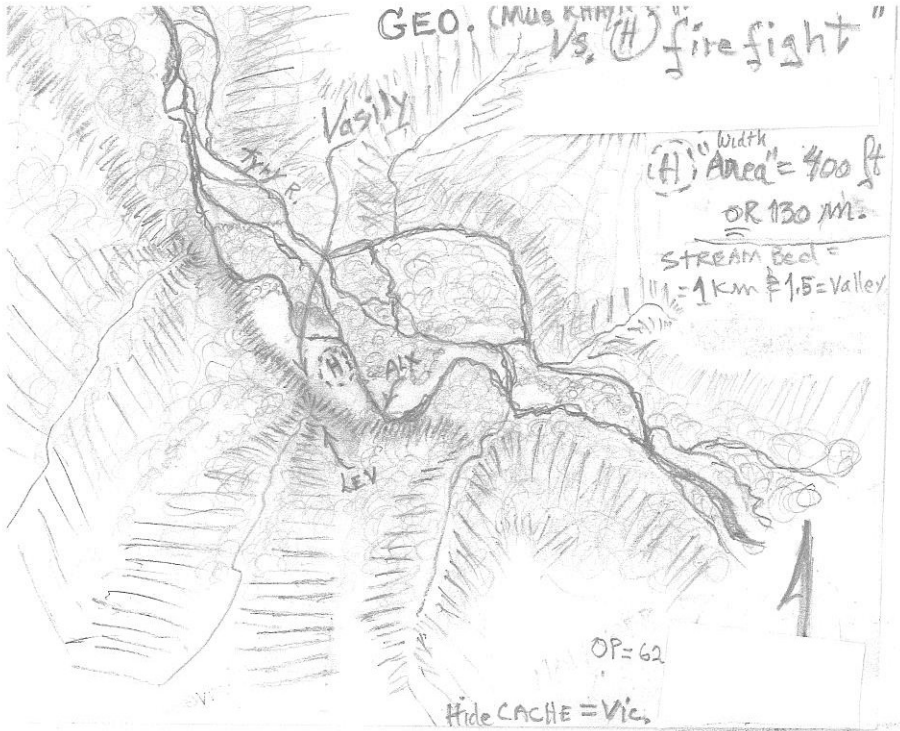
After Vasily was out of earshot, Lev said, "This is a bleeding putrid muddle. He's a corpse in search of a place to go prone."

"True enough. The state organs will get him long before the Taiga does. And, if the FSB has his ass first, they'll have a track on us. We might be up shit's creek. However, our present argument to take action *may* be substantial, perhaps even correct, but *is* insufficient."

"Ok professor," Lev said back over his shoulder as he turned about 180° from their chosen course. "Let's think more on it as we walk with him."

"Why not," said Aleksey falling in behind, "we did loot enough from the drone to eat for a few extra days didn't we?" he said, questioning Lev's re-provisioning for the first time."

"Check," Lev said with an inflection and look that established an hour-long mood of quiet rumination as they meandered downstream following Vasily's track -- fully distracted.



Pocket Valley (Actual similar feature = "NEZHDRANINZ KOYE")  
[62.5021, 139.0468]

# FIREFIGHT

The angry whine – herald of both anxious dismay and reluctant relief – had a chirring undertone with the beat of a four bladed helicopter. Both men were less than two meters from good cover and were instantly down -- tête-à-tête, hands on knees; butts dry, under a double canopy of evergreen with nothing to do for a while.

“Sounds like a recce bird,” Lev said with a head-shake and tight smile, pleased they had followed Vasily.

“We even have a *reconnaissance* helo?” asked Aleksey, “too small to be Russian.”

As the whirring grew louder, Lev clarified. “We *did* have a helo called ANSAT, which plausibly was eased off into the FSB.” His last three words rising in volume as the chopper neared 200 meters short of overhead, pelting the valley with the snappish blats of a sharp turn. Before coming overhead it made a low level quick 180° turn to go downstream.

Lev half rose and peeked over a big fir branch and said, “Oh yes, sir, me ol’ mate the ANSAT. Got some serious cockpit hours in that honey. For us though ‘Eeesss’ not so good effendi.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” said Aleksey echoing his intonation, “the case for action has now reached ‘sufficiency.’” He was relieved they were within reach of Vasily.

A bit later, when someone fired two rounds of AK-47, it was anticlimactic. Somehow, they had “known” Vasily would need help, and now they knew the enemy had seen something worthy of a recon-by-fire.

“Marching to the sound of guns...” as they say, Lev took-off at a run toward the retreating aircraft. Aleksey only picked up his pace from meander to forced march. He did not expect actual engagement with this sortie. The odds were at most were five to three – not counting the pilot. No security service, Russian or otherwise, took on armed prey with that small an advantage. “Chicken-shits one and all.” However, it did trouble him that this aircraft had range-limiting pontoons instead of skids.

For some odd reason Lev’s naming of the ANSAT had triggered another memory. He suddenly recalled that he had heard of this helicopter, and that it might indeed bode ill. The Americans in his Washington office had called it the ANS-N. They had thought it hilarious that the helo had been shoved out of operational status by Russian combat pilots, because it did not

conform to their notions of what a combat choppers ought to *look* like. It was too small and fragile, so unlike the beefy armored behemoths that populated the Russian helicopter fleet.

That so amused the retired officers in his office, because it reminded them of the US Air Force's A-10 saga. That highly effective close air support aircraft *looked* clunky and slow, but "wreaked ruin and brought pee," as the adoring US grunts put it. Nonetheless, the finicky Air Force pushed it out of their active forces. The illogic of it made the self-professed fighter pilots appear derisively prissy in their preference for aesthetics over combat functionality. His American colleagues had roared when Aleksey revealed the news that Russian ground force officers had been astonished at the A-10's demotion – and *relieved*. As Russian "grunts" saw it, their principal rival had *voluntarily* eliminated what was believed to be the most dangerous fire support weapon on the battlefield. Although IMI was delighted in this vindication of their long held policy vis-à-vis the A-10, they never published Aleksey's revelation for fear the think-tank would be accused of promoting Russian propaganda.

However, the whole point for Aleksey – in the here and now – was that all sides knew the ANSAT was a "great little bird." As the newest, fastest aviation platform for intelligence acquisition, it would have risen immediately to top dog in the FSB fleet – reserved for the highest echelons and employed only on the highest priority missions. That prospect sent a frisson of dejection down his core. He had been counting on staying off the bigwigs' radar. Suddenly it felt as if the whole phalanx of security organs were looming overhead, lodged in his blind spot.

He expected the next sortie to be armed to the gills -- in multiple aircraft. This realization awakened a heightened awareness of his surroundings. Now everything felt narrow, steep and inescapable. He yanked his mind from those visual impressions to a more measured analysis hoping to elude the rising panic lapping the inner shores of his cerebellum. He retraced their route wondering when it was that the topography had changed so dramatically. And upon more reflection, he decided the terrain had changed more slowly. In a vehicle he would have noticed, but on foot not so. The trees had become scrubbier over the days not hours. They had followed draws all the way and had not encountered inclines steep enough to create an awareness of a big gain in altitude. Hence, they had been less likely to see how their recent surroundings had become more of a large mountain defile than a valley. Woods were limited to stream shorelines. Elevations on either side of the river basin were just short of cliff-like and covered with bush-girdled scrub pine – not the evergreen forests and scenic slopes of the *Ancha* river valley.



Aleksey put his ass in another gear. Now he wanted to get a fix on Lev and maybe spot Vasily. Soon, he was at a jog and shortly thereafter passed by a tree where Lev's rucksack was hanging with the waist-borne paraphernalia that hampered running. He knew Lev was paralleling the outer channel running south of the multiple braids of the river and staying well up the slope from water level. From the satellite map he remembered that further downstream that outer channel bank curved further south and got higher. At the military crest of that bluff Aleksey expected to be looking down on an expanse of exposed rock beach where he was presuming Vasily had been caught in the open and become the focal point of the circling chopper's immediate interest. He also presumed Lev saw the situation as he did.

As he crested the cliff where it dropped to the beach, he caught a glimpse of movement ahead and upslope. It could only be Lev at full tilt. Aleksey selected a spot below in a cluster of foliage where he could remain concealed. When he turned back, he saw a rear view of Lev from the waist up, knees pumping high like a twenty-something about to bag a deer. Staying out of sight Aleksey climbed down to get a lengthwise look across the open expanse, while Lev headed – where else? To the high ground. If they were to confront the chopper here, it appeared as if he and Lev would be at right angles relative to anyone on the beach – a crossfire of grazing and plunging fires from concealed positions into targets in the open. Very tidy indeed, except that Lev – visible in his binoculars – appeared far too untroubled about sitting in the open. He had found a small bald spot about 150 meters beyond Aleksey and over 50 meters up where the ridge line bent down to the river and was sheared off like the sliced end of meat loaf. On this apex, Lev was busily stripping a small tree still in full view. The recce bird was coming back upstream from its last pass, flying low and slow. Still... no Vasily; no dog.

Aleksey looked over his binoculars and located the bird with its nose slightly depressed to gain forward velocity aiming at a point right between his eyes. It was paralleling the south channel at less than 30 meters off the deck keeping the huge rock slabs of the "beach" to starboard. He judged that it would start a 180° turn at his right front to pass over his end of the beach.

In this instant he was oddly of two minds. On one hand, he felt no inclination to fire. It would be a rapidly crossing target and he was still hoping to escape the current peril by remaining unseen. On the other hand, he delighted in what a superb shot Lev was going to have halfway through this turn – head-on, and probably nose down.

“Had they seen Lev?” he asked himself as it started to turn. The answer was loud – an angry ripp and an ugly stream of brass falling out from the ANSAT, disclosing a coaxial mini gun of relatively small caliber eating away at the exposed precipice below Lev.

Aleksey swung his binoculars to Lev’s post and saw his M16 go level over a branch of the stripped sapling. Two beats later, he could see that rifle flashing: one, two, pause...three, four, five... No full automatic, not him. “Bless that black hearted bastard,” he thought. “He’s standing fast. ‘It was the only way,’” As Lev had proclaimed so often in so many drunken diatribes, (wherein old soldiers rehashed the fine points of combat.) This was how the British “thin red line” had stood up to cavalry charges that had so often terrorized *untrained* infantry. It was something helicopter “cavalry” had been getting away with for far too long in Lev’s opinion. “What a great time to demonstrate such an enduring truth.” Aleksey felt as if there should be bleacher full of young bucks glued to their binoculars, with someone starting a long whoop, which would end in wild applause.

Yet looking from three-quarters aft, he could see no fall-of-shot impinging on the fuselage or windscreen – no sparks, no holes and no jerks in the flight path. It was now pointing directly down Lev’s bore, but nosing up and heeling slightly to starboard. The port float was lifting to end the turn when the craft made a surprise maneuver – a quick, bizarre rearing up, tail down, slithering sidewise through the air. Aleksey feared the tail rotors would hit rock first and shear off. But in the last micro-second it somehow regained enough lift to go level less than a meter high and bounced onto a reasonably flat stone, skidding thereafter into an ungainly nose-down posture. The turning main rotors seemed in danger of hitting the ground as they passed before the nose.

“Well, he hit somebody with his hand on the collector,” thought Aleksey. “Now we are truly in the hundred-year shit storm,” he said aloud to no one else.

Nobody moved. There was no sound but the steady swoosh of idling helicopter blades. Some American teenage girl might well have said, “Geezz... awkward...” He implored some higher power, somewhere, to keep Lev and Vasily in place. No doubt, this scene was playing-out on some flying robot’s screen, in fuzzy radar images taken from above the drizzly low ceiling. If so, he preferred that the RPV come down for a closer look even though he expected that it could be armed. “Better the enemy you can see...”

But, Aleksey was getting ahead of himself. The aircraft’s occupants appeared unready to surrender. The starboard door slid open barely long enough for one balled up body to roll out. In

seven fold magnification, he could see the tucked body was a helmeted, flak vested, full camouflaged commando-like rifleman who rocked back to a stop in a seated firing position simultaneously raising an AK47 with his elbows planted on raised knees. Muzzle flashes began immediately. Over his lenses, Aleksey surmised rifleman was firing at Lev – over 100 meters away and up a 50-meter embankment. “Good fucking luck with that,” He thought as he leaned forward on rock, shouldering his M16 to take the higher percentage grazing shots at about 150 meters. “If he did not hit this gung-ho shit, he would at least shut down the incoming around Lev.”

Squeeze, whap-flash-recoil... Again and then again, then one and two more. ok, acquired him with top of front-sight-on-ass, squeeze... whap-flash-recoil. Rock dust puff, “ok, he’ll see that.” Now squeeze one ... then two, squeeze it...

Seven shots into the long range, stationary target drill; Aleksey could see that his target had registered incoming rounds from his left side. With a snap roll, the target was no longer stationary. Over his open sights, Aleksey watched his quarry spin over again with admirable vigor to a spot forward of the mid-line of the pontoons. As the marksman scooted back, between the floats, he went prone to take on Lev again. But then, Aleksey heard an M4 firing from beach level. It had to be Vasily – 20 to 30 meters downstream from where a coin flipped by Lev would have landed. His firing point allowed Vasily to aim straight down the pontoons’ centerline -- a trajectory like Lev’s line-of-fire -- well away from Aleksey. Mimicking Aleksey’s steady rate of single-shot, aimed fire; Vasily and Lev both popped a series of rounds at the base of the helicopter. Aleksey saw a few ricochets near the seriously outgunned rifleman’s helmet. Then after only three rounds of return fire, a head and arm jerked into view above the near pontoon. The silhouette hung an extended hand up like a classroom inebriate unsure of his question and then drooped out of sight. The former awkwardness resumed, but for the beat of rotating airfoils.

Aleksey was impressed by the resilience of the pontoons, which had not deflated under fire. He had half-expected the fuselage to sag to one side and bring the arc of the rotors into ruinous contact with the rock beach. He guessed that they must be made of some solid flotation material or well partitioned inflatables.

Seeing Lev rise from his prone firing position, Aleksey seized the opportunity to try to stop him and Vasily in place. He hammered an empty cup on his stone firing support and yelled in his best command voice. When he thought his friends might have located the source of his racket, he signaled RPV four times by jabbing his finger skyward in long pumps and clapping the other hand

repeatedly over his eyes. He reinforced the first signal by following with the standard road march hand sign for “stop.” After four repetitions of each, he laid flat on his rock – on his back – in full view thrusting his rifle multiple times into the air. There was no way he could be certain how much Lev had understood, not to mention what the drone’s controllers and Vasily might have thought. If one of them supposed him psychotic and the other assumed him wounded, that would be fine. At the moment, the important thing was that Lev had resumed his seat beside the sapling muzzle rest and could be reloading magazines. He sure as hell hoped so.

\* \* \*

“Un-fucking-believable, how can those dumb shits be so dammed predictable?” rejoiced Aleksey.

“You sir, are the ‘un-fucking believable.’ You knew? Was that what all your ludicrous gyrations were all about? How the hell did you know a UAV was coming?” said a bemused Lev in mild astonishment.

“I didn’t. But, I presumed if one was up there – not an unlikely possibility – it would be coming down for a closer look. You mean you never got my drift?”

“Are you joking? All I saw was my old friend coming unglued. However, I did catch the sign for ‘halt’ and figured you must have had some serious reason. All I did was stay put.”

“And shoot its ass full of tiny lil’ five-point-five-six millimeter holes.”

“Not so, again, sir,” said Lev, “my last mag was almost empty. Had maybe five shots left. Surely, you noticed my kit hanging from a tree back there. You’re the marksman this time. You had the head-on shot, close-up and a belly-up view. I just plinked my few remaining rounds hoping for a lucky hit.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but that’s the first moving target I get to paint across my cockpit,” said Aleksey slapping his own buttock. “But you, sir, did nail the brass ring for this fine day. Thanks to you, some imperious asshole is going to pining for his zippy new ANSAT.”

“By the way,” said Aleksey continuing in a more level tenor as the overtopped mutual backslapping brought him down a bit from their euphoria. “Did you see it go down?”

