

## Ari's Escape

I shivered as I walked down the cold, grey streets of my home, Unpa. I eyed the watchful sentries respectfully, dipping my head briefly as I passed each of them. I had always wanted nothing more than to escape my harshly controlled country – North Korea. I had heard about Yeonmi Park a few days after my sixteenth birthday this year, and wanted to follow her famous footsteps. I slipped through the narrow wooden doorway of my little home, wanting to apologise for my treasonous wishes, because I had already told my mother, father, grandparents, and best friend Jae about my dreams to escape.

“Ari Hae-Won Kim!” the furious but strangled whisper of my mother hissed as soon as I was inside the sparsely decorated little hut housing eleven people.

“Get-here-now!”

I ducked my head nervously, wondering what was coming.

“Yes?” I answered sullenly, peeking around the second door frame. My mother was staring out of the kitchen window clutching at the deep sink.

“Go wake your father. Find all of your cousins, Aunt Eun and Uncle Won-Shik, and your grandparents. Tell them to pack their backpacks with clothes and provisions.”

“But- why?” I faltered, my eyes focusing on the disciplined crowd of uniformed and armed soldiers marching towards our house.

“Did you tell anyone else?” my mother asked softly.

“Only Jae! But she wouldn't-” I snapped furiously- but still whispering.

“Then Jae told the Government.” she said sympathetically. “They are powerful, and spies are everywhere.”

I spun and sprinted out of the doorway, and thought how to wake everyone at once. I settled for lifting a grey vase above my head and smashing it against the floor with a satisfyingly rewarding crash.

We had managed to crawl out of the back window before the soldiers came, and were already two kilometres away, running to the South Korean border. We kept a steady pace until the Molak Mountains, which we had to circle around. My mother suggested we stay away from any roads- which we mostly managed to do.

We kept running until we reached a massive grey wall topped with curled and sharp barbed wire. My mother blinked rapidly as she took in the sight of the imposing block of sheer mass in front of her, as I stared up at the same towering concrete wall- it was at least eight metres high and twelve metres thick. Along the wall, there was outposts and lookouts scattered around: at least three hundred of them, either relaxing on break or tensely alert on watch. All were armed with large guns and plenty of bullets. Our goal was the small river next to the town Panmunjam on the other side of the border. There, we would hire a

little boat and sail away to, hopefully, our new home. But first, we needed to do one thing: Get around the border without being seen, and fast enough that we weren't cornered by the soldiers already chasing us. Just as I had that thought, a little boy came sprinting out of the thick copse opposite ours that we had almost just quietly slunk into. He raced up to the biggest camp and spoke rapidly to the burly dark-haired man who stood with authority, most likely the leader. He stooped down to listen, then straightened with a jerk, ordering soldiers to attention.

"There is North Korean people here, escaping! Hahm! Ahn! Hyun, Im, Jang! Kye, Myung, Lee! Jeong! Nahm! Om, Paek!" he bellowed. The soldiers mentioned snapped to attention, jumping up and saluting. Fat droplets slide off the leaf onto my white face, but I don't dare say a word as I crouch, unmoving, in the thick undergrowth as one of them, possibly Jeong, came within a metre of me, Mother, and Grandfather Kwan. Everyone passed, moving away from the border- so we sprinted- or hobbled- towards the border.

From the river, my uncle and father hastily paid for a small wooden boat. It did not fit my mother, Ae-Cha, my father, Young-ho, Grandfather Kwan, Grandmother Bora, Uncle Won-shik, Aunt Eun, my youngest sister, Gyeong, my middle sister, Hwan, my younger brother, Haneul, and my two cousins Ma-Ri and Duri, comfortably, but it would have to do. The tiny boat was rusty and smelt of pungent, fermented salt water. I quickly scrambled on board after my mother, and turned back to help Grandfather Kwan, with his crippled leg, get onto the swaying vessel. My uncle braced himself as he shoved the boat out, but-

"Won-Shik!" my aunt shrieked. "Go back, we have to go back!"

He had fallen into the water by trying to jump into the boat, but, as no-one was steering, it lurched forward at the exact second he leaped. He surfaced, crying out to Aunt Eun. "Just go without me!"

He floundered around, trying to get back to the sandy shore until the elderly man reached out tentatively to help him up. He waved sorrowfully as we glided through the small waves of the tiny bay. My mother and Grandmother Bora hurried to comfort Aunt Eun, who had sunk to the wooden deck of the musty ship, sobbing hysterically, and the young twins Ma-Ri and Duri, who were both crying into Eun's grey cloak. My father hurried to the steering wheel, looking horrified about seeing his beloved brother-in-law fade into the distance over the gradually growing waves.

The next few days were slow and boring, and we all had a strict sleep schedule, as we had to share four uncomfortable wooden beds with ten people. We stopped at multiple countries to regain crates of food and flasks of water- Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and finally Australia, where my father decided we should settle down. He decided on Sydney, the best place in his

opinion, but also, rather infuriatingly, the longest to get to. Every single one of us mourned the burning, heartbreaking loss of Uncle Won-Shik, who would surely be dead by now, or taken prisoner by the soldiers. He was always the one to cheer us up, or to joke when I felt sad.

