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Category: Short Story

For Freedom: The Story of North Korean Defectors

Crack. The ice groaned softly.

Crack crack. A thin layer of ice broke apart as numbing waters flooded in.

"Run!"

The small crack spiderwebbed at an alarming rate as four escapees sprinted across the frozen river. A horrifying gunshot soon followed a distant shrill of a whistle.

"Yeri, we don't have much time," the man leading the group warned as he briefly glanced back.

Before I could respond, a terrifying shrill echoed in the coldness. I whipped my head back to see the horrifying scene; my mom submerged under the water in a blink of an eye as the ice around her crumbled into the icy water.

"MOM!" I roared as I ran and scrambled onto the frozen floor. "MOM, WHERE ARE YOU?"

I dove my hands into the frigid water as I desperately searched for my mother. Seri knelt next to me as she ripped a long piece of fabric from her shirt.

Seri, my younger sister, panted as she lowered down the knotted fabric. "*Please, grab this.*"

"MOM!" I cried as I hammered my white knuckles onto the surface. "MOM—"

"*Stop it,*" a male voice ordered as a firm grip pulled me away from the floor. "*She's dead. It's useless.*"

"*NO, SHE'S NOT,*" I hollered as I broke free from the grasp. "*I just saw her.*"

"YERI HAN," the voice boomed once more. Burning tears streamed down my frozen face as I paused my desperate search.

Chul-Soo quickly cradled me into his arms and dashed across the breaking ice. He briefly paused and glanced back. I could hear Seri's screaming of agony as she wailed on the icy floor.

"We have to get her," I quavered. "*Go back.*"

Another shrill of a whistle. Chul-Soo hesitated, then turned back. "I'm sorry, Seri. Don't forgive me."

Before I could retort, Chul-Soo headed toward the end of the river.

Suddenly a gunshot echoed. *Boom.*

Chul-Soo stopped in his tracks and slowly turned around as another shot rang. *Boom.*

From a distance, I could see the thin silhouette; it was Seri. My heart stopped beating as I saw the horrifying scene. Two guards had reached her.

"We have to go," Chul-Soo gulped as he started moving. "For our children."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered as shameful tears trickled down my nose bridge.

I closed my eyes. Then the world went black.

-4 years later-

"I'm sorry, but the person you are trying to reach has a voicemail box—"

"They aren't answering," Chul-Soo muttered as the call failed for the ninth time.

It has been almost four years since Yeri and Chul-soo arrived in South Korea. After successfully escaping from a Chinese prison camp, the couple had safely made it to freedom. Now, Chul-soo and Yeri are proud workers at a Pyongyang Noodle Restaurant in the heart of South Korea, Seoul. At first, it was a small local restaurant with a few customers, but now, groups of people flooded the busy eatery. Everything was terrific for the couple—everything... except for their heavy minds.

Chul-Soo sighed deeply as he punched in the ten digits once more.

"Hello?"

Chul-Soo froze on the spot after hearing the voice.

Yeri jolted as she covered her mouth with shaking fingers. "*Oh... my... gosh...*"

"Hello?" the soft voice asked once more.

Yeri breathed deeply and spoke, "Is this Junsoo, Nayoung, and Hyunsoo?"

Silence. Yeri asked again, "Is this Junsoo—"

"No, I'm going to answer this!" a distant voice whined.

"No, you *aren't*," another voice snapped. "Hand that over!"

A soft smile immediately bloomed on Yeri's face as she listened to the bickering of her children. She missed everything about them so much... even their petty arguments.

Finally, a young girl's voice hummed on the other end, "Hello? Mom?"

Yeri gripped the phone as she sniffled, "Nayoung, this is me. Your mom's here."

"Mom," Nayoung blubbered as soon as she heard Yeri's voice. "I- I just missed you so much."

Suddenly, an irritated voice screamed over the phone. "Nayoung, I want to call now!"

"Hello? Hello? Mama? Are you still here?" the young boy chirped.

Yeri wiped her streams of tears and replied, "Hyunsoo, I'm here."

"I miss you, mama!" Hyunsoo bubbled.