“L.F.G.,’ as they say, level flight into ground.” Then, abridging his explanation, Lev added, “Actually, it was not quite level. It was starting to nose-up before it hit the ridge, next over – the granite sided one, over there, where we walked into the Tyry valley yesterday. Come to think of it, you could have gotten that result by disabling a navigation camera. The controller probably would have been freaked out by the blank screen, and by the time he realized that the obvious thing to do was pull his joy-stick hard-back, he was already ‘L.F.G.’”

Then, also coming down to a more even keel, Lev said, “You’d better go to Vasily and supervise his handling of our POW’s before he gets relieved of his weapon.” Then, he appended over his shoulder, as he was turning to go, “I’ve got to pick up my rucksack... But, whatever else, do *not* shut down that chopper. It can idle like that for hours.”

Aleksey was pleasantly surprised to find Vasily needing no supervision. He was very much in charge. The POW’s were well secured – separated, silent, bound hand and foot, and blindfolded with reversed flight helmets over their heads.

“Not a bad job, captain, I see your time in the reserves was well spent, Aleksey said in someone else’s senior-officer-voice, slinging some pure bullshit with the intent of confusing the prisoners and communicating to Vasily that they were not going to be saying anything approximating the truth within hearing of these captives.

“So,” he went on in the same vein, “has our wounded warrior over there been whining or do we recommend him for WIA benefits? Before anyone could answer, he tapped the bandaged prisoner on the helmet with his weapon and asked, “You walk, dip-shit?”

His “da” brought an unseen smile to Aleksey’s face and to Vasily he pontificated. “You could have authored the POW handbook, but that would be granting these wing-nuts more status than they deserve. They’re not warriors, only gofers for spooks – ‘last echelon of the heroes of the rear,’” exaggerating his pompous pose and adding a self-deprecating smile his captive audience could not see.

However relaxed he tried to sound, his thoughts were skittering quick-fire from one looming hazard, to the next -- with a sensation of endlessness to it. His ideation was like a meth charged wasp in his underwear. He could not wait for Lev’s return to get started on a way out of here.

“Losing contact with a recce sortie *and* an UAV at the same time,” Aleksey thought, “would be creating an unrestrained shit-fit among the security pukers up and down the chain. All the way

back to Moscow center they would have briars up their asses and would be stretching limits in full disregard for the niceties of priority and authorization. It would be all-hands-on-deck with no questions asked in order to generate any damn kind of retaliation – the more violent the better.”

Aleksey knew that if forces and transport were readily available his threesome could become riddled corpses in a flea flick. Then again, the time-distance-terrain box they were stuck in did have the advantage of being at the distant end of a rickety logistical pipeline barely adequate for routine operations, and easily overloaded by sudden demands. He could visualize the frustration of hopped up chiefs in urban headquarters hearing from their backwoods counterparts: “Just not there, sir. I do not know, comrade colonel. Yes sir, I did say zero-point-zero on-hand. It’s been on ‘empty’ for three months. Sorry sir, he’s AWOL. *This is* senior man on site, Corporal Kresky. Or... Sir is ANSAT a motorcycle or a truck?” Their pursuers could lose valuable time pissing up ropes, but he also knew they would eventually launch some kind of operation, and Aleksey would have to devise yet another herd of goats to put in its path.

He took a prone firing position 15 meters from the detainees and motioned to Vasily to take up an assistant gunner position beside him. With his right forefinger outside the trigger housing and Vasily’s ear 20 centimeters away, he sighted the center of mass of the prisoner group, relaxed belly down, and began to whisper into Vasily’s curious ear.

“We’re on a short fuse, my prodigal accomplice. You have sped up the process by keeping your shit together during (and after) your first firefight. Pop up that puny chest Mr. badass. I am especially pleased about the very short leash you’ve got that chopper crew on.”

“Not hard to learn the rules when one is on the receiving end of a three-week ‘transport...’ But, there’s something you need to know, Aleksey Mikhailovich, my friend, let me tell you *how* I got spotted by that helo. Hard to believe, but we’ve got company in this valley... on the ground, no less.”

Too convoluted a choice of words, and unfortunate, because his Aleksey had an overcharged urge to get underway. “We’ll sort out ‘who-shot-john’ in the back-brief,” Aleksey interrupted with only a quick nod of acknowledgement. “Here’s what I think. In an unusually short time – maybe by late afternoon – those swinish bloodsuckers could be combing this valley, buzzing up and down a half dozen of the nearest tributaries in multiple, armed aircraft both rotary and fixed wing. The choppers will be loaded with pissed off grunts. They will be supported by so many

surveillance doo-dads trained on our lil' playground here that we'll probably die of radiation overdose before they can catch our scrawny asses." He was jabbering, unstoppable.

"The scary part is that we can't get far enough away in all this bare rock and steep terrain. So far, we've remained undetected because the search area they had to consider was too vast. For all they knew, we could have been anywhere from the *Maya* to the *Tyry* or from Batamay to the sea. That's probably why they were chasing up and down river valleys – hoping to get lucky catching us making crossings or using the easier gradients, (which worked, come to think of it)."

"We might be able to get some help..." said Vasily trying to interject.

"So what we need to do," said Aleksey blabbering on over him, "is delay their reaction force. That means devising another deception plan. A ruse... something, any damn thing to make them look elsewhere. We want to make them think they have a much larger area to search than they do. If we get them to fall for some dog shit ploy, then we will have the time to meld back into the Taiga and become three ants on a wide open steppe instead of three rats in a corner."

"Dammit Aleksey," said Vasily spitting his whisper, "listen. We got *allies* in this valley. Two armed locals stopped me before all the shooting started. Maybe forty-five minutes ago. Had me face down like a POW." He held a palm at Aleksey against interruption, "Until all hell broke loose and they watched the chopper go down."

"Yeah, I'll bet... Got buddy-buddy right away. Sounds to me like locals looking to kiss some Federal ass by getting all three of us, and turning us over to the FSB."

"Will you please give it a rest?" he said, displaying a rare show of genuine anger to stifle Aleksey's run-away mouth. "They immediately identified me as one of three 'escapees' from Belliya. Said their Chinese liaisons told them about us."

"Chinese? You gotta be shitting me?"

"Shut up, blabber-butt," said Vasily in wet sibilant words. "One of them told me they needed *you* – by name, no less – to find them a nearby PLA 'hospital.' Oh yeah, you heard me right – 'hospital.' Sounds as if their 'inscrutable' foreign 'friends' won't let any Russians into it. My captors seemed to know about your access to caches and the GPS, which they do not have."

"No way...How?"

"Provincial authorities? I think. Claimed to be special militia force. One called himself a Provincial Border Guard. Looked and sounded like paramilitary *volunteers*, if they're official in any way at all – that is. I'm guessing someone in their group has been talking to Khabarovsk Krai

militia. Remember Igor Vladimirovich? Brought to mind some sort of coalition that excludes Moscow. For some reason, these guys share their southern colleagues' benign disposition toward us. I know," Vasily shrugged, "Sounds far-fetched."

"Indeed..."

"But, it gets worse. They said they were in full 'scramble mode.' Could be that they're abandoning ship – as it were. Apparently, the whole bunch have been called in for 'wheels up' in less than an hour."

"How'd they hear that?"

"Dunno, but the talkative one had ear buds." He turned his head to touch his forehead above Aleksey's ear. When his friend startled back to look him in the eye, Vasily said, "That means – in your militarese – they've got a helicopter, right?"

"Guess so. Could be..."

"Guess' my ass. The speaker's side-kick also blurted out that they could *not* get caught harboring Chinese illegals and they'd have to evacuate them before the firestorm you and Lev stirred up descends on this valley. Then, the other guy speculated that we-three would have to go with them, saying, 'There's no good place to hide fugitives around here.'" Turning his eyes back over his sights, Vasily added with a tone of grumpy indignation, "Sure seems like a way out to me."

"Were these guys – alleged 'allies' – in charge of any damn thing?"

"Dunno, but it gave every appearance of a small group where everybody knows everything, does every job, no upper echelon. You know flat organization..."

"Uh-huh, amateurs. So, where's the rendezvous?"

"They took off downstream. Said to follow them to the next stream junction and they'd find us."

"Sound like pilots?"

"Didn't hear any of the Lev-style aviation jargon."

"Ok then, I for one am not ready to put our lives in the hands of people we don't know and might be required to meet in maybe 20 minutes or so. First we've got to settle the matter amongst ourselves, saddle up, walk to wherever this hypothetical aircraft sits and then – only if they will take the time – we can *start* to come to terms about our role in their enterprise. Will they let us go our way again once this close call is behind us? Remember, if we get caught later and interrogated,



they'll be in deep shit. Same for us, if one of them gets nabbed. Sorry, this option sets off a lot of my shit detectors."

"Fine, what do you propose we do in the next hour containing – as you say – so little actionable time?"

"Cannot believe I'm saying this but we've got more time than that. And, as I was saying, we can 'make' more time..."

Aleksey was interrupted as both heads slewed about toward the gentle whine from behind and the floor was seized a lapping tongue and a ball of fur trying to squeeze down between them to reunite with its master. Relieved of the need to finish his answer, Aleksey made a mental note of pleasant surprise that since it left Beliiya, the dog had not barked – not once. Then as he rose to a sit, still fixed on the POW's, his mind sprinted on to temporal estimates.

"Thirty minutes," he thought, "more, it's nearing midnight in Moscow – 40 minutes minimum for the news of the firefight to go up the command chains and bounce back down – in the form of warning orders – to action leaders and staff planners. Then, nothing happens until everyone's on-board for what they will probably call 'the Tyry River incident.' Beyond that response times would be additive to travel times in overlapping and bewildering ways. Let's see, can we sort out only what's here first? We do know that the closest armed UAV would be Yakutsk. No, Susuman is possible. So, at 150 knots for... Wait a minute, Beliiya's closer and may still have choppers flying in and out. Therefore, at 100 knots those observers (unarmed) could get here in – damn – one piddling hour. But then, how long for a bunch of forensic nerds to get their shit together? They'll have dropped their guard days ago..." Aleksey's synapses crackled on at chemical reaction speeds – faster than sound but slower than light.

Vasily, on one knee with an arm around Chili, held his peace as both watched patiently knowing something important was afoot. Aleksey stood almost catatonic one half turn away, eyes locked in a fiery stare into the probabilities.

Before the pause became too painful, Vasily heard Lev scrambling down the bluff and took Chili to meet him. They whispered 30 meters away from Aleksey, trusting that he would catch any untoward movement among the prisoners despite his appearance of mental absence. Old soldiers had aural and visual reflexive overrides that brought them back in a way that astounded the unsuspecting. Lev reacted with equal skepticism to news of another armed group in the valley. He seconded Aleksey's caution about joining a hasty evacuation, but buoyed Vasily's dropping spirits

by adding a revelation of his own. Lev could fly an ANSAT. He had quickly recounted highlights of the story of how he had learned while he was an artillery observer. Russian Air Force pilots who were too lazy to stay focused for hours of interminable circling had taught him to do it himself. Eventually he had blackmailed them – as co-conspirators in breaking several serious aviation regulations – to instruct him in the much more difficult skills of taking-off and landing. He had never expected to use the knowledge again since the military had scuttled the ANSAT procurement. Now, they were just plain, blind lucky because the ANSAT was the only aircraft of any kind that Lev could operate.

As they walked up, Aleksey turned their way with two fingers out at eye level. “Two hours,” he said his whispered turning raspy. “Two hours from 10 minutes after the UAV hit the deck. By then we’ve got to be out of here or out of sight. I mean deep cover. I figure that after the spook bosses stop pinging off the walls, and line-up some border service infantry and surveillance nerds; after time of flight for aircraft – manned and not -- and after we allow for reorientation times for satellites; we can expect to start seeing observers overhead in helos and to start making personal appearances on screens from RPV and Sat feeds, *if we are still in the open*. Two hours,” He repeated flipping two open palms and cocking his head in anticipation of interruption, “is not a perfect estimate, but I am confident that beyond 110 minutes from now odds are great that our necks will be on chopping blocks. Not dead but that close. One lucky break is that we’ll be able to *hear* the most likely first on scene (a Beliiyan chopper) before it can see us. Furthermore, nearest chopper – if ready – and UAV’s – if prepo’d in Susuman -- will *not* be flying low. *Not* after our shoot-downs. That leaves fast movers from who-the-hell-knows-where as next most likely on scene. They are a real wild card, but while fast as hell, they are also notoriously inept at targeting ‘troops in the open.’ And, come to think of it, they may have trouble even finding anti-personnel ordnance. It’s been so long that they’ve needed it.”

“But, those guys said...” Vasily butted in.

“I know. You told me they’re trying to clear this bulls-eye in one hour. I thought of that. However, it’s different for them. They have to be aloft and way-way off this target grid by the time the cameras roll. They had to include their own flight times to get clear. So, at my two-hour mark they’d be outside a 150-klik circle around this ‘crime scene’ and indistinguishable from normal civilian air traffic when that far away. My thinking was that your buddies’ estimate confirmed my own.”

“You missed my point...” said Vasily, but then interrupted his own thought and changed topics, “so then, we’re back on the one-hour deadline after all.” He said speaking over everyone despite Lev’s open-mouthed lean inward. “Lev’s gonna fly us out. We can be out beyond suspicion with those what-you-call-‘em ‘locals’... ‘Volunteers’ or something.”

“You can...?” Aleksey said toward an already nodding Lev who finally got his turn to speak.

“But not so fast, my nimble minded friend. In fact, we *could* be more than 150 klicks out in this swift little bird, but that is a ‘safe zone’ for *unidentified* aircraft. When the spooks confirm that *their* ANSAT is gone, they must chase it. They gotta presume we hijacked it until proven different, and they will start looking outside the circumference of the 150-klick circle – expecting that we would flee as far and as fast as possible. And, nothing, comrades, is easier to pick up over the motionless background than a moving helicopter. Witness our discovery of one on a sat photo yesterday when we weren’t even looking for it.”

“Shit, you’re right. Could we crash it nearby and gain time while they run off to search and rescue?” Asked Vasily.

“Ok, but would they? And, if they did, they’d still have UAV’s and Satellites crawling all over this ‘hot zone. How far could we get?” said Aleksey impatiently.

“My thought,” said Lev, “was that I could fly us to some least likely spot – near a waterside hide-out well inside the 150 klick circle, and do so before surveillance could reorient. We might have time to fly 30-40 klicks in an unexpected direction, sink the bird and get well hidden in time.” He ticked off one—two--three on his fingers. “If we were to blow it off its floats leaving no visible wreckage, we would be saddling the search op with a much larger search area than if we did manage to hump it out of here unseen.”

“Not bad. Could work. Where though?” asked Aleksey.

“That’s your job. Ideally it would back-track from our presumed destination (northeast) and be near one of those PLA supply points.”

“Ok, I’m seeing a division of labor shaping up here. I’ll find a destination and any PLA facilities. Lev Ivanovich, you get the chopper ready...” said Aleksey.

“Check, that’ll include silencing it,” added Lev. Need to shut off the transponder and its Sat-Nav that might be signaling location. Oh, bugger it, what about the crew’s mobiles? Don’t know it might be done, but I fear the FSB may have a remote way to track the damn things.”

“That’s my bit,” said Vasily. “I was planning to be the POW handler. I’ll go through belongings and take anything worrisome to us such as any-and-all tools; pen knives; wet-weather gear; hats; boots; and of course, any-and-all signaling equipment. Also... what about switching clothes? Wouldn’t it help to look like them (especially wearing those helmets) if we were to encounter other aircraft?”

“I like it,” said Lev, “maybe leave them jacket-less and in street shoes. We want them under performing when we leave them behind. No telling what the unfettered human primate could pull.”

“And timing?” asked Aleksey.

“Well, 45 minutes max flying time gets us out to just over 100 klicks. So, some deep water somewhere short of 100 klicks sounds right to me.”

“Good enough as a starting point. That leaves us a little less than an hour before takeoff. We’ll adjust as the destination clarifies and the inevitable hiccups pop up,” said Aleksey. “Why don’t you-two go back to the chopper and I’ll perch a little higher so I can lookout for those ‘locals’.... One never knows...”

“Check,” Lev and Vasily said in unison and spun to it.