I had heard a Greek legend once- once – in my lifetime, as it was strictly forbidden like all other myths and languages, clothes and hairstyles, and considered ‘dangerous poisons’ in North Korea. The myth considered a Greek goddess, Artemis, who rode a silver chariot across the sky, also known as the moon. We docked on Sydney harbor several or so days later, under the glittering black bridge silhouetted against the brilliantly scarlet sunset. Stars already sparkled like diamonds in the eastern sky, surrounding the glowing full moon. It shimmered and shone like shined silver, but seemed as strong as steel. I finally believed the legend of Artemis, it seemed to be real in a way that never existed in North Korea.

I practically fell out of the boat in relief as soon as it was moored, until my nose, eyes and ears were shocked by the bright lights, noisy babble, and strange fragrant and pungent scents. It dawned on me then: we were in a random foreign country that had different money, taxes, rules, languages, food, and words. My parents and Aunt Eun would have to find jobs to make money to support the family, and my cousins and I would have to go to school.

“Wohh ayeh hwou?” an unfamiliar voice made me jump.

“Sorry- what?” I replied, confused.

“Ayeh hwou Kaeren?” the older man with greying hair and blue eyes said.

I looked at my mother, puzzled.

“I am a Korean refugee.” I said slowly, with emphasis. It only seemed to confuse him more.

“Cum wiet mey.” he shrugged, starting to walk off. I blinked after him. He turned back and flicked his fingers at us. Beckoning. I nodded, following him away, lacing my hand into my mother’s. He brought us to a large white building. “Cum ein.” he caught himself, then beckoned again. My father led the way this time. A woman at the desk nodded at him.

“Waht doe hwou nead?” she asked.

“Ie thunk tehy ayeh Kaeren. Tehy cam tonit.” he said.

“Ah. Hello. Are you a Korean refugee?” she asked. In Korean!

“Yes. North Korean.” my mother said shyly, coming forward.

“You need lessons for our language? It is called English.” the kind lady informed us. Her last word sounded strange, but I thought I should try it.

“English.”

“Good!” she praised. “We have a refugee shelter here, so you can stay for a while. But you can’t get lessons for a while- they’re all booked. Sorry.”

“That’s fine!” I said fervently.

“You still need to go to school though. I’ll ask you to be put in a multilingual class. What age are you?”

“Sixteen.” I answer automatically.

“Your . . . Siblings?”

“Cousins. Both of them are eleven.”

She nodded. “The free quarters are through that door. My name is Harmony. Call if you need anything.”

I raced out of the classroom door, snatching up my bag and sprinting to my two cousins, blinking at my hasty escape. “Lets go.” I growled at them.

“Are you okay?” Ma-Ri said softly to me, glancing at Duri.

“I’m fine.” I snapped. It was a lie. Obviously. Maths had been terrible- it was written in English- but at least the teacher could explain it in Korean. English had been so much of a disaster that I didn’t even try to think about it. Science was still quite bad, but not quite as much as English. My first day of school had been a mess, and I never wanted to go back. Ever.

Two more miserable weeks at school passed, and finally, finally, Harmony called, saying that she could give us English lessons. Her actual words were, “Our schedules are still busy, but less so. I saw Ari looking miserable the other day, and I want to help with her- all of yours’- language.” So we all went into the English classroom with Harmony.

“Eye. Say it like I. Yes, yes. Good!” Harmony said in English, writing .

Another three weeks have passed. We are all making good progress: I can now read, write and say simple sentences in full english. I was starting to get more friends in school: Chloe, the blonde-haired and blue-eyed girl, Olivia, the dark haired girl with green eyes, and Charlotte, a French immigrant with brown hair and blue eyes. I’ve discovered the sport of tennis, where you hit a fuzzy ball over a low net with rackets that look like snowshoes with handles. My family has settled in, my mother, aunt and grandmother working at a laundromat, my father studying to be an engineer and looking after Grandfather Kwan, who has had to get a prosthetic leg. They are normally very expensive, but the fund for refugees in Sydney has helped us greatly. A tiny girl from North Korea has come to our school, too. Her name is Ji. She’s in our friend group now, since I’ve helped her with English. She’s quite nice, too, but very quiet and shy.

After about a year of living in Sydney, I’ve entered plenty of tennis competitions and won money. I hoped to go to the Australian Open when I’m good enough, and old enough. My English is slightly over average now, as I’ve been practising for hours every night. The day after my seventeenth birthday, I was walking along the harbour, eating a chocolate ice-cream, gazing at the Sydney harbour bridge, when a familiar, musty-smelling wooden boat sailed in

at the horizon. It was the boat that we had escaped on! I squinted at the little fishing boat as it came closer: it was definitely the same, but on the deck was . .

I gasped. I fumbled in my pocket for the phone I had gotten yesterday and called my mother.

“Mother! Come quickly! Come to the dock in the harbour outside of the ice-cream shop. Try to bring everyone; except maybe the grandparents.”

Luckily, everyone was gathered around the dock when the little wooden boat docked, and Uncle Won-Shik hopped off, beaming. He embraced each of us tightly.

“How did you get here?” my father marvelled in Korean.

“Oh, long story. One to tell over the dinner table, probably.” Won-Shik smiled.