"Same, sweetie," Yeri replied.

A sudden voice echoed in the background. "We're departing in five minutes! Gather up!"

"Mom, we gotta go. See you soon. I love you." Hyunsoo shouted.

Shortly after, the line went silent.

Clunking sounds of footsteps and the heavy odor of oil greeted me unpleasantly as soon as I stepped into the dim bus. After a brief phone call with mom, I had no time to look around the dark surrounding as someone from behind shoved me forward further into the aisle.

Junsoo, Hyunsoo, and I had climbed the snowing Baekdu Mountain for three nights nonstop. Despite the dangerously freezing weather, all three of us made it in time for the departure, *alive*, and that was the only thing I genuinely cared about. My stomach growled in hunger, and my small hands showed a crystal clear hue of blue, but I felt happier than ever; I was finally going to South Korea.

I found an empty seat at the very back of the bus. I pulled Hyunsoo into my lap and quickly sat down next to a young lady.

"Hi, my name is Sunmi," she smiled as she scooted closer to the window. Her bright yellow hair was tied into a low ponytail, and her tanned face was coated with layers of unnatural makeup.

"Hello, are you going alone?" I whispered.

"Unfortunately, yes," the lady answered. "My family doesn't know that I'm leaving. My parents still think that North Korea is the wealthiest and best country in the world. It's a pity. But I doubt they'll leave even if they know that *any* other country is better than North Korea. "

She rolled her eyes sarcastically.

"Why?" I asked.

"My *brother*," she answered. "Like my parents *areso* going to leave my brother and come to South Korea with me. Right? And just *abandon* him in the north."

She chuckled emptily as she glanced at Hyunsoo.

"At least he's here with you," she grinned.

Suddenly, a loud voice boomed inside the bus.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Chul Kang, and I will lead our group for the rest of the trip. Speaking of our journey, we're finally departing from North Korea now. It'll take around seven days to arrive at the China-Laos border. This is a strictly secretive journey. I am warning. Anyone who wishes to leave right now must do so at this moment. After now, there is *no* turning back."

There was a deadly silence on the bus for a few moments.

"Well, I guess that's the cue for our departure," Mr. Kang spoke as the bus doors squeaked closed. "Good luck everyone."

It's already been five days since the departure from the safe camp. I have gotten used to the musty smell that enveloped the cramped bus and the atmosphere of uncertainty that hung over us...

"Nayoung?" Hyunsoo softly whispered. "Our bus is slowing down."

I was so immersed in my thoughts that I didn't even realize what was happening in my surroundings.

After a few rocking, the bus jolted to a stop. Startled, I instinctively wrapped my arm around Hyunsoo. A few moments later, Mr. Chul and two other escape brokers stood up from their front row seats.

"Good morning, everyone. I have a significant announcement to make. To decrease the risk of getting noticed by the Chinese police, we must form smaller groups. We will be taking different routes. Group A will take the faster route and arrive about four days before Group B," Mr. Chul announced.

For the next few minutes, Mr. Chul separated the crowd inside the bus into two separate groups; no one objected as Mr. Chul separated families and friends. He would simply point to the person, point out the window, and mouth "leave." Only short farewells existed within the defectors. He slowly walked along the aisle and stopped his footsteps right next to me. I lowered my gaze and hoped that he would leave me alone.

"Young lady," a deep voice spoke. "I know you're awake."

My heart skipped a beat as I slowly elevated my gaze; Mr. Chul was standing in front of my seat with a seating chart in his left hand.

He pointed at Hyunsoo with his red pen and asked, "Are you with him? Brother? Cousin? Friend?"

"Sir, he's my younger brother... he's only six," I hesitantly added, hoping that he would feel some sympathy towards us.

Mr. Chul nodded absentmindedly and counted the number of people left on the bus once more. After a few seconds, Mr. Chul picked up Hyunsoo's small backpack from the floor and motioned him to stand up.

"Let's go, kiddo. You're going with Team A," Mr. Chul spoke to Hyunsoo.

"And you," Mr. Chul spoke to me. "are staying with Team B."

My heart sank.