As he climbed, Aleksey knew that he should already be scouring his memory for rough terrain, cliffs, deep water, etc. inside the southwest quadrant of their 100-kilometer circle. But his mind obstinately kept overriding the map visuals he willed it to depict. What resounded instead was the word “hospital.” And, when he suppressed that nagging, another worry sprung into its place -- the dubiousness of getting away in the noisiest, flashiest vehicle in the RFE. At the same time, he felt the tendrils of anxiety about belatedly changing the arc of this -- their Plan A. Would the time lost getting a better plan actually turn out any better than simply executing a perhaps less elegant Plan A, which benefited from the full time available spent in preparation?

“But then, half-assed could too easily beget whole-assed dead,” he thought and vowed to look for PLA caches, engineering installations, rivers and lakes using the map as his medium for thought. With the GPS scaled so that the 100-kilometer ring filled the screen, he allowed the symbolic imagery to randomly strike his roiling visual cortex: “Relevant perhaps, but maybe dangerous... Worth checking back... Big waste of time... Great possibility...depending...”

Then a form materialized -- as if on its own -- to absorb Aleksey’s full attention. It was a pleasing concavity inside a circular ridge-line pointing its open quadrant northwest; labeled with a

Chinese character he had never bothered to translate. He slapped his left pocket to confirm the presence of his Mandarin dictionary and the trajectory of Plan A changed.

“Time be dammed,” he thought, “this discovery would offer the opportunity to stretch time for them by diverting the looming tsunami of state power.” He bore down linguistically, visually, and conceptually – synaptically alight.

\* \* \*

“As much as I’d like to see my intrepid friend fly us all out of this devil’s *tupik*, I do not want this cul-de-sac to become his last,” Aleksey said to reopen the planning discussion. “That’s why choppering out of here began to distress me so. Any hint of rotary wings anywhere on this 150-klik disc, and all security agencies will pounce. Most worrisome would be the MACH-2 high performance aircraft or ground attack birds, which their HQ would scramble for an armed recon mission against a target this lucrative. The fighter jocks might laugh at a fire mission for ‘three infantry in the open’ knowing damn well it’s a moving target and not ‘open’ for long. But, if we present as easy a target as this,” he pointed to the ANSAT, “Our two-hour window would evaporate. Hell, even overhead, low res mapping sat photo can pick up our blade spin. You do recall? Our own PLA GPS did so when we first scoped this valley.

Furthermore, our first plan depends upon a damaged chopper and a pilot whose skills could have deteriorated a tad. No offense intended dear friend...seriously... But you and I both have heard pilots – working pilots – tell stories. How ‘rusty’ skills made for ‘white-knuckle’ flying. They’ve said a rusty pilot could sometimes only remember just enough to know just how bad he had fucked-it-up *after* he’d already done so. Unfortunately, Plan A has too many complicated tasks, and too many of them depend upon scary unknowns.” Aleksey paused before his punch line.

“That’s why I want to let *them*,” he jabbed a thumb back over his shoulder at the prisoners huddled 15 meters behind him, “fly the stinking thing out and take all the risks. Let’s divert every danger we might face to those more deserving wretches. First, we expropriate their flight suits and leave them with nothing to wear but our PLA jackets over bare feet. Then, we give them incentive to fly far enough by planting time-fused C4 on-board. If Lev strips the ANSAT of all comm gear, emergency signaling devices and tools; and if Vasily strips the air crew of all footgear, pen knives, belts, wet weather clothing, marking pens, paint; (a process already underway) then our substitutes

will not only be unable to call for help, they will also be unable to identify themselves to the onrushing hordes or to disarm the explosives. My bet is, pilots will mistake them for us or at least presume they've been hijacked at gunpoint. Moreover, gents, there is always a good chance that some attacking aircraft – fixed or rotary – might not be so tender hearted. As so often happens, they could choose to 'shoot it down and sort it out on the ground' as the air defense 'bird shooters' in the US artillery like to say.”

“Excellent,” Lev said, chiming in, “easy for me to picture some pilot more worried about being accused of letting us escape than about the sorry asses of some captured spooks. What's more, if they do screw it up badly, It's always possible that the search bosses might never know what happened to their aircrew. Even if they survive and the chopper blows empty, they'll never be sure whether or not we have their cell phones, comm gear or this month's code book. Think about it. When that book goes missing we could cause the entire Russian security establishment to jump through its ass re-issuing books. Consider how much time that will consume. It's even possible our case will fall through the cracks that might easily open up. Ahh... this new plan's sounding better all the time. Thank your stars, Aleksey Mikhailovitch, that I haven't already done anything to our lil' bird to foreclose any of those measures. You, Vasily Yurovitch?”

“Nor I ... *But*,” said Vasily, “what if they merely circle around and set it down nearby just before it blows? Live or die, they'd get us caught. Or,” he said waving a hand to hold the floor, “Why don't they just put it down in an open spot and separate the C4 from the chopper? Or...” he said hoisting two hands, “Failing that, won't they just land somewhere – anywhere – and simply watch it the thing blow-up from a safe distance? I fear we could spend too much time on this for naught.”

Lev took the answer. “Would you risk exposure out here knowing the slim chances of rescue and having no fire (no way to *make* fire)? I think not. As to accessing the C4 and fuse package, there are two access ports on the outside – port and starboard that are screwed shut. We can burr-out the screw slots so it would be nigh impossible to open – with tools. And, old friend, you recall they will have *no* tools. You and I will see to that. And, if they were to circle back over us, how do they avoid being shot – again. They'll know we will hear the chopper land, and I'm sure they won't want to take us on again – unarmed. Lev paused and added, “One more thing just occurred to me. Those pontoons might have a quick release. If so, taking those off would make decent landing zones rare indeed.”

“Good answers. I’m impressed,” said Vasily smiling. “Guess I’ll second Plan B. Presume you believe you’ll have time to execute before some surveillance gizmo records us switching clothes and waving the spy aircrew *adios*. And, will you get far enough out of the cross-hairs while they chase wild weasels?”

“As usual,” said Aleksey, “our good friend has asked the critical question. I’m pleased you like the deception plan, but you haven’t heard the best part. There is a 80-90% chance that I have found the PLA ‘hospital’ that Vasily Yurovitch was told about. They said it was ‘nearby’ and there is a PLA feature that’s labeled with a character that could refer to such a facility. Translations vary from ‘unit fund’ to ‘troop considerateness’ to my best candidate – ‘people’s beneficiary installation.’ Considering its location, I can see no plausible military, technological or engineering use for the place except as an aid station. What’s more, if we hustle we could walk there with time to spare.”

“You two go ahead,” Vasily said full voice, taking the others aback, “work out location, ETD, routes, etc. while I get to work on these prisoners,” lowering his voice closer to a whisper and ending with a grin. “Whom could I better trust to get this part right?” He whirled about into a double time with carbine pistol gripped into his right armpit – no departing grunt nor a glance back.

Staring at Vasily’s departing back, Lev said, “You, you, you-two?’ Things with him are feeling daft *again*...”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. He seems happy not knowing. What do you say we codify what you’re thinking, and not utter anything more about Plan B in front of him? You ok with that?”

“Indeed. He could have decided to evac with his new friends. He seems determined not to leave mother Russia. And now that I hear it put this way. I am reminded of the first time we ever discussed escaping exile, (before we even met you) he seemed unable to imagine any destination that did not end in his beloved *Akademgorodok* ivory tower. I surmised at the time that he had tied his identity to academia and his elevated status therein. Hope that doesn’t cost him his life.”

“If it does, let’s make damn sure not to let him take us along.”

“Actually he’s a bit like us with our links to military culture. Fortunately, we are not so tied down geographically.” Then changing to a more business like demeanor Lev added, “So where is this so called ‘hospital’ my wily friend and do you think we can weather a full-dress area search in it?”

“First, let me reiterate my serious unease with hiding anywhere in the face of a deliberate grid search. Do not like hunkering down like some sniveling rabbit -- as a matter of principle. However, as much as I was attracted to your idea of making a short hop to un-ass this hot LZ and sink the evidence, I simply could not make it play out to a happy ending. It was not only the high performance aircraft that worried me. It was hard to find deep water in this vicinity to sink the ANSAT. I feared that once they confirmed that the chopper had disappeared, they would suspect a hijack, followed by a sinking, and would immediately focus on the few likely lakes. It has to be lakes, by the by. These rivers may be wide on the map but they're all shallow streams this time of year. I was loath to map spot some places where a channel *might* get deeper – just couldn't be certain. So it's only with great reluctance that I say this PLA site could be our best chance. Looks as if their engineers may have designed this thing more carefully to *stay* hidden – more so than the caches, which as you've seen, are damn hard to pinpoint even when you have the eight-digit grid. Could be an old mine. The area nearby shows signs of mining infrastructure minus the working machinery.”

“If it is, makes one wonder why the locals couldn't find a disused mine.”

“Maybe it's abandoned, or maybe well-paid miners were the first ones out of these backwoods when the Soviet paychecks and pensions dried up in the nineties. Be that as it may, why don't you pull out your GPS so I can input the grid and connect you to the zero-fix instructions and door pic. It'll take two of us to figure out how to get in.”

“Before we get to work,” Lev added, “I want to say that there are other good reasons why hiding *can* work out in this instance. As much as it will churn my gut to sit out a search, we know (or should know) this will be tougher for them than for us. We *can* trust our experience. When it did look as if we underestimated our friends from the security organs, I believe they were simply getting lucky. Their early ETA by chopper, finding Cho's lair, spotting Vasily before the firefight... could be explained by things like local informants, the happenstance of blade-time availability, the unexpected influence of the ANSAT's high ranking 'owner,' or... all kinds of inexplicable horse manure. 'Even a blind pig finds an acorn once and a while,'” he added with a strained attempt at southern American English.

“However, institutional inertia is real and human nature in the bureaucracy does not change. You and I should not change our well-earned understanding about these *apparatchiks* fundamental ineptitude. This is especially true here at the shambolic end of a rickety pipeline. The



FSB will go tits up, run dry, and try to lie their way out when they get at sixes and sevens, which they will. Be at ease my friend, we can wait them out -- if we don't fuck it up, of course. Unlike them -- sure as swine warts -- we cannot lie *our* way out."

Lev had finished briefing the ANSAT's slipper-shod co-pilot. Vasily had given the thumbs up signaling that he had tied the remainder of the aircrew into the passenger seats, and Aleksey had ensconced himself in a covered firing position well in front of the aircraft carefully aiming at the ANSAT's windscreen. When Vasily reached his own firing position to port -- clearly visible from the choppers left seat, Lev put a knife on the last strand holding the co-pilot's hands and growled in his ear, "You've now got 119 minutes left on the fuse, Lieutenant. Make 115 knots and you can get to Béliiya or Ust Nera. Fuck around with us here and you have a choice *only* of burning or freezing to death. If you force us to shoot your sorry ass, your wounded pilot's gonna play hell executing this mission for you." Lev cut him free but tugged once more on this collar for a last word, "Remember lift-off hard and those pontoons will drop. You'll need the added airspeed. Now get the fuck off my LZ." Lev's boot left a muddy print on the officer's pajama pants.

As the little bird heeled to port heading for Béliiya, the threesome closed in on tree cover behind Aleksey's firing position. Lev kicked-off the second edition of the trio's farewell speeches -- being more garrulous this time. "If your new friends find you out or break your story about Aleksey and me *not* flying out in the ANSAT, then admit it. Say we are in the area but watching. Let them know we'll leave behind word about the hospital's location and FSB comm codes, if -- and only *if* -- we learn that you are ok."

"Still think you guys are too suspicious. These are not just 'locals.' They are insurgents from Magadan for shit's sake. Why should that be any more surprising than Estonian rebels, or Kazakh fighters? Separatism is coming in Russia -- better late than never. Why not, 'Free the RFE?'"

Aleksey clasped Vasily's hand in both of his own. "I fervently hope we'll be raising our mugs one day to your remarkable intuition about these revolutionaries. Now, let's squat." It could not be a drawn-out farewell. Lev and Aleksey faced a river crossing up ahead, which would add time to the distance.

## HANG-FIRE

The two shivering fugitives slogged their way to the doorstep of the secret PLA infirmary, but could not get all the way inside. Resigned to spending the night in the rock crevice, they started the obligatory fire, which drafted nicely considering the close quarters and began to exchange thoughts about how they should view their so-far-so-good day. Both were chagrined at not foreseeing that Vasily's evacuation could have been aboard a *fixed* wing floatplane. His new benefactors had taxied upstream to pick him up – barely visible in their binoculars – in an amphibious eight-seater of a type favored by bush pilots. Good news. Not only would the plane outpace any helicopter exiting the zone of suspicion, but also a second plane had magically appeared capable of carrying another six passengers. Everybody could fly out. No one left on foot to see them on the way to their hospital hideaway. Thus unhindered by discovery inside the looming two-hour window, they had made it six meters inside the drippy fissure a good 14 minutes before the ghoulish glare of federal surveillance could begin to slurp up the surrounding sea of seething electromagnetism to parse the photons, which might betray them.

As relieved as they felt, they also agreed that they could merely be enjoying the contentment of the unknowing. Upon reflection, their ignorance started to seem unbounded. They petrified each other batting about dire possibilities, descending eventually to the worst cases. They dumped salutary probabilities behind a dark wall of survival ideation. Their amygdalae permitted only a gush of mental associations in one pitiless direction. Lost was the likelihood that federal surveillance might take a whole day to become anywhere near comprehensive, or the good chance that the ANSAT would be shot-down by a pair of hot-dogging SU23's -- putting any hot pursuit in abeyance.

Instead the duo unnerved each other with less likely constructs: "What if the ANSAT crew had been rescued by passing trappers?" That misfortune could, in turn, lead to the FSB learning about the twosome's possession of cell phones and codes, which could be compounded by the FSB's use of that information to lure the unsuspecting fugitives into the open with fake messages; Or, "Could Vasily have been met at a Magadan airfield by an arresting party of FSB goons who might be torturing him at this very moment?" Worst of all, one of them mentioned the gruesome possibility that a stray satellite sweep at just the right focus could have -- purely by chance -- spotted them crossing the *Tyry* River and followed them to this granite cleft.

Getting antsy, Aleksey cast about for some hard evidence to nail down this surfeit of supposition. He found something in his favorite frame of reference for hard thinking -- maps. He had belatedly recalled that he could again check high-resolution imagery of the helipad in Beliiya to see if anything had changed. The photos had not changed by a pixel for days, so if there had been an update, he would know it. And, if so, it might reveal some sign increased air traffic. His latest look was just the relief they needed. It showed the ferry on the opposite bank, but the helipad unchanged. Someone had coiled the fuel hose, but the same two helicopters remained unattended in the same configuration.

Concluding that Beliiya had not been brought into the search before Vasily left, he informed Lev and added, "Perhaps we've leaned a tad too far to the gloomy side. It's the downside of our respect for worst-case thinking. I say we drop it and use the remaining daylight to brainstorm a way inside this mysterious place. I'm guessing that the 'get wet' character points us upward considering all the condensation up there -- a trapdoor perchance."

"Or, a dip into one of these puddles..." Lev said off-hand being only half serious.

"Ok, let's think downward." The illogic of it sounded familiar to Russian brains groping around in Chinese militarese...

\* \* \*

"Damn, feel how warm it is in here. I'm almost dry," Lev said clapping both hands behind his thighs.

"Must be thermal springs. Not hot like a *banya* but warm enough indoors. That picturesque pond outside, which I'm sure you realize, connects underground to this spring, seemed just oddly lukewarm out there but it changes the ambiance of enclosed spaces like this."

"If it's mineral water, could not be better suited for a hospital."

"Might be the only reason the PLA used that strange overlay symbol -- hardly a model of clarity."

"Any other non-standard Chinese printed over this area map?"

"Not really, but we also have yet to find anything medical in nature, only engineer equipment storage and another standard resupply cylinder."

"Patience, ol' friend, there's still a lot of unexplored mine in the dark up there."

“Mine? More like an improved crevice. Hope this 50° climb levels off higher up there. No way we are gonna scale a pitch like that to the top of the ridge, which I sure hope is where it goes.”

“Speaking of ‘improved,’ do you think the PLA dug out that underwater link? It’s difficult to visualize how that little one-and-a-half-meter hog wallow out there connects *naturally* below the surface to the water in here.”

“Hard to say, but there’s no doubt they did chisel away the wall on this side to make the swim under the low point 20 centimeters wide instead of the meter or so, which looks about how thick that stone used to be.”

Shaking his head without acknowledging the answer, Lev veered from the subject again. “All this feels so contrived, if I were telling this story around a camp fire people would think it was *deus ex machina*. What I mean is...we see nothing for a week or so. Then all of a sudden, when things go wildly kaput, we find ourselves nearly atop a great hideout inside the world’s most secure entrance. Too pat. Too sweet by half.”

“Well by all means, let’s rescue your story. Wouldn’t want any barflies rolling their eyes at your yarns.”

“Tosser. Methinks, you’re carrying trash out of your *own* house, now.”

“But then, it could be straightforward cause and effect. We might *never* have seen sign of FSB (or they us), if this hide-away had not been here in the first place. It’s plausible that some surveillance nerds at search ops HQ responded to movement by those ‘locals’ in what they expected to be a dark area. The locals, in turn, were here, because their Chinese allies were exploiting these facilities... for guerrilla ops or training... who knows. Anyway, the FSB sees more movement and lingers a bit too long. So, when we show up and unleash a shit storm, it’s no surprise that there is something of singular military value at our doorstep.”

“Not a bad analysis, Aleksey Mikhailovich. Not that I was prepared to pass-up some feet-up time with a mountain between me and the hounds on our tails, but you’ve made the situation feel a stitch less eerie.”

“Great. I was so hoping to get promoted to morale officer in this outfit.”

“Good, then you’ll notice how our pool is lighting up. The sun must be getting high enough to beam a ray or two over the ridge and onto the lake, which means it’s later than I thought. We should get going. I’ll check for batteries in the supply tube. Why don’t you scout that first leg up the crevice.”

“Ok, but I fail to see any urgency. We will hardly be scheduling our time by the sun for a while. Sunset might well become a curiosity we will be looking up on the weather app, If we ever get a signal again, that is.”

“I was kinda hoping for a porthole or such somewhere in here.”

“Hard for me to visualize at this point.”

“You remember the old saying?” Aleksey called back two minutes later to Lev who was still saddling up at poolside.

“Which is that?”

“Be careful when you petition Odin.’ There is a switchback up here and it’s much less steep. Our wish was granted. Unfortunately, it’s an inclined heap of loose gravel. I’ve yet to get two meters up. Take a look. It could take hours to get to the end of my flashlight beam.” They bumbled around for ten minutes before Lev found a prearranged way up. Underneath on the inward sloping sidewall, the PLA’s engineers had congealed the loose scree into shallow steps using the same sprayed-on plastic that coated the interiors of PLA caches. The handy substance that worked so well to seal dirt caves worked as well to stabilize loose footing.

Climbing over a variety of rock surfaces at differing grades inside alternately tight tunnels and cavernous chambers, they found equipment and facilities tucked into shafts radiating out from the main passageway. The arrangement was typical of a field hospital moved indoors and laid out vertically. Nothing fancy anywhere, but there were smaller, higher-ceilinged sleeping quarters, which were meant for officers as well as some thickly coated, vented caves that were clearly operating rooms. Having estimated that they must have nearly come up under the ridge crest, the duo postponed the search for openings until they had a full night’s sleep – on bunks for the first time in a harrowing week. They bedded down in the nearest officer’s quarters in full agreement that day-two priority would be locating some upper-level egress. They needed to assess the threat of unfriendly ingress and to find satellite reception.

As Lev slid into his sleeping bag he said, “I know nothing about mining beyond digging bunkers, but every one of those side passages looked hand-hewn to me.”

“That’s one way of putting it. Did seem odd they were so short. No long, rambling shafts. The deepest, widest, highest ones were those occupied by the PLA for living and working spaces, and they’re not much.”

“Yes, but my point is that none of this appears to have been done by Chinese engineers who would have mechanized the effort.”

“So? Your point is?”

“My point is: if not a PLA construct, then why doesn’t someone -- local miners, their kids, wives -- know about this place? Seems obvious that someone should have told the provincial officials about it. They presumably sent the insurgents here. Makes one wonder... who were the original diggers?”

“The upside is that it’s likely the FSB surely won’t know either. Otherwise you seem to have uncovered a mystery, one which may turn out to be relevant although right now I’m at a loss to see how...”

“Well,” said Lev with a grunt as he snap rolled over, head pillowed for sleep, “at least we know now *how* the Chinese working with the insurgents managed to access these amenities without giving them away.”

They were burning C4 for their first coffee, when Aleksey stiffened without lifting his head. “Lev,” he stage whispered, “hear that? I hear growling. Not a bear. A good way up that main passage. Listen.”

“Would wolves come into an inhabited place?” Lev asked as they both grabbed M4 pistol grips.

“Guess it depends on how hungry they are. But, we haven’t eaten anything up here. Even wolves can’t smell packaged food.”

“Bugger, I hear it now. You’re right it’s not bear-like. Would a wolf huff like that between growls? Sounds kinda like a muffled bark. Wolves bark?”

“Do not know,” replied Aleksey looking up and spinning a forefinger over his head. “Nor do I have a clue what to do if it is. A wolf hunt in the dark sounds like a colossal ‘maggot wrestle.’”

“‘Maggot’ what?”

“It’s an Americanism. Doesn’t translate well.”

Remaining seated, each one pulled his carbine up to a modified firing position with the stock under his right armpit and both swiveled on their butts pointing muzzles at the exit. Benumbed, there they sat, in the low yellow light of burning C4, looking as idiotic as they felt.

It was Lev who sliced through the tension with a burst of logic. “Chili?” he called in the first word spoken aloud in some long anxious moments. A frustrated whine from the main passage was his welcome answer.

“I’ll be damned,” said Aleksey following Lev’s sprint out, “why didn’t I think of that? Should have realized that Vasily’s new friends were not going to take a dog aboard one of their puddle jumpers.” He thought, also wondering how Lev knew to go uphill and to do so with such agility -- up a steep boulder pile. He trailed his excited friend shining his light in front of the leaping form.

The poor pup was stuck, unwilling to descend from a two and a half meter ledge above a cluster of soccer ball-sized stones. She had come at least eight kilometers, wiggled somehow into the mine and minced down a dark, treacherous slope in the passage only to be stymied on their doorstep. Like most dogs, she sought human help before deciding to negotiate the dicey drop. Left on her own she probably would have figured a way to skitter down. Aleksey brushed aside the possible pitfalls of a dog’s presence in their cave and joined Lev in a warm rush of greeting happiness.

“Good dog. Stay. We’ll get you down...” Lev whispered at the wagging form above. Once he had her in his arms, he continued a steady stream of endearments, notably he asked, “How’d you get in here, pretty one?”

Aleksey patted her head, “How indeed, clever beast. Maybe you can show us some ways out,” he said going nose to nose and ruffling her ears. Turning to Lev, he added, “Bet there was a hell of a wrangle to keep her off the plane.” Then looking away with a shaking head he said, “Wonder how things stand now with Vasily’s new pals?”

Neither man was too mystified about how the dog had contrived to find the mine. Russian lore was replete with long lost dog stories, in which they found missing masters in unlikely places – battlefields, jails, ships, etc. At the moment the advantages of her help in detecting intruders and locating water seemed to outweigh the possibility that she might give them away somehow. Aleksey specifically decided not to raise the issue of that danger until the pursuit entered the “deep search” phase.

He and Lev had already confirmed each other’s suppositions about how the standard military search operation would proceed. As they had dried off around the thermal pool, they had taken turns ticking off the chronology: first, an out-to-in rush along obvious avenues of egress; followed by an in-to-out harder look; leading to a methodical grid pattern effort; and concluding with

a deep search inside the 10-15 kilometer circle delimiting the area in which the fugitives could have walked before high resolution surveillance was in place. It was most likely during this last stage when the fugitives would have to worry about the border constabulary troops nosing into mines, caves and crevices. At that juncture one could envision observers or surveillance gear tracking a dog's movements in and out of interior spaces – not to mention smelling vents for smoke, crawling into holes, focusing ground surveillance on suspicious openings for failures in light or heat discipline – the list went on... Aleksey hoped he and Lev – maybe with Chili's help – could identify the switch over to that latter phase.

After bonding ever closer to the dog by feeding her, the familiarization with their abode got underway. As Lev picked up his M4, he caught Aleksey's questioning look and jutted his chin toward the animal saying, "Earlier, what were you growling at sweetie? Want to go take a look?" Chili looked up politely from her food rock and went right back to nosing all around it hoping to find more. "Me too, pretty thing. No rush," said Aleksey, and turning to Lev said, "give me a minute to dig out my pistol. I'd rather have it in these tight spaces, though do not expect to need it. She could have been sensing any damned vermin. Be right with you. We do need to get going, anyway." He took only three steps toward his pack when it happened.

This time the dog only snap snarled once as she leaped toward the passageway. Lev was boulder dancing his best behind her. Aleksey caught a glimpse of them turning downhill, but kept digging for his 9mm. To her ever-lasting credit, this mutt did not launch into a typical barking howl in the chase. Aleksey was both pleased and astounded at the depth of her training. As he made the first steep descent still seeing nothing in his beam, he heard a heart-stabbing squeal of pain. It was not Lev.

"What was it? Is she hurt," asked Aleksey.

Lev seemed hesitant, "No think she hit her first slag pile a bit too fast. No break. No cuts, but she'll limp around for a while. However," Lev added with ominous emphasis, "'not an 'it.' We were chasing a someone – someone female."

"A woman? You sure? How?"

"Nude woman."

"Holy shit. Just what we need," said Aleksey, pausing two beats. "Russian or Chinese? Could you see?"

"Dark hair that was longer than most Asians."



“Ok, why naked? How’s that happen?”

“Be buggered if I know, but have you noticed it’s gotten warmer the more we’ve climbed? Hot springs, heat rises and all that? Could be hotter uphill where she’d been, who knows. And... as you may know, women can be compulsive about sweat.”

“Let us hope that’s all there is to it...”

“Anyway,” said Lev tersely to change the subject. Surely, we can leave the mutt here while we get her. Let’s go.”

“Get her? Not so sure about that. Maybe we should bat that one around a bit,” said Aleksey feeling a little guilty about his hesitancy.

“Surely you jest?”

“I am some way short of certitude, but you must admit she has quite a lead on us by now. Do we really want a repeat of yesterday’s climb back up here with a prisoner in hand? Or, might we be chasing her out some exit we know nothing about? Any bipedal movement outside is going to draw some unwanted attention. We want FSB surveillance concentrating on something klicks away from here, not within meters of some entrance. Don’t we?”

“Can see some merit there. And, I can imagine how she could be a fellow fugitive especially if she’s Chinese – perhaps even a potential ally.”

“Yes, that too. She could be running simply because we are men – unexpected men.”

“Did I mention she was naked?”

“Indeed you did. That may well have been the only reason she ran,” Aleksey added beginning to feel less the indecisive dip. “Prisoners come with a shitload of problems. If we could somehow keep her out of sight without all the POW baggage, might be better in the long run.”

“Your inclinations have merit, but – a big *but* – only if she’s in it for the whole package tour, which means more than just staying inside. Has she even heard of light discipline? How are we gonna know how much she knows about what she (we) are up against? She ever heard of thermal imagery? Ever even seen a high res sat shot?”

“Agree. It could be a grueling, chancy, pain-in-the-ass. But, we’ll have to decide whether it’s more demanding or more dangerous than keeping track of a POW.”

“You’re bringing to mind an image of carrying a squealing, squirming, naked youngster demanding to be left alone to pee or some such.”

“And,” added Aleksey, “refusing to acknowledge even understanding our Russian or my Chinese. Could never know where we stood with her. Captivity could turn someone merely scared into a hard-core enemy.”

“Hard to say. She could also agree completely with our program, but be a fuck-up. Unlike our mothers, not all women are models of reliability.”

“Some personal experience, eh? But then, it depends on how long she’s been in here. This place stayed secret from those insurgents. If she was hiding through that – well...”

They battered the subject around for too long, considering how little they knew about their latest dwelling. Eventually the pair settled it. They would not try to meet her face to face. Mutuality of endangerment was something that they could assess by exchanging notes or by shouting down a tunnel at distances, which left each party unseen. Lev correctly surmised that they could gain as much as she did from remaining unobserved. They had started calling her “cave girl” and thought of using the sobriquet as a way of goading her to name herself in reply.

Having done their best planning to reassure their anti-social cave mate, they proceeded to collaborate on one of Aleksey’s notorious lists. This one designed to get answers to crucial questions about her. They needed to know if she had a reliable supply of food and access to one of the hospital’s compost toilets. Did she also want to stay hidden from the authorities? Regardless, would she do so? Would she acknowledge the need for numerous precautions to counter thermal, satellite, and ground observer scrutiny? Could she undertake them without help? Would she forgo *all* use of generators? What did she need to know from the two soldiers to be secure for some weeks? Could she use weapons? The items listed ran to a couple dozen and would take some serious time and effort to convey. Refinements would need to be added, like the last one, which had belatedly dawned on them. Counter-intuitively, it would be necessary to keep existing vents *open* since they would already be glowing with the heat from the hot spring and any change might attract attention on satellite or RPV thermal image strip scans. When the trickle of list ideas dried up, they decided to send the most circumspect short note possible with only the fewest critical bullet points on it – in three languages. Aleksey wrote it on an end paper of a medical manual in three close-as-he-could translations: “Danger outside and above. Please stay in mine. If send phone message, extra danger. Please never generate electricity.” The most restrictive vocabulary was international English, with its meager 5,000-word limit.

In order to get her attention, and yet avoid frightening her with their proximity, they put the paper into a large, closed tin can the staff had used for trash. Once thrown it clanged long and loud – but unthreateningly – from the top of the big cavern down the longest, steep incline in the mine.

Even though, they had not yet done a thorough reconnaissance of the passageway and side galleries on the way up, they decided to go uphill first to continue familiarization. It did indeed become warmer and they learned they had bedded-down much further from the top than they had supposed. At the pinnacle – at least where all the passages went horizontal – they could see a spot where the geological fissure appeared to close into a feature five to seven meters overhead that brought together two monstrous slabs of smooth granite – the lighter khaki one outshining its darker partner. The closure explained the trapped heat, but left them (literally) in the dark about how the huge mine might be vented. They had learned even less about where they might locate an exit and began to consider the possibility that there might not be openings large enough for a man. However, the number and complexity of the horizontal shafts had grown higher up. Many of the dozen or so side tunnels ended in “tees” with unexplored corridors spreading left and right into the darkness. Near the top the main passageway – following the rising base of the great cleft – had become faintly illuminated by a dull, inexplicable glow. At first that had encouraged them about finding an easy way out, but the apparent dead-end overhead left them without a clue about how to proceed. Laboriously trudging into every cavity to obtain a field of view and a decent electronic signal would be too time consuming, because there was no telling what nasty surprise might attend remaining out of touch for too long.

Aleksey sat and Lev meandered in little circles with his head cocked back, ogling the cavernous “roof” at the limits of his flashlight. Lev’s effort paid off. He stopped, stared harder, and said, “Something familiar, Aleksey Mikhailovich, about that granite overhead.” He reached down, picked up some jigger-sized stones, and began to throw one after another at the peculiar juncture of the giant boulders. “Hear that? *That is not* pebble hitting a rock wall. That’s plastic, fiberglass mayhap, but it’s something man-made. That chimney pot section of the darker wall’s disappearance over the lighter one reminded me of a movie set from American Westerns.”

Immediately, Aleksey was on his feet, head cranked back, “Think it covers some natural opening?”

“It would certainly be a cheaper, quicker way to modify this space (perhaps fully enclose it) than moving stone or laying concrete.”

“Looks to me as if we’re seeing yet another clever PLA adaptation.”

“So, it’s possible they did more of this. For instance, hiding viewing ports. Wouldn’t it be a good way to enclose an OP?”

“What’s your point? Follow the fiberglass?”

“Indeed, find more plastic and we’ll find our OP. I’m starting by finding where that fake wall up there begins. Remember that dark gap a few meters back? I’ll bet it or some similar void has steps.”