"Mr. Chul," I started. "My brother is only six, and he has *never* been away from me. We've been together for our *entire* lives. You can't take him..."

I hugged Hyunsoo tighter and refused to let him go.

Mr. Chul glared at me and barked, "Young lady, he is coming with Team A. So now—"

"Sir, I don't think that's going to happen," Sunmi suddenly snapped. "Are you trying to separate a preschooler from his older sister? *How pathetic...*"

Mr. Chul raised his eyebrows as he slowly backed away.

"Whatever suits you miss," Mr. Chul peeped. "I just needed one more person—"

"No," I whispered to Sunmi, breaking Mr. Chul off. "Miss, you don't have to do this."

Sunmi's angry expression vanished away as she met my eyes.

"Sweetie, it's fine," Sunmi spoke as she patted my head.

She gave me a soft smirk before she exited the bus.

"Please stay safe," I faltered.

"Nayoung! Wake up," someone whispered urgently.

I fluttered my eyes open to see a figure waving their hands in my face; it was Junsoo.

"We made it to the China-Laos border, and we're leaving *now*. Be as quiet as possible," Junsoo spoke as he zipped up his navy jacket. Even in the pitch-black darkness, I could see his fearless eyes sparkling with determination; we were going to survive.

Half asleep, I fumbled around my seat and hastily grabbed my belongings before dashing out into the cold winter night.

"Folks, the two-hour climb on Shicheng Dashan isn't going to be pleasant. There're a lot of hunters in this region, so we have to be careful. They can shoot us at any time." Mr. Chul mumbled as he led the group through the thick bushes.

Whoosh.

Mr. Chul froze for a moment and slowly turned his head to the left; a thin arrow was deeply rooted into the tree about a foot away from where he was standing.

Whoosh. Another arrow. This time, the unknown shooter shot closer to Mr. Chul. A similar thin arrow grazed Mr. Chul's left cheek as it struck the tree just behind him.

Then another. *Whoosh.* Whoosh.

Mr. Chul dipped and whispered loud enough for only our group members to hear.

"Dip down low, now," he ordered as three more arrows flew over his head.

"We can't stay here hiding and just wait for *that person* to leave. And we don't even know if there are more people. We *have to leave*," Mr. Chul whispered. He tried to stay nonchalant, but his shaking voice was conspicuous.

Leaves rustled nearby as a pair of feet stepped over a pile of dead leaves. Whoever the shooter was, they were getting dangerously close to us.

"Everyone, follow me and *stay low*."

After an hour, we saw the end of the thicket. Nothing special awaited behind the dense trees, but relief washed over me as I saw the small cluster of boarding houses.

"We made it," I breathed. "We're finally here."

Clang!

"Argh!" I screamed as I jumped out of my sleeping position. "What in the *world* was *that*?"

Hyunsoo gave me a nervous chuckle as he held up a half-empty lunch box container.

"HYUNSOO LEE!" I exploded as I marched up to him. "WHEN DID YOU SEE THIS?"

"Sorry," Hyunsoo mouthed as he gulped down another rice ball. "I was too hungry...."

I opened my mouth to bark angry words at him, but nothing came out. How could I ever get mad at this poor child?

"Nayoung!" Junsoo popped his head into the doorway and beamed. "I got treats!"

"Huh?" I asked, confused. "How?"

"This morning, Hyunsoo told me that he was *super* hungry. So, I sneaked into one of the police officer's dormitories and got this granola—"

"WHAT? YOU DID WHAT?" I shrieked as I pointed to his hands accusingly.

"Umm, haha... I stole this from the—"

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH BOTH OF YOU GUYS?" I angrily yelled at Junsoo and Hyunsoo.

"Nayoung, everything's fine." Junsoo smiled as he let out a nervous giggle.

"I'm going back for more food," Junsoo spoke.

I held my breath and waited. Two minutes went by. Then five. Then ten.

"What's taking you so long?" I whispered to myself as I scanned across my surroundings.

Just as I started to fumble from my uncomfortable squatting position, a black, bowl-cut hair popped up behind the nearby house. A few moments later, a pair of glowing, dark eyes came into view.