\* \* \*

Lev was taking his turn on the binoculars. He alternated randomly between two narrow slits peering out under wide overhangs. One overlooked an arc from north to east-southeast, and the other had a southeast to south view. He had let the conversation lapse, as he got accustomed to scrunching down to low openings that required him to lean his weight onto his knees against the rock. It kept his back straight. (Neither of them could afford to risk affront to their middle-aged backs.) The posture only aggravated the difficulty of being a thorough observer in such abysmal visibility. He struggled to confirm his initial scan, which had seemed to reveal no sign of enemy forces -- air or ground. The clouds had cajoled the sun into hiding, and he was annoyed that he had been unable to see any part of the scene of the firefight. Not only was the closer half of the river basin in the lee of the near-bank timberline, but scuttling fur balls of charcoal mist – pregnant with rain -- persistently enshrouded the far half. The unremitting drizzle thickened and waned, smudging a sector only to have it peek out later. It was hard to be methodical. His frustrations obscured the rugged charm of the sodden landscape. The only color came from foreground conifers of the darkest green fringing a forest of black spears blended farther out into solid, dark, needled mats. The matte grey river tangled over a medley of stones varying from burnt-russet to black -- highlighted by blanched sand. Elevations fuzzed into formless grubby grey walls outlined by sharper lines delineating peaks and ridge crests against an undifferentiated gunmetal blur of sky.

Aleksey worked the satellite imagery, his eyes stuck fast to the GPS screen. He was extra busy because the satellite photos had updated since he last looked. The PRC was doing it once or

more per day – a strange but welcome development of the last 48 hours. At the moment, he was nearing the end of a tedious task searching the archive along likely routes to Beliiya for any sign of human transit. Yesterday two HINDs were still on the helipad. Today they had gone. So, the search operation was underway in some fashion or another. It depended upon whether the chopper sortie from Beliiya was just a reflexive response to news of the firefight or the first wave of a systematic hunt. Then again, it was conceivable that the aircraft had not come their way at all. They may have left town for some distant assembly area to join the air arm of the search operation. Therefore, it seemed worthwhile to find the ANSAT, which might reveal something more about the time available. Aleksey was still tempted to believe the notion that an irresponsible fighter pilot had shot-down the errant craft and that might stop-the-show long enough for them to walk out from under the sword of Damocles dangling over them. However, he also felt some guilt about slighting the lower Tyry valley – the most likely ingress from Yakutsk – from where the mobilized infantry would come.

Lev's audible musings intruded on Aleksey's concentration. "If I were commanding a search of this magnitude, wonder what I would think about a report of a crash site?" He had not lifted his eyes from the terrain to the southeast, "Would I jump to the presumption that it was the missing ANSAT? Or, would I question the report itself? Better include some convincing photos with accurate map coordinates, or the news might not divert me from the frenzy that attends such 'blue sky' ops -- with deadlines of yesterday. Personally, I might have become quite resistant to change at this late stage. By this time, the workload would have buried a commander in frantic preparations for -- what -- 48 hours or so. One often has to build immoderate barriers to distraction at times like these..."

"Yet your first subject of comment was the ANSAT?" Aleksey said betraying no sign of his own guilty conscience. "I cannot help but note that you didn't start that last train of thought by wondering about naval cooperation with the op, which might support the search in some dangerous ways; or, by asking what access the FSB might have to archives of standard PRC commercial sat coverage. You didn't even question why Beliiya's choppers have sat on their asses for so long."

"Ok, I'll concede that my hopes for the worst to befall the ANSAT crew may have crept into my thinking. However, take heed of my titchy stroll in our enemy's shoes. I'm coming round to the proposition that this spook CO may be running late, but he will descend on us with the whole Megillah – first."

“Ok ‘commander,’ let’s say you get a report with photos of mangled metal. What do you do? Excited staff weenies are hanging on your answer.”

“Same thing I’d do for any solid lead on my quarry with no *positive* ID. I’d divert resources: men, blade time, surveillance priority, etc. from my least promising secondary objectives and continue to march – *i.e.*, by the book.”

“Not bad at all...that analysis,” Aleksey said with a grin devoid of irony. “You’ve convinced me, I’m shifting from the road-to-Beliya over to air and water routes from Yakutsk.”

“Good,” Lev said and continued with hardly a pause, “I was thinking – again as big search gaffer – we ought not to short change the *eastern* approaches. Magadan could become a staging area for air assets. Naval support for the op, in particular, could do it, even if it’s only log support. And, if this wears on, Magadan could also become a point of departure for this op’s biggest headache – fuel. They can open the ‘Road of Bones’ from there and truck petrol to within 60 or 70 klicks of this place, right?”

“Check. And, what’s worse, there *is* a unimproved track from here to the main highway up the *Dyby* valley. So yes indeed, we keep Magadan on our radar, but in these early days we need to check the *Tyry* and *Batyly* valleys most often.”

“Concur, but before we leave the subject, we *are* reasonably sure the ANSAT did not turn up in Beliya – are we not?”

“Yes, I scoured high res sat photos all around the village and the good LZ’s within an easy walk. Nothing.”

“So is it possible they went north to the ROB?”

“Doubt it. There’s very little transit there even in the winter when ice makes it more traffic-able. It’s near empty this time of year. While I agree that the search force may use the thing, they’ll have to do some serious engineering work on it before they do so. Whether they do or not may become a good measure of how serious they are about finding us.”

“Fine. So, when I do check up there, it’ll be the last priority, if there’s time to spare. Kinda like today.”

“Be my guest. Anything seems possible about now,” Aleksey said with an unusual air of resignation.

Instead of finishing by policing their roost and returning to quarters, they found dry spots to lean seated against a wall and picked up the unfinished thread. Without explicitly saying so, they

felt a mutual need to examine the ANSAT deception further. Their differences on that subject boiled down to individual perceptions about how much political muscle their trackers could muster to get satellite and UAV priorities. In retrospect, Lev felt the one-hour window may have been too generous. Aleksey countered by citing the hard evidence that the hunt had taken at least a day longer than estimated -- noting that if they had been observed, the spies would have already sent fewer men more quickly to their doorstep.

Lev conceded the point, but pointed out a new worry. They had not found a way to observe the base of their own ridge, front or back. In the last 24 hours a dozen men could be tearing the woods apart down there undetected. That stopped the ANSAT deception review and prompted them to schedule a climb down to check their rear. Such a trip could also serve as an opportunity to engage the "cave girl." Whether the news was good or bad -- on either score -- it would be a half-day well spent.

While eating an overdue meal and getting ready for the descent, they resumed discussion of earlier business, which segued easily into a critique of all their attempts to deceive the FSB. They soon reached a glum consensus on the matter of Lt. Cho's body. It was hard to deny that Aleksey's attempt to pass off Cho's corpse as his own had turned into wasted time. Once Lev had killed a federal agent, the FSB would have been obliged to go after the trio whether Aleksey had been dead or alive. The fact that the pursuit had shown up so near Cho's cache so quickly confirmed how little time the security forces had lost in tracking them down.

"But, I've always wondered," said Lev, "how did you expect them to mistake Cho's body for yours?"

"I'll be damned, I'd forgotten you hadn't ever seen him. Well, he didn't have that classic Han Chinese look. (Probably why he was assigned to both the advance party and the rear party in the war.) He was a Uighur, often called China's white minority. Then, consider Eurasian me. We had same hair, eyes and similar height/weight. Not least of all, I gave him a full-face camouflage paint job and he looked like he'd hidden out in the compost pile."

"Not a bad try, ol' chap -- more plausible than I'd thought all this time. It's a shame that I had that run-in with the lurker -- so to speak," he said with a sly grin. "Had I not, we might have had a more leisurely stroll by Beliiya on our way out."

In the ensuing deliberations, each man challenged the other's exact recollections, but still reached consensus on each deception's value. Their final assessment was: two likely successes,

one flop, one unknown, one pending and one unknowable. The winner was sending Igor Vladimirovich downstream, which they credited with sparing them surveillance from the air for days into the trek. The other favorable outcome was the risky walk by Beliiya to leave the scene by the northeast corridor, which got the escape off to a safe start. The ANSAT ruse was one still hanging fire and the other one on-hold was the planted SSB radio, which could have undermined Aunt Li Li as an informant -- something they might yet learn about, someday. (If credible to the FSB, it was possible that her boys could have led them to other PLA caches.) They had to admit they could never expect to learn the fate of the library atlas' map pages nor what effect they may have had -- if found. Overall, it was not an unusual result. That is war.

Despite the mixed findings, none of their deceptions appeared to have backfired. The no-harm-done appraisal and the intellectually honest conversation re-strengthened their bond, lifted their spirits, and left them more reassured about their own abilities to improvise.

\* \* \*

As Lev's head broke the surface, he put one dripping finger across his lips. "She's over there, alright," he whispered, "inside the outer cave entrance... in the sun."

"Damn, is she coming under behind you?" Aleksey asked, also in an unnecessary whisper.

"Don't think so. She didn't see me. Looks settled in for a sun bath, but she'll be in the shade soon enough -- presuming she doesn't go outside."

"Wonderful," Aleksey said, lifting a palm up and rolling his eyes to the ceiling, "we won't get a read on the exterior ground level threat, and now we are missing a opportunity up top. There'll be some terrific visibility up there."

"You're spot on, this jaunt could have been a dodgy call. Who knows if the sun will still be out by the time we get all the way back up." Lev paused making a be-that-as-it-may brush outward with his hands as he pulled on his dry trousers and said, "But then again, maybe we should stay and establish comms with her while we're here."

"Uh-huh, but we cannot do so in this confined space. With us here, surfacing, would be worse for her than busting in on Stalin's ghost. She'd lose it."

"Indeed, we'll have to back off a tic and wait up there on the next level out of sight. Far enough so she won't feel trapped. Presumably that also means leaving a note here," he patted a poolside niche in a prominent rock.



“A note, or three...”

“No, just English. I heard her whisper-singing an *American* song.”

“What song?”

“Seriously? It matters? Blimey...” Lev replied tugging his clean socks on with evident irritation.

“When did you ever hear an American woman sing?”

“...*De temps perdu... mon ami.*”

“Really... Proust? I guess I know when I’ve been topped. Even so, I’d better write it in International English lest one of your – oh, so – erudite British phrases leads to misunderstanding.”

Then having done so, Aleksey picked up his pack, handed Lev the note and said, “See you upstairs. Speed out there. We don’t want her popping in on your *toilette*, now do we?”

“Ok, in a sec. Let me get on some shoes and saddle-up. I now know why we found her nude. How many times a day is one going to get undressed and all the way dressed again just to use this exotic doorway?”

When it came, the female voice was stentorian and assured. The cadence was let’s-get-on-with-it. “*Başka bir şey var ma? Biraz Uighurce biliyor mis niz?*” she said.

“Blah, babble, babble...Uighur...mumble, Ms.,” is what they heard.

“I caught ‘Uighur,’” Aleksey said in a faint whisper.

“Like Cho, eh?” Lev said jutting his jaw toward Aleksey’s nearest ear. He exhaled into it, “Check. Stay with English, though.”

“We hear. Do not understand,” he said aloud enunciating at a measured pace.

“You are American, no?”

“Not so. Lived in America. Born in Russia.” Aleksey chose to simplify his vocabulary in keeping with what he could remember of Globish.

“Good English. Stay slow,” she replied and without a pause added, “my hoosbahn is soldeeyair. Soon will jum back weeth mahnee comrades.”

Aleksey turned, shrugged, “So-what,” at Lev and turned back toward the corridor saying, “if not Russian secret police – ok. Chinese soldiers are friends. Province police also friends.”

“Secret police, no... But, name what oh-thair police?”

“Okhotsk police.”

“Ok, If hoosbahn not see thees womahn be A-ok, he and comrades weel keel you and all yoor comrades.”

“Me and only one friend will never hurt you. No way,” Aleksey said with as much sincerity as he could summon. “No killing necessary.”

“*Inshallah*,” she said with the internationally recognized term for hope so. “No problems for me. Tale hoosbahn no killing necessary,” she added correcting her pronunciation of the last phrase to mimic Aleksey.

Aleksey turned his chagrined countenance to face Lev’s alarmed expression. “She bluffing?” he asked in a low murmur.

“Don’t challenge her. Let’s just beg...” Lev replied so low Aleksey could not make out the last few words.

“Not necessary phone your husband. It is very dangerous.”

“Ok, ok, I get yoor note, ‘...phone very dangerous.’” She paused two beats and said, “Yoor Chinese note very good. Doe you speak also very good?” Again, her answer mimicked the corrected English.

The switch to Chinese brought more amity and fuller understanding. That language brimmed with courteous expressions and Aleksey turned on his best mandarin to emphasize humility and accommodation. Like most Uighurs she was bilingual and had chosen her third language, English, at the outset only because she had such low expectations from school-taught Russians who, as a rule, learned to read Chinese and little more.

With Lev holding the written list and kibitzing in whispers, they made it through the list of precautions and logistical needs. She cited no substantive objections once Aleksey explained their reasoning, and she made no unexpected demands. The men were to stay clear of her, announce their movements, and alternate sole occupancy of upper and lower exits in half-day increments, meaning the men could use their observation post in the AM on one day and the PM on the next. She also stated a requirement for six fuel cells from the ER as back up for her disallowed generator.

Although the two and a half-hour dialogue had gone better than either man had expected, all was not well. She had remained adamant – unreasonably so in Lev’s view – on the point of communication with her spouse. Despite Aleksey’s suspicions that she was still bluffing about her potential for retaliation, (if she were to be molested) Lev believed that she should have showed

greater concern for their mutual security needs. She would not identify her ostensible capability to reach someone outside the mine, nor would she agree to forego use of any such means. They had noted the possibility of having to live at odds with an unwanted neighbor. However, now that the hypothetical proposition had grown the teeth of reality, it no longer seemed like such a pain-free risk. Lacking a remedy, they let the matter drift – without intending to do so.

“No more doubt about the effect of our little ANSAT ploy,” Aleksey said lowering his binoculars and wobbling his head in dismay. “They are flocking out there. I just counted helo number six and we can’t even see the southwestern quad.” He had hopped between both slots in the OP to maximize the rare access to sunlit views and the luck of their turn up top.

“No one’s calling off any search op, but that doesn’t confirm that they weren’t delayed. Could have been worse,” Lev said unwilling to lift his stare from his GPS. “What the sat sees is nothing in the spots you’ve been ticking off. And, the transient murkiness looks familiar – as if they’re still transmitting photography from yesterday.”

“What about the firefight site?”

“Surprisingly clear view from overhead and no sign of visitors – that would be yesterday. All the ANSAT crew’s rubbish still strewn about...”

“Objectively, we are in no more jeopardy than before, but my skin’s crawling...”

“Me too. I think we feel so sod-wit wonky because that bitch can bring them swarming up our asses minutes after she hits the press-to-talk button any damn time she pleases.”

“She’s lying, old friend, there’s no hubby looming. I’m betting so. Can’t really blame her. What would you do, stuck between the devil and deep kimchi?”

“Actually, I think I’d come up with a more imaginative lie... But, I take your point.”

“Your more plausible lie could be more disturbing by making her appear more devious, if we found some flaw in her story. There’s an elegant simplicity somehow to, ‘I’ll-tell-on-you.’”

“Could be... But what if she’s got something we haven’t thought of? Who knows, a landline maybe. Let’s say someday, she just picks up a big black handset and rotary dials hubby’s number from memory... Blimey that’s a stretch. I’m getting paranoid.”

“Son of a grumpy goat. Not at all, that’s a fantastic insight. Dammit, wire *is* plausible. Believe it or not I’ve run that one by my mental shit detectors a couple of times since she made that threat. But, the notion foundered on the issue of technical difficulty and the lack of need on the part

of the PLA,” Aleksey said as he stepped from his post to squat beside Lev saying, “though they did have the technical wherewithal.” He lowered his head, eyes up, in a serious story telling mode.

“Get this, she could be using wire laid by PLA engineers who developed a way some time ago to lay some super-strong, super-fine carbon fiber cable *by air*. They needed something low-tech like that to *engineer* a way around the NSA. No realistic hope of one-upping them in the high-tech commo game.”

Aleksey settled onto the nearest stone protrusion, “The whole notion started with Cho’s unsatisfactory explanations for why the NSA never detected the myriad logistics preparations and training that it took to field a hundred thousand-man force in westernmost China. The troops whose footprints we are following. All he could come up with was they were ‘isolated’ the whole time and he never saw so much as a walky-talky capable of electronic transmission. At first, I presumed the isolation fostered self-sufficiency and the electro-spectrum silence must have been a training device to teach reliance on the passive GPS. However, that left out army-sized logistical imperatives. Considering the sizable support component, how does such an HQ feed, fuel, clothe and shelter three corps out of touch with the homeland? When you factor in the NSA’s undisputed capability to suck up and read every data-bearing electron in the atmosphere, the PLA was forced to do something *radical* -- something violating the dialectic – retrogressing. Better yet, revising the established empirical laws of history by resorting to more secure albeit less sophisticated...”

“Not so radical, Aleksey Mikhailovich, more like maximizing the existing technology to gain the advantage. After all, Alexander, Hannibal, Bonaparte, did not have to devise new weapons or transport to win. They did it with the technology extant in their times. The best example is probably WWII in the Pacific. The USA did not overwhelm the Japanese with high-tech doodads. Instead, they mass-produced prodigious quantities of mostly run-of-the-mill weaponry and ordinary transport to revolutionize amphibious warfare. Their fighter aircraft were second best to the Zero and their iconic landing craft with the drop-ramp barely won its place in the arsenal over a standard New England fishing boat. The only technological edge the Americans had was radar. That’s big but not decisive...”

“So there *is* some historical precedent for such a major strategic approach? The PLA could have *logically* reached back into the Korean War experience and laid wire? Thousands of miles of carbon nanotubes or some such – damn the cost – stretched all the ways to western Xinjiang. For unavoidable hard copy message traffic, it’s not inconceivable that they could have

made do with motorcycle messengers in addition exploiting civil aviation assets. Imagine how many two wheelers jam those western roads and how much admin shit an *Antonov 22* could deliver if the state secretly commandeered twenty percent of the seats on every other flight.

PLA logisticians could have handled bulk cargo much the same way. They could have come close to meeting the fuel-stingy needs of three foot-mobile corps by expropriating passenger space on trains and tonnage aboard motor transport of 'frivolous' luxury consumer goods. After all, these forces may well have been the lightest light infantry of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

"Hello darling," Aleksey interrupted himself to greet the swooping tail wagging a wiggling fur bundle.

While Lev gave Chili's ears a thorough ruffle, he said, "Aren't you excluding bulk logistics for our 100 K red ramblers *during* the trek? I mean there would be few secure, low tech means for transport of those cache canisters and their emplacement tools."

"Yes, that would have been in another theater – hidden differently. I had always supposed they hid those amongst fake contractors in the mostly bogus 'oil rush' to the RFE."

"Roger, but some cylinders would necessarily have gone to Xinjiang for training purposes. Would they not? Hardly think the PLA would have risked something so secret on civilian transport."

"No, but, that gets me to my most 'creative' supposition," Aleksey let slip a wry beam. I am supposing – not unreasonably – that this force may have carried the myriad electronics alongside cargo for *nuke* ops. Then there is the dicey part. They could have transported all the heavy shit, including cache canisters, this hospital, etc. in fake *mobile nukes*."

"Bit of a swallow, that," said Lev. "Aren't you implying that the Alaskan Op had to be critical enough for our paranoid lil' red comrades to drop their nuclear guard? You are edging up on codswallop old friend."

"Have to admit, it's hard to contest your reaction. However, it would not have been dropped for long. And, you recall, they did time-scale this whole thing – a five year plan – to coincide with our interregnum in Russia and a period when the USA was transfixed by the Pentagon's revived monomania about terrorism. I also suspect that reduced nuke capability wasn't the only risk this geopolitical window allowed. Also, the PLA more than likely had to drop a chunk of their conventional guard forces along the Sino-Russian border. Remember the whole Chinese state was also busily massing at this time for the main attack on Taiwan and would have needed

the manpower. It's plausible that they supplanted at least 50,000 of the visible border-guard reserve with those commando trainees. That border force has been in place for over a half-century, but hiding the whole shebang from the NSA to gain strategic surprise may have been worth it -- or as they say, was a well calculated risk." Aleksey palmed away any interruption, ignoring Lev's fiddling with something around Chili's collar, and said, "The 50 K number was merely a showpiece but feasible because the grand trek training program kept at least half the commando force dispersed in the field at all times in those virtually undetectable five-man crews. That part, at least, is solid fact. It's supported by first-hand testimony from Second Lieutenant Cho."

Lev lifted his head from his hand, smiled, and said, "Quite a credible hypothesis, professor, but the PLA's use of wire comms might be moot. I can read enough of our cave girl's Mandarin," he raised a hand clasping a small paper, "to infer that she's going to forego any 'electric' messaging. Not to mention, the more important news. She's apparently co-opted our best early warning system as a messenger..."

"True enough, on both counts," said Aleksey raising his eyes from the note. "At least, she's made it clear that she acknowledges our concerns as valid. Her compliance is untested. Nonetheless, it appears my monologue has taken you roundabout on the 'boat that no longer goes to Vladivostok,'" Aleksey added, bemused.

"At least, you've convinced me not to exclude all possibility of landlines in the People's arsenal. Though it's hardly making me feel less crawly about the spooks and troops infesting our rockbound highland home."

"Our 'rock' what? Get a grip. Don't lose-it on me, Lev Ivanovich," Aleksey chuckled. "We're in a no-other-choice, clammy, stone crack for who knows how long -- stuck with a cave-mate that might still turn out to be a loose cannon."

"Surprised myself with that barmy bit. Maybe I spent too much time looking out in the sunshine..."

"You *were* gone awhile. I was going to ask you if she was naked again."

"No, as a matter of fact, cave girl was lying on a rock upslope tilted *away* from me, which is why I'm so sure she didn't see my slippery eyeballs gazing *beyond* her out the door. Bet you didn't notice (I didn't) what a picture-perfect little dell we dashed through on our way here."

"Likable mountain Taiga as I recall."

“Much more. In the sun, it’s downright idyllic. Made me want to see it someday under different circumstances. Had she been naked, I’d still have had a long stare at that bonny lil’ glen.”

“High praise indeed but, don’t expect we’ll be seeing it again for some time. Have to await our turn downstairs and there’s no chance it’ll be sunny tomorrow. Better forego the aesthetic rumination now while we’ve got stunning visibility up here. I say we fix on fuel. It’s early days yet, but with all this air traffic, having flown from far away to get here, they’ll need to top-off soon enough. May become important to know how it gets here, where it goes, etc.”

“Check,” Lev said looking down and clicking at his handset. “I do want to check the ROB – east and west from where our northerly track joins it – and then look for barge traffic on the Aldan near where the main road meets the water at Khandyga...”

“Khandyga? Never heard of it. Are you implying there’s a *port* connecting the big river to the 90% useless ‘Road of Bones?’”

“Haven’t looked close-up yet on the Sat-Nav but I’m not expecting much -- maybe some rip-rap and a piling or two. My guess is...” He cut off his next word as they both perked to the crack-shewyoo of a long tube firearm.

“What the fuck – over?” Aleksey said, almost shoving his head and binos out the narrow slit. “Sounds like it’s from below our line of sight,” he jabbed straight down with an index finger. “Luckily it’s this side of the ridge from the pocket valley. Our startle prone neighbor probably won’t hear a thing.”

“Chili?” Lev hissed shelving his GPS and sliding crab-like down the low exit from the OP, “Come silly mutt. Here sweetie,” he called aloud in the passageway.

Aleksey heard the low greeting growl and happy panting not long thereafter, followed by some more scolding endearments and Lev’s boots crunching gravel back at the OP access tunnel.

“She’s fine. Perhaps it’s time for a system to monitor her whereabouts.”

Aleksey nodded, “Your call, Colonel. Let me know what you come up with.” Then, making a sideways brushing gesture, he revived the subject of shots fired. “So... what was the target? Trying for fresh meat? A green troop shooting any damn thing? Recon by fire?”

“Let’s hope it’s the former not the latter. The less discipline there is out there; the better for us,” Lev said not looking up from his enthusiastic petting. “If you don’t mind continuing to march alone here, think I’ll have another squiz at likely places where the pooch could have gotten inside. Sunshine lights up apertures not noticeable under an overcast.”

“Good point. I’ve got the conn,” Aleksey said, and then added, “won’t hurt to spend more time climbing up and down this complex. Constant movement is one antidote to cabin fever and it might keep us fit.”

“No mistake, going pear-shaped would put us in cock-up creek. Wouldn’t it? Imagine, finally getting out and then being too fagged to climb the bleeding slopes. Don’t know about you, but that last pitch above the *Tyry* was a walk in the park compared to that first climb out of *Beliya*.”

“And, if memory serves, it takes only days to lose conditioning while it takes *weeks* to get it back.”

\* \* \*

Aleksey’s dinner pot neared a boil, when Lev strode into the bunk-room from the main shaft; full of himself, arms flung high. “Well mates, the cave climbing PT program has paid off...”

“Me too,” Aleksey blurted.

“Chili’s access was up a shaft I’d passed by a half-dozen times,” said Lev talking over the interruption, “mistook it for an oversized vent. The first step up – carved from that band of basalt– made it black-on-black so it was practically invisible. But, once one took that first step up, it went from vertical to a 30% grade with the usual handholds and side steps everywhere. Very clever.”

“Going where?”

“All the way topside to a hidden, lockable hatch just like the ones we’ve seen at the cache entrances. If the spooks ended up next to it outside, they might never find the door or be able to open it if they did. And – hear this – the sodding door was propped *open*.”

“*Open*?”

“Spot on, that’s why Chili got in. I’m guessing the cave girl left it open because she doesn’t have the combo. Maybe she was afraid that it could lock her out... or, maybe it’s some kind of alternate escape...”

“Makes one wonder if that’s her comm device with hubby... And what other horseshit she’s been up to.”

“Could be... But, it gets worse. We may have to leave it open at night since it’s been venting heat ever since the heavy surveillance started.”

“Hence, that spot could become a signature by its absence on thermal imagery -- bringing unwanted scrutiny,” added Aleksey redundantly. “Think it’s possible we could vent around a closed hatch somehow?”



“Don’t know yet. Spent most of my time this trip checking out the new OP,” Lev said shaking his big grin no-no and cocking a hand in unison to stifle interruption. “I know what you’re thinking. ‘Out’ is non-habit-forming. However, this one’s well covered with a great view west to northwest. Same gap that allows one into the pocket valley continues beyond to a visible patch of sky maybe 20 kliks away. Also, a climber searching up here would be so drawn to the opening where he’d find the OP, that he’d miss the entrance hatch, which is in another of those L-shaped niches -- so typical of the People’s engineers -- that look like dead-end recesses.”

“We should haul-ass up there while there’s still light. Correct me if I’m wrong, it’ll be ok, because that area’s not included in our deal with cave girl, right? Also, from there we should be able to see most of our little valley, and I’m very curious about the search op’s encroachments therein.”

“Indeed, why don’t you man the new OP,” Lev said, “while I check out the venting possibilities and you can tell me what you’ve found when I join you there. It’s a tight lil’ cranny but two people can fit inside and remain out-of-sight.”

“Lead on, Commodore Bering. Show me your new lands.”

“Just call me Vitus from now on...”

Lev spoke as he squeezed in beside his friend, “Already vented. There’s a natural fissure overhead just inside the doorway about five to ten centimeters wide that vents to the air above. So... has anybody been molesting our gorgeous glade down there? Cave girl out for a stroll? Why don’t we hear your sentinel’s SITREP and then let’s hear all about *your* find. Sounded as if my news may have pre-empted yours.”

“Well, your discovery was more helpful to our cause. However, I did find bones – a sizable pile, at least a dozen or so skeletons. Human and probably Gulag prisoners... I could still make some surviving shreds of those ghastly padded jackets and tatters of leggings (guards and any free man in the Gulag wore boots). I’ve got some off-the-wall ideas about how they got there and what it could mean. Hence, I’m most interested in your reaction. I fear I may have jumped over some less outlandish, and more plausible explanations.”

“Blimey, does pose some interesting possibilities. But, the simplest one -- hence, most likely – is that this was a one-time Gulag mine, and you have discovered an execution site. Something rumored to have happened a lot, and seems logical at first blush,” Lev said and paused

a few beats. “However, I must presume – from your expression – that there are some bits about that, which don’t fit. Correct?”

The impromptu seminar, which mushroomed effortlessly from both views, tapped two wells of accumulated knowledge to produce an eventual convergence of opinion about some plausible – albeit unexpected -- conclusions. Marshaling recent journalism, years of accumulated hearsay and even some evidence from recollections of primary sources, they determined that the hand-hewn mine was not a forced-labor installation. Furthermore, unless further examination turned up actual bullet-holes, they doubted that the deceased were executed. The uncontested impunity of the Gulag’s masters would have eliminated any need for concealment or tolerance of aboveground internment. In a more mundane vein, it was clear that those same bureaucrats could never have stomached the inaccessibility of the mine’s entrances. Lev and Aleksey agreed the dead had most likely been escaped prisoners and the mine had been a refuge for those who could not or dared not cross the Taiga. However, they also realized that it had become more than a warm shelter away from the camps. Mining in granite by hand must have been excruciating, and runaways would have undertaken it only if there had been no better way to survive. That train of thought led them to deduce that the Gulag escapees might have been mining precious metal. It stretched credulity, but it appeared as if the current occupants were hiding out in an old improvised gold mine – converted later to a hospital by the PLA.

It was difficult to imagine how Chinese foreigners had discovered something that had eluded jailers and the indigenous population for decades. But, as far-fetched as their conclusion may have, at first, appeared, it did address some other puzzling features they had encountered. The presence of accessible gold could be a valid explanation for why cave girl was so certain that her husband was returning. It also provided a logical reason why the most recent Chinese occupants would have withheld the location from their so-called “allies.” Aleksey even thought it conceivable that, if true, this might be the basis for the age-old rumors – almost mythical tales by this time – of Gulag prisoners who had escaped and lived out prosperous lives with the gold (or, diamonds in some cases) they had presumably smuggled out during their getaways. Lev suspected that gold from this hideout could have bought the fugitives the cooperation of local civilians and perhaps even the help of guards they had corrupted. They even envisaged an escapee cover story. With gold as an inducement the runaways could have hidden the existence

of the mine from those collaborators by claiming they had found a ways to sneak out gold from prison mines despite the notoriously ruthless measures warders used to prevent pilfering.

“Either our imaginations have gone wobbly or we have stumbled onto something here that explains a great deal,” said Lev. “I don’t want to be a Russian xenophobe, but presuming there is a rebellion underway in our little post code, seems to me that our countrymen have a more legit claim than the PLA. My bet is that the People’s operatives assigned here are lying to their higher-ups in order to cut the locals out of the loot.”

“Let’s hope the whole thing is just a string of amusing conjectures. If correct, that scenario could complicate things a tad. Corruption of the PRC liaisons be damned, they could become a near term *danger* to us.”

“Indeed. Cave girl could be fearful about more than rape.”

“Might likewise narrow our departure window. We could be forced to un-ass this place immediately after the FSB leave the scene, and before such ‘rebel advisors’ arrive to reclaim their booty and their woman. At least, we should be able to guesstimate the FSB’s ETD better than she can...”

“Unless, she *does* have comms with outside, after all...”

“Let’s not ride that merry-go-round again. I’d rather stick to something more certain to be relevant to our survival like the view over this pocket valley,” said Aleksey poking his binoculars out his side of their cramped cranny. “For example, see that big clump of dark spruce, two fingers left of the outcropping on the next ridge? Saw a chopper drop below those trees and takeoff again -- two minutes later. Probably dropping a search party to work their way down that north to south tributary to the *Tyry*. They might go down to some rally point or base camp on the *Tyry*, or...”

“It’s well,” said Lev butting in as he raised his own binoculars to peer out on Aleksey’s right, “that they appear to be still in the fly-out and search-in phase of the op.”