I sighed in relief and flashed an urgent smile. "Hurry!" I mouthed.

Just as Junsoo started dashing to my hiding spot, two police officers approached Junsoo.

"Nǐ zài gàn shén me?" one of the Chinese officers inquired.

Crap. He can't speak Chinese

"I-I-I..." Junsoo faltered.

"Nǐ huì shuō zhōng wén ma?" the other officer barked as he pointed to Junsoo.

Junsoo slowly backed away from the officers and covered the food under his jacket protectively.

One of the officers chuckled deeply and mumbled, "*shoot him.*"

Shoot him.

Before I could do or say anything, a gunshot fired.

I covered my mouth with my trembling hands as my body shook in uncontrollable fear and desperation.

As soon as they were out of sight, I dashed to Junsoo and immediately hugged his shaking body.

"I'm okay," Junsoo mumbled as he coughed wildly, splattering blood all over.

"No, you aren't," I cried as I hugged his body.

"Take the... food," Junsoo mumbled as scarlet tears glazed down his nose bridge. "Food."

"Y-you're so s-stupid," I cried as I wiped his bloody tears. "Be selfish for once."

"Go," Junsoo mouthed as blood splattered from his half-opened mouth.

With his last remaining strength, he flashed his crooked smile. Sun rays kissed his trembling eyes, giving them the final sparkle of determination and strength before they fluttered close.

Heavy silence accompanied the rest of our journey. No one mentioned anything about Junsoo's incident since the day of the shooting. Even Hyunsoo was quiet throughout the tedious 22-hour bus ride to the Vietnamese border to cross the Mekong River. Once we cross that river... we will be safe.

That night, I drew a star on the fogged-up window and started my prayer to Junsoo.

When I opened my eyes, the star drawing had again melted into the foginess.

That evening, we finally crossed the Vietnam border. And soon, our bus came to a gradual halt next to a small village. Nearby, I could see the Mekong River glowing jet-black under the full moon, and the colorful roofs of houses dotted the shorelines of the peaceful river.

"Congratulations, we made it," Mr. Chul boomed on the microphone. "Here, you will unite with some of your family members. Then, we will cross the Mekong River and meet with the Vietnamese brokers. "

"Everyone, before we get off our bus, I have a quick announcement to make. Last night, the group who took the other route to cross the Laos Border... was captured." Mr. Chul softly spoke.

Gasps erupted from the bus as the heavy news sank in. Someone in the front row started wailing and sobbing for her family to come back.

"Oh, poor lady," someone near the back row mumbled. "Her daughter was in that group."

"Her sister was in there too. How awful," another voice whispered back.

I'm so glad I wasn't separated from Hyunsoo and joined that group. I would have—

"Nayoung!" Hyunsoo suddenly spoke. "The lady was in that group!"

"What?" I whispered, confused.

I froze in place as Sunmi's soft smile floated into my memory.

"No, no, no," I shook my head as an answer as guilt took over completely.

About fifteen minutes passed before someone started to gather their belongings. Soon, other passengers followed and got off the grieving bus.

Hyunsoo and I were the last to leave. As soon as we stepped out into the chilly evening night, I could feel a rush of brief calmness. The crisp wind blew into my face, drying my sticky tears. I held Hyunsoo's tiny hand and squeezed it tight.

I saw two familiar figures standing next to a wooden post as I turned around.

"Mom! Dad!" I cried as I dashed to them.

I just hugged them and hoped that the beautiful moment wouldn't disappear.

-5 years later-

"Nayoung, three bowls of Pyongyang noodles for table four!"

"Alright, Mom!" I hollered back as I balanced three heavy bowls on a wooden tray. "Going!"

"Sorry that took you so late," I apologized as I carefully served the noodles.

"No worries, but I have a quick question. Who is that? Is he your older brother?" the lady asked as she pointed to the family photo that hung on the center wall.

"Yes, the awkward kid on the far left is my older brother. He... he didn't deserve any of that. But he's in a better, happier place now," I answered.

An entry bell sounded like a new group of customers had entered the restaurant.

"Welcome to the Lee Restaurant!"