“Agree,” said Aleksey, remaining glued to his eye pieces, “it *is* good they haven’t begun the sector by sector pattern and it’s also nice to see them wasting time searching avenues of egress that we’d never use. However, my point was... it’s *not* good news to think that they might also be walking upstream in our direction, right now. We sure as hell don’t want them wandering into our little Shangri-La down there. They might become enamored of it and stay. Can you imagine how tricky it would be to try escaping via this ridge-top exit?”

“Talk about flashing your ass on a skyline...”

“Hold it,” said Aleksey putting a hand on Lev’s shoulder, “look beyond that spot I just pointed out and go 20° left. Is that not a flying crane with a sling load?”

“Mi-46 ‘Hook,’” replied Lev by way of confirmation, “indeed, they *are* bringing fuel by air.”

“That’ll last about three sorties, if they’re lucky. It’ll be like pissing up a rope for them to keep that kind of priority on heavy blade time.”

“Ok, he’s gone behind our ridge. Probably should use our next turn in the other OP to start looking for ground delivery preparations.”

“Check. Will be good timing, too, since we could be getting sat photos taken in this sunlight. That’ll help.”

“Roger, out.” Lev hesitated four beats and continued. “Tell me, where d’you think, we stand with cave girl? I’m leaning toward the always best first-option: do nothing,” he said leaning back and lowering his binoculars with a crooked grin.

“By the way,” replied Aleksey sidestepping the question. “I actually saw her for the first time.”

“You did? Voyeur sounds like an unlikely role for the Colonel Aleksey Mikhailovich I know.”

“Remember my trip to that bone pit? While I was in there, she sounded the ‘stay clear’ that she was descending. Caught sight of her in the binos for a couple of seconds as she went by.”

“Binos?”

“Yeah, at probably 20 meters or so in the dark. You know how much more one sees that way at short range.”

“What’s she look like? Clothed, I presume.”

“Now, who’s the dirty old man?”

## PASSERBY

The first thing Aleksey heard was a bared fanged snarl. Chili was barely able to restrain a territorial bark. His hand helped by swiftly reaching a pat to her flank. "Easy girl." The second sound was Lev – nearly inaudible.

"Bugger. Gotta be grunts. The pup's ceased-fire on the girl."

"The third thing was falling scree, which dropped three floors onto re-purposed bed-pans. They cringed at the obviousness of the ploy. They had intended to cause an intruder to believe that he had inadvertently kicked off a miniature rockslide, but this had been too loud by half.

"That's the point man," whispered Lev sidling over until Aleksey could feel his breath on his ear. "Takes us 10 minutes to get here from that trip wire. It'll take them 15 to 20."

"More, he'll have to clean out his trousers."

"Once they're inside, there's no point in hiding. I say we fight 'em from the next level up. Leaves us a line of retreat that we can use in the dark."

"Good. There're side shafts on both sides of the passageway. We can put them in a cross-fire, and double-up the surprise."

"Check. Hope there's enough off-set in side-tunnel altitude to precluded ye olde suicide ambush."

"Be ironic as hell to shoot each other after all this..." Aleksey said, pausing. "Fix bayonets?"

"Why not."

They left Chili to guard the bunk-room and crept into firing positions. On the way, they whispered at some length to delineate sectors of fire and to agree on contingencies that would determine *when* to open fire. They had also concurred that they would not fire on a lone point man (with a long lead in front of his patrol). This was a case where a POW was worth the trouble. Lev had cautioned that they should not hesitate to wound him, if he resisted. Should they confront two or more, it would be grenade-time. The thrower was to precede any toss with a shout of "avalanche."

The wait was throat searing. Their quarry was disturbingly nimble, but reassuringly alone. Each man strained to hear sounds of the point man's followers but could hear none even as the scout paused and the cavern became aurally vacant.

When it sprang, the trap struck so fast, it was not easy for either attacker to remember what had transpired. Aleksey recalled hearing only a hard smack near Lev and sensing the thud of flesh on rock close by. His butt stroke crunched sinew, but his follow up with a muzzle down-swipe hit stone. After Lev's first blow, he dimly remembered following it with an upper cut launched toward an expletive blurted by a strange voice. He admitted that he had forgotten a bayonet protruded from his muzzle. He recalled little resistance to that last swing.

Neither of them could forget the suddenness of the tomblike quiet. However, neither could recollect quite how long they waited in the soundless vault, which remained grave-like even after each man stopped panting. It stayed that way until they were certain there was no one else was coming. The interloper had been *alone* after all.

At their feet was a dead body. They had presumed it before Lev finally illuminated the scene with his GPS screen.

"No pulse," Aleksey said from his squat beside the corpse.

"At least this time it was a fight; although, again, I did not intend to finish him."

"If you were the one who did, I landed a hefty stroke," Aleksey added and quickly removed the dead man's sidearm. When Lev shined his beam elsewhere, he rolled the cadaver over to conceal the likely source of the big puddle of blood. One side of the cranium had an odd concavity to it, which caused him to look closer. He could not tell which blow killed and did not want to know. Lev – who was ok so far – did not need another hand-to-hand killing on his mind, especially, since he had glimpsed the face. They both *knew* this victim. Igor-the-country-cop. "Here...now?" Questions dinged off the walls of his cortex. The shock of recognition was so disruptive, he wiped his thoughts and banished the discovery from his short-term memory. There was no time. This could take days.

"You stay there, let me search him," said Aleksey.

"Roger. I recommend starting with jacket pockets to look for a GPS handset and his squad radio – If any. We'll want to power-down one and check-out the other."

“Good guess, my friend,” he said trying to keep a steady tone. “GPS is here.” Aleksey stuffed his hand into the upper left patch pocket of a standard PLA jacket. “And, good news. No radio.”

“So now...” Lev said and continued after a hushed exhale, “if the PLA is back in town, shouldn’t we presume rebel detachment brought them here? If so, would it not be nice-to-know what’s what, eh?”

“There’s a smartphone,” Aleksey said and immediately regretted it as a picture of the cave girl look-alike flitted by as he scrolled through the photos. “So, it *was* a rendezvous not a reconnaissance,” he thought. Hoping Lev had not seen, he hastily added aloud, “Why don’t I go through the wallet and phone, which could be in Mandarin. You can search the GPS as well as I could. EEI are waypoints – past and future – and search history.”

“Fine, but we’ll need to move this body eventually. Let’s do it while we’re out here...”

“You get the feet,” Aleksey said by way of answer -- holding his breath out of concern for the latent emotion that any inkling of a dead acquaintance (or husband) might arouse. Awkwardly, he put one foot in front of the blood puddle and did not lift his end until the lights went out as Lev lifted his.

“What ho,” said Lev with some elation, uttering the first words since leaving the bone pit, “There’s a *future* waypoint on his Sat-Nav. Didn’t you say that this feature was tantamount to an *order* during the PLA’s trek?”

“I did. It’s so when a time is included on the icon. Presume the policy still pertains. Where’ our KIA supposed to show-up and when?”

“Let me zoom out a bit... Crikey, it’s an eight-digit grid almost under our noses...the first bridge north-northeast from old OP ports. You remember, the no-‘on’-- no-‘off’ span. We called it the ‘no-no bridge’.”

“So they’re going to recon of that north-south track? What do they know that we don’t?”

“You surprised? Our intel compared to theirs? A jigger to a petrol-lorry. Furthermore, would not a recon order include two coordinates -- e.g. grid A to grid B? Looks more like an assembly area to me. See how far back in the woods it is, with higher ground all around. Could be an assembly area for a road-work party, and, if not that then it’s most likely ... an assembly for...” Lev tilted his head and palm sideways beckoning Aleksey to fill-in-the-blank.

“Ambush? Damn. If so, this Magadan guerrilla militia’s taking on an FSB-run border guard. That would make them some serious hombres and that’s some serious shit. No way. How could they get enough people all the way out here? Too much surveillance... When’s it scheduled?” Aleksey looked in over Lev’s shoulder and pointed at the icon. “Not later than 1130 hours,” Aleksey said answering his own question, “with one of those esoteric military characters appended. It means something similar to ‘stand-by.’”

“Thanks to frequent sat updates and some impending sunlit shots, we won’t have to guess what the target will be.”

“...An impending petrol delivery it *is*,” Lev said, intoning the phrase as a pronouncement. The proclamation ended a half-hour of ceaseless fixation on hand-held screens and binocular eyepieces scored sporadically by grunts of three-digit directions, one-word findings and deadpan six-digit requests for confirmation. The muttered three, zero, five was the only preface to Lev’s declaration, which he followed with bare-boned clarification. “The thick air cover confirms our suspicions that the big vehicles you’ve seen on-screen moving up the ROB from Aldan are indeed tankers,” he added, without looking away from his northwestern view.

“A veritable rolling fuel depot headed this way to support our neighborhood search op,” Aleksey added, looking up from his handset.

“Let’s hope so. If our prediction of a firefight materializes, the loss of that much petrol will put a serious strain on op force air ops and make those ground pounders actually pound the ground for a change.”

“Not to mention, it would keep those hounds sucking on the far end of a long leaky straw. The more orphaned they become the better.”

“Gore blimey,” Lev exclaimed, lowering – at long last – his binoculars and squeezing back to face his old friend. It’ll be assholes and elbows all at sixes and sevens every-damn-where. Spooks ‘n grunts will be shooting everything that moves.”

“So? How’s that any different? What I see is a mix of risk and opportunity. What I don’t yet see is how the danger on-the-run outside will outweigh the near certainty that the previous occupants of this cave will return.”

“You don’t see the difference between walking through a sea of hornet’s nests outside and picking off intruders one by one inside?”



“What about the longer view? After we pick off a few, a lot of people will know right where we are and how do we get away then? Not to mention that the process would alienate the PLA as much as we’ve already upset the FSB. Leaving us only the option of finding a way through said shit-storm against every-damn-body. Worse, since the hornets will know our point of departure.”

“Ok, ok, point taken. Situation hot up and hairy. I get it. *When*, not *if*.”

Knowing they had to re-stock; re-prioritize weapons and ammunition; and pack it all before BMNT; made the departure debate feel longer than it was. Whichever way the decision went, years of hard lessons about the fog of war had taught both debaters to worst case it. That entailed being prepared to vanish without a trace from the moment they finished packing. They began by nailing down deducible knowns: the most credible ambush target; the most likely not-earlier-than time; the duration; the minimum number of combatants; the most plausible FSB reaction; and the consequent attributes of the safest escape route. Without sufficient time to catalogue the plethora of “unknowns,” the other arm of their dialectic became a chronological list of specific threats: beginning with an attack – any minute – on their bunk-room by intruders; including an airborne missile strike at anytime on the outside catching them as a target of opportunity; and ending with a possible convergence of the rebel’s escape rout with their own.

The soonest departure decision rested upon the probability that the FSB search operation would shift its full attention to the ambushing party and on the likelihood that FSB surveillance would not extend west of the *Dyby* river. That river blocked a retreating ambush unit and could be easily watched by satellites and UAVs. The FSB would conserve resources by restricting all its search assets to the *Dyby* and points east. Thus, a careful reconsideration of the terrain on its west bank convinced them both that the narrow gorge behind the western heights of that valley could provide a secure egress. In that ravine, they could keep a steep ridge between themselves and any operations underway to catch the bushwhackers. This escape route extended north almost to the ROB. Exiting the gorge and crossing the highway was going to be a tricky undertaking.

\* \* \*

“What a pain in the ass,” said Lev pushing on to his favorite ledge in the old OP, “almost couldn’t get through the passage. These silencers have turned our handy carbines into veritable muskets,” he added with a dash of hyperbole.

“We’re lucky to find two of ‘em,” Aleksey said staying focused on the scene out the northeast portal. “I hadn’t seen any in cache tubes since we decided against taking them back in Cho’s den.”

“An excellent decision, this time, though I concede that they might save our asses in the upcoming few days. By the way, there is some decent news on the girl-front. She did agree to our request for an out-of-turn OP access. Did so readily. No necessity for any explanation about any concocted ‘emergency.’”

“Sounds suspicious,” Aleksey said turning around this time.

“Not to this man on the scene,” Lev said emphasizing the preferred military perspective a bit pointedly. “She was...” he paused a telling beat, “more affable than we’ve seen her.”

“Now my shit-detector is really twanging.”

“This from our expert on women,” said Lev coming back with a grin, head back. But, it was the first jab, ever, at Aleksey’s failed marriage. The exchange was escalating at a bad time.

Aleksey dropped the subject, but the abruptness was as barbed as the mine-better-than-thine crack. “The rebels are either well *maskirovka*-trained or the ambush is not set yet,” he said turning back to the apertures, again.

Ignoring the minor rebuff Lev replied matter-of-factly, “Any physical manifestations of infantry activity?”

“Not yet.”

“Better see something soon. No fight out there; no getaway for us.”

“Roger. I’m expecting to see someone cross east to west over the track parallel to the *Dyby*. They’d need to do that to make the lower limb of the ‘L’ in order to configure a proper formation for the ambush of something coming down the trail.”

“Quite right, that’s the most plausible plan, but let’s not get too wedded to it. They could still be trying to recon a road-works detachment coming *north* up the foot-path or who knows what else.”

“Entirely possible. In that case, the detail would likely be too close under us to see. Shit, I was counting on the ‘show’ being somewhere near the ‘Y’ beside the ‘no-no’ bridge.”

“Ok, why don’t you stay on that,” Lev said moving in beside Aleksey, knees first, on the north-northeast wall, binoculars extended outward, “and everything *east* of the track. I’ll watch everything up the river and *west* including the far northern horizon where we’re most likely to see

aircraft. Believe I still have the better eye for picking 'em up when they're only blurred dots on the skyline," Lev said. A verbal vacuum commenced, which lingered longer than was customary for these two.

"Alright, nailed it!" said Aleksey popping the blister of quiet, "troops in file, in the open crossing there above the fork -- blatant as you please. Moving fast but spaced tight."

"Good, things are underway. You focus hard on that and don't look up right now. I may have something on the northern horizon. Will take a minute to sort out..."

"There t'is," Lev said, breaking into the calm of mutual concentration. "Looks like air cover -- as in *convoy* air cover. Too many different aircraft, too far north to be looking for the guerrillas... or us. We should be seeing fat tankers trundling down that bloody cart path before long."

"Sounds as if it will take awhile. Our boy's will need the time. This attack looks like it's bigger deal than we supposed. I've seen half a dozen. You add three times that many to account for those who are firing the broadside, figure in a little indirect fire support and before long you will have counted up a whole damn platoon."

"That many? Pushing the credibility envelope -- that. How does one waltz across this deserted terrain with 25 sodding grunts?"

"I'll say. Odd is an understatement."

"We've been worried -- correctly dammit -- about sneaking the two of us out from under omnivorous information hoover. We're stuck in here and they're trotting about in the open like it's the bleeding Great War or something. Inside job?"

"How would that help? An insider couldn't cover-up a dozen monitors nor shut up a half-dozen S-2 nerds."

"Maybe it was a faked display. Let's say the intruders showed the intel geeks only what they expected to see -- i.e., a Russian looking phony border guard unit conducting a methodical search. Maybe not where they were supposed to be but close enough for monitors to presume an out-of-place plot. Wouldn't be so unusual."

"Perhaps, plausible for one time -- no more. Or, maybe an insider simply put an extra pin in the map, or conducted a deliberate unit miscount, etc. etc..."

"Yet it wouldn't work very well for the multiple days it would take for the fake troops to get to this vicinity in the first place. Not across the hot surveillance zone. They would have to arrive pretty much over the course of one day -- not likely to go unnoticed."

Lev motioned for Aleksey to take a seat as if a break was overdue. He was presuming they needed only one observer while the action hung-up on the slow moving vehicles. Aleksey accepted the unspoken division of labor, putting his chin over his knuckles and elbow on a knee as he sat.

“Unless,” Lev said spinning around from his perch pointing his free hand at his friend, “they used...” again, he left a blank to fill-in.

“Or, stole...” Aleksey said chiming in – beaming.

“A chopper,” They said in unison.

“Only things,” Lev picked up the thread with gusto, “any insider would have to leak was ETAs and ETDs for re-supply helos.”

“All they would have to do was steal something big already headed this way,” Aleksey added, also becoming enthused.

“What’s more, they could have double-timed, in uniform, in formation directly onto the helipad as if they belonged there. Then, commandeered a super hook, attached an 80% empty sling load to make it look good, and...” Lev said looking for a confirmation at Aleksey pumping a forefinger at the ground.

“And, fake an emergency landing well away from the base helipad. Who’d notice them as they foot marched toward base camp? Who’d give a shit, if they didn’t ask for help?”

“Very plausible. Almost too much so...” Lev said rotating back to his observer mode.

“I know -- virtual guarantee that it never happened that way. But, it’s reassuring -- in some strange way -- that it’s conceivable. At least one’s *not* expected to believe they popped out of the ground like a bunch of zombies or something, Aleksey said.”

Then, added to himself, “Especially plausible since Igor’s presence on this scene meant that the resources of at least *two* provinces were in the mix.”

“Here we go,” Lev said in his all-hands-on-deck voice. “I’ve got eyes on a scout vehicle and a lorry.”

Aleksey slipped in alongside, “*Big* bear of a truck,” he added seconds before rounds flashed in anger through cordite-tanged air.

Ambushes – even big, lethal ones – are more aural than visual. Attackers remained hidden and the stunned defenders squeezed under every shadow clawing for refuge. At the edge of good hearing the two violence voyeurs soon picked out muzzle flashes and heard – on delay – a

jumble of small arms fire, punctuated by the double thump of rocket propelled grenades. Associating sight with sound was impossible, but those 40-millimeter rockets gave their positions away by whipping away branches and underbrush with their back-blasts. The OP remained chatter-free. The two veterans of such engagements had seen nothing to warrant comment until the FSB air cover arrived. Even so, Lev's announcement had been monotone. He had been first to identify the low and fast approach of an attack helicopter dripping with ordnance. However, excitement built when Aleksey growled, "Man in the open." Before he could finish his heads-up by saying, "With RPG," the aircraft jerked into a starboard-heeling yaw and puffed jagged spew out its port side.

"GRAIL," Lev said finishing for him by identifying the infantryman's anti-air weapon with one word.

As Aleksey struggled to fathom the importance of an air defense capability in the hands of the guerrillas, a second GRAIL at right-shoulder-arms trotted into the clearing and fired. Neither man could see its target, but the puff of black smoke they spotted high overhead -- after the blast reached them -- convinced both that the shoulder-fired missile had hit something. At this point, they decided they had seen enough.

As decided in advance, Aleksey stripped the OP clean and Lev clambered out toward the new OP to open the door. Then, they both hurried to their quarters separately to grab their packed gear for the road. Despite being in full evacuation mode, they managed to spurt enough jargon filled military shorthand to reach agreement that the second GRAIL shot had downed a UAV. As they reached the pool, Aleksey decided that he ought to push their talk beyond, "What's next?" So, while they dry-bagged clothes and electronics for ducking under the half-submerged rock face, Aleksey explained that he had become convinced that the insurgents intended more than a hit and run raid. It did not take much recounting of the assault force's superb preparation, deception and equipment to convince Lev that the guerrillas could be taking the offensive. There was little doubt that they had achieved tactical parity with the isolated federals. Aleksey had nodded a "Well-said," affirmation at Lev's wry three-word commentary: "Dien Bien Phu."

The situational advantage for the two escapees was that the FSB would be too distracted to continue a deliberate search. The disadvantage was running into a crossfire triggered by either side -- or both. By kicking the can downhill and shouting goodbyes to warn the cave girl, they burned that bridge, and then they felt an urge to move out smartly. As they donned dry clothes in

the narrow stone crack now serving as a porch, the old soldiers plotted their next three moves by studying the limited view of footing and cover outdoors. They thought it best to stay unseen although there was no reason to expect an encounter with more than a handful of Chinese, who were liaisons and advisors, after all -- not fighters. It was more important to evade the omnipresent FSB overhead by leap-frogging across the pocket valley in rapid 50-meter jumps. Aleksey would lead with a short hop and plant himself in the pine needles beneath the shrubbery filling the crotch between the two nearest outcroppings -- 25 meters out. As the winner of the toss, Lev would take the safer second leg, sprinting by the outcroppings to reach a stand of firs about 25 meters beyond Aleksey. They intended to stay uphill from the lakeshore in thicker vegetation but not so high as to encounter rocky ground nearer the base of the encircling ridge.

As Lev took up a firing position to cover Aleksey's ticklish exit, he said, "Really thought we might see the girl this time... considering the message -- at least a shout from above at the basin."

"You're kidding me -- right? Heads up, I'm doing this thing..."

"Go."

Aleksey had barely landed and low-crawled to the nearest opening when he heard Lev's footsteps. He could see Lev pass by but not where he would end up. As he moved forward to find another opening, he heard what almost got him killed.

"Lev eet ees me. Come here," the cave girl beckoned.

"Deniz, oi you..." Lev shouted.

Aleksey dropped from a half-stoop to his butt looking down at his lap, "Day-nee? What the fuck?" he was thinking when the wall to his left slammed into him like a curb-jumping bus. Mind whirling while he recoiled from his wallop against the boulder, he thought with his eyes still shut, "A grenade? Not hit. The girl did it -- had friends. Where? Why?"

Then a host of other sensations seethed up like the froth of good beer. "Too quiet. No falling debris. Head clear and no ringing," he pondered, eyes opening. He was bloody and his nose protested a diesel stink. Quickly, the fizz of thoughts stilled as his turning head filled his visual cortex.

Like the lesser speed of effervescence climbing from the bottom of a glass, a more measured awareness supplanted the rush of ideation that immediately followed his rebound from the blast. The blood on him had crusted. He was aching not stinging. The bright spot behind the

overcast was lower in the sky. A fresh realization foamed over his earlier clutter. “I am *awakening* – not popping up from a knockdown,” he yelled inside his own head.

“Shit,” he said aloud, “how long have I been out?” he asked himself.

Faster than he would later recall, he checked his watch and gear. All present and 50 minutes elapse since reaching the “porch.” “Something else had hit nearby. Grenade’s too small for all this,” Aleksey’s thinking whirred up again. “It’s been most of an hour. Shit! Shit!” Panic hammered on some door in his pre-frontal cortex, “Lev! Where the fuck is Lev?”

Later Aleksey would remember -- under a recurring cloud of guilt -- the too circuitous thought process that took so long for him to miss Lev. Galvanized anew, he started thrashing through the brush to get out of his stone culvert. Blood flecked, branches snapped, pine needles flew and physical security lapsed as he scrabbled toward the spot where Lev encountered “Day-neeZ” -- more tantrum than haste. As he gasped for air climbing a boulder, he saw the blood on his sleeve and hesitated. Jarred by it, he came full stop. It was very likely he had not been seen yet, so he decided for stealth over speed.

Prone over the crest of the big rock, screened by evergreen branches, he swept his binoculars across yet another shock. He gagged back the still proximate panic and took in the black smeared horror of a cauterized lakeshore extending up to the base of his outcropping. He looked among the carbonized carcasses of small firs and brambles for a sign of his friend. Eventually he could make out four or five lumps of char side-by-side – undoubtedly her comrades. He judged the nearest, lone mound might be whatever was left of Lev. He could now reason that it was not smart to rush over. Whatever delivered the deadly missile could still be orbiting.

Unfamiliar with incendiary ordnance, Aleksey could not be sure what was in the guilty warhead. “Napalm was possible. If so, that probably eliminated RPVs as the weapon’s platform,” he thought as his mind leaped from one supposition to another. The napalm bombs he had seen were far too big for a drone. A high-performance jet could have been the culprit. It’s possible for their strikes to arrive before the sound of their jet wash reached the ear. But, he could not imagine how even an SU-41 would bother with such an insignificant target from so far away. Or, he guessed, maybe the *nomenklatura* assholes *had* cooked up a miniature napalm-like weapon, fitted to an RPV. “If so,” he conjectured, “the spooks were more pissed-off at us than we thought.” He yearned for a camera. “This was war-crime shit.”

Some unknown interval after he had plopped atop his web-gear, sunken under the mental welter into the void at his core, he was roused by the weather ramping up to a deluge. It allowed him to approach Lev's remains. Once he had recognized the unique PLA silencer projecting from a mound of undifferentiated scorch, he could only meander away – his need to reach out satiated. His amble continued unseeing across the dell and north up the next valley. Aleksey trudged under the weight of existential loss, glowering back across a fortnight and a thirty thousand meter chasm battling what-ifs. Again, time flitted from his grasp.

In retrospect he would infer that he had transitioned – he knew not when – from his thousands meter empty eyed stumbling into trek mode -- on autopilot. He could barely recall remembering his GPS, shouldering his pack, retrieving some of Lev's stuff, dropping his friend's rucksack far upstream from the pyre, and bunking down in last light. Some things he could not remember at all. He could only deduce that he must have: donned wet-weather garb, recalled the escape route, reckoned a concealed path up the north-south valley, climbed three meters up a rock face and pulled fallen pine bough in behind onto the ledge. It had not been a blind march but one blurred in one long smudge. He had been overly familiar with the terrain so it did not seem impossible. He had often mused about filling his free time alone with maps while he presumed that Lev was exploring. Who knew? No doubt, those hours of "preparing in fair weather" had probably saved him.

He had never felt so vulnerable. If they had killed her cohorts with such surprise, he had to expect every minute to be his last. Worse, yesterday's sleepless night and this shitty day had physically depleted him. However, nothing less would have sufficed to shut down the paralyzing torrent of synapses firing long strands of guilty associations backward and streams of mounting trepidations forward. Continuing to stay tired was likely to be what he would need to do to survive.

That night, wild dreaming was prelude to righting his floundering ship. His sleeping mind flashed incessantly back to commando training. One class in particular had described but had not done practical exercises in "tank dodging." He spent the night doing those practical exercises, believing that he was rolling under tank bellies or scrabbling into ditches away from clattering treads. Every time he got up to continue some vanishingly vague but desperately urgent mission, the leaden rattle of T-72's would descend on him again – always too close and always unrealistically so.



When the repetitive nightmare became so tiresome that his consciousness almost surfaced, the visions only got crazier. The sound of cave girl pleading and scratching at the door to some nonexistent hut served to trigger his first truly sane moment since the fatal deflagration. The first growl he heard woke him, but he only marveled -- thinking he was still dreaming -- that it must be some bizarre twist on Lev's favorite story about, "How-I-fucked-up-and-still-lived." Next, his opened eyes washed his slate clean of yesterday's bedlam. Something sizable and dog-like was whimpering softly beneath his ledge.

"Chili, you gorgeous beast." Moments of disembodied and joyful delirium supplanted all caution as they both flailed about trying to get the clump of wagging fur over the dead tree and onto his ledge.

Feeling just a bit more rested as he curled around the exhausted animal, the dog's unbidden will to accompany him reminded him again of Lev's close call with wild dogs. In numerous retellings, his departed friend had explained how he had gone on a fateful run near the Turkish border one day. Unprompted, one of the garrison's spiked-collared mutts had tagged along. A few kilometers out the two of them stood down a wide semicircle of snarling, feral mongrels by brandishing a handy branch overhead and charging. To the surprise and great relief of dog and man alike, the cringing pack had fled. Lev Ivanovich had always ended the story by reminding whatever audience he had buttonholed that he had never seen his four-legged sidekick before or since. Those first fond memories of Lev -- in a long list to come -- were his last that night as his consciousness ebbed.

Mercifully, the sleep that followed lasted until the low slung boreal sun was well up and his impatient companion was licking his face. "Ok, ok, honey. Let me up and we'll get some food. Afterwards," he said holding Chili's jaw in both hands, tickling her ears with his fingers, "there's a little 30-klik stroll. Keep me out of trouble with armed apes and big critters, and I'll put you up tonight in secure accommodations -- indoors." Thinking at the same time that he hoped the PLA had not yet turned over codes to supply cache doors. The insurgent recipients of such largess might well have looted his prospective overnight hideaway by now. His destination lodging was among those most vulnerable to pilfering. That cache line stretched from the sea to the border of Yakutsk Province just south of the Road of Bones. Proximity to such easy ground access assured that those supplies would be first for the taking.

It turned out to be far less commodious than his last two PLA sanctuaries, but the cylinder had a plentitude of leftovers and the front door shut the outdoors firmly *out*. As he scrunched into the emptied aluminum tube to leave the floor for the Chili, he had a long postponed moment or two for reflection. After vowing to make a spiked collar for the dog first thing in the morning, Aleksey mused about things that reached as far as he could foresee from his present circumstances.

Certain left wing Americans might smile at his latest characterization of the recent war with the PRC, because he believed he could now say something original, without much fear of contradiction. “In the few short years since regaining its 18<sup>th</sup> Century territorial integrity,” he thought, “the rising Chinese great power has delivered ‘black eyes’ to *both* military superpowers.” It had only recently occurred to him that a victory by this burgeoning RFE insurgency could be as grave a setback for Russia as the surprise in Alaska had been for the US. If the Federation were to lose its Pacific coast, it would certainly be so. Taken together, the two Chinese successes tended to lock-in the notion that the PLA had transformed warfare and had done so in the face of conventional wisdom, which had ranked the PRC as a distant fifth in military power. It had certainly punched over its weight class amongst those great powers capable of projecting power overseas. Furthermore, it did so with *pre-existing* technology, putting paid to the US belief that hi-tech was the sole key to conventional military might. The PLA had merely stretched the engineering limits of such mundane military capabilities as database management, logistical pre-positioning, satellite photography, GPS and cruise missile design. Their only military innovation was the low-tech attainment of a new level of unit discipline that permitted a tiny handful of soldiers to conduct strategic maneuver on their own. Aleksey hoped to provide some personal testimony on that score. In addition, the PRC had likely matched the US ability to commit huge economic resources to a military undertaking. He hoped to find the numbers someday to confirm that the Chinese state was able to suspend enough civilian enterprise to sustain commitment to an amphibious assault on the scale of Normandy (the Landing on Taiwan) while simultaneously supporting a 5,000 kilometer turning movement (against Alaska) that was every bit as distant as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. “The monograph is coming together,” he sighed to himself, “Like tectonic plates.” Then he grinned, “Perhaps not quite that slow...”

He was falling asleep despite the slivers of guilt poking under his consciousness about still having a future – something forever denied to Lev. His own warm feeling about the monograph magnified the unease, because his old friend could have helped so much with the historical

chapters. Then, he blanked until morning during an argument with himself about which eventual outcomes might qualify this multi-provincial insurgency as a genuine predecessor to the change in the nature of war.

He made the ticklish maneuver of crossing the ROB without incident. It turned out that even this decrepit thoroughfare had some covered drainage. He was refitted and free of the haunted cloud of memories that had dogged him so far. At last, Aleksey was no longer able to sense the reek of his smoldering dacha. As he turned into the timid glimmer of daybreak, he could not have found – had he been looking – even a footprint in his mind's eye about wandering bereft on the Taiga. The often-derided amygdala could come in handy after all, if its host was under genuine duress. It did so by obliterating serial associations, which might hamper the physiological demands of a true-blue fight or flight. All mental trails had gone cold except those directing gear packing, navigating and watching – hard eyed scouring of every blade and twig. He had become an ectoplasmic cruise missile. However, when he reached the next stream, he had to engage his pre-frontal cortex for a decision. Crossing it to the east risked encountering more people. Following it downstream would take him through the uninhabited north. He turned upstream to find a better crossing and muttered something barely audible, “Let’s find you a friend, lil’ beastie. Who knows, maybe a husband, eh?”

Decision made, he became too relaxed. Hard-eyed searching gave way to aesthetic appreciation of his surroundings. Aleksey was in a wide swath of needle-cushioned openness under high evergreens holding the weak dawn-light, behind a thin overcast, to a flecking of lucent spots among the tallest boughs. With a gurgling brook in the background, his surroundings rivaled the once idyllic pond he had left behind in the now besmirched pocket valley.

Filling his visual cortex with such appealing images slowed his reaction to the lupine shapes, flitting downwind between nearby spruce trunks. “Wolves? Who *ever* sees a wolf?” He thought. “Do wolves growl? Or, could they be pack dogs? Lev’s old story. Shit. No round chambered – double shit.”

Aloud, Aleksey said, “We’re in deep, old gal.” He took an aggressive step forward, as his dog snarled back at them, incisors bared. He raised the carbine high over his head.

**END**