

Hye-Jin's Tale

Chapter Two

1 a.m., September 18, 1996 off the coast of Kangnung, South Korea



All 20 passengers on board the North Korean 'Shark' class submarine heard and felt the bump. Then the engine stopped. They weren't submerged anymore, so the captain and some of the other officers went on deck to check out their situation from above. The engineers could be heard in the engine room swearing. It looked bad for their first mission from their home base of Wonsan.

Seung-Jae was with the others in the torpedo room, which had been stripped down to transport the 20 spies to South Korean waters. They were planning a 2-day mission to photograph and map out the South Korean military installations in the area. But now, if the submarine was broken down, they would have to abandon their plans and head for home overland, which was a dangerous plan, but perhaps the only one other than surrendering to the South Korean army. However, the captain of their mission had made it clear that there would be no prisoners taken.

It soon became obvious that the submarine was going nowhere any time soon, so the soldiers got ready to disembark. They loaded up their weapons, ammunition, and cameras, then filed up the ladder to the outside deck. They were only 35 meters from shore, but the crashing waves and the nearby rocks would make their landing rather treacherous. One by one they jumped into the surging surf. When it was Seung-Jae's turn, he quickly checked to see that his secret letter was safely secured inside his shirt. He zipped up his coat, closed his eyes, and plunged into the frigid waters of the Sea of Japan.

Twenty minutes later all the North Koreans were assembled on the beach in the darkness. Their orders were simple: split up into groups of three and make their way north to the 38th parallel and safety back in North Korea. The orders were simple, but the task of carrying out the order was a difficult one. It was more than 100km to the border, and their enemy would be numerous, adding to the dangers of travelling at night and hiding out during the daylight hours. Seung-Jae was grouped with two privates, so as a lieutenant, he would be in charge. Off the three went into the night, carrying their backpacks full of provisions and their rifles armed and loaded.

It wasn't long before shots were heard. Seung-Jae reckoned that the gunfight was about a kilometer south of where they were, so he urged his companions to march a bit faster. They moved as stealthily as they could, but their progress up and down the hills through thick bush was not allowing them to maintain silence.

Just before dawn, Seung-Jae decided it was time to rest, so the three soldiers prepared a camp under an overhanging rock on the north side of a hill, well-treed and quite hidden from prying eyes. They certainly could use a sound sleep, as they hadn't rested for more than twenty-four hours now. They couldn't possibly light a fire for warmth and cooking, as the enemy could spot the smoke and flame from long distances.

Lieutenant Seung-Jae Kim and the two privates had a fitful couple of hours sleep before the sound of approaching helicopters awoke them. They couldn't be seen in their hiding place, but it was certainly a concern, as the South Koreans had obviously come out looking for them in force. Little did Seung-Jae know that more than thirty thousand troops were involved in the 'search and seize' operation. Even the Americans were involved by allowing the use of a squadron of helicopters. In fact, South Korea was treating the submarine incursion as an act of war, so it was important to them to apprehend the enemy.

After a quick, cold breakfast, the three set off down the hill. Seung-Jae had decided that travelling during the daylight hours would be necessary. After all, they had the cover of the trees, and if they stayed away from any road or villages, they should be fairly safe.

Less than an hour later, Seung-Jae and his two companions spotted a brigade of South Korean soldiers, about four hundred meters away, disembarking from a military helicopter. This was occurring just to the north of them, so Seung-Jae quickly calculated a new direction of escape. If they weren't careful, they

would soon be surrounded. And what was worse, the three North Koreans heard the bark of tracking dogs further to the south.



“Sir, what can we do now? Should we stay and fight?”
Seung-Jae explained to the private that opening fire on a superior enemy when they didn’t actually know they were there was foolhardy.

“But we have to keep moving north. Those dogs sound as if they may have discovered our scent, and if so, they’ll be upon us soon. So lets keep low and move fast. If we keep parallel to the enemy, we may have an opening.”

The two privates thought that Seung-Jae’s idea was a good one, or perhaps the only one, so they followed him silently along a wooded path that was parallel to the road that the South Koreans were quickly filling.

The dogs were getting closer, so close in fact that soon the North Koreans would be overtaken. But were the handlers with the dogs, or had the animals been given free rein to pursue their prey? Seung-Jae had to find out. He ordered the two privates to carry on down the path. He had told them that he would remain, and either kill the dogs outright or perhaps distract them somehow. If the South Korean dog handlers were right behind, then it would be a gunfight for sure. Seung-Jae didn’t want to have to do battle while being outnumbered, but he was trained to fight, and fight he would if it came to that.

After the two privates had disappeared into the bush, Seung-Jae jogged down to the creek at the bottom of the ravine and waded upstream about 100m. This would help prevent the dogs from picking up his scent. Then he jumped up onto an overhanging tree limb and climbed up into the furthest reaches of the tree. His camouflage was both the canopy of leaves and his uniform, so he would be hard to discern from below. He lay perfectly still, high in the tree, and listened intently to the sounds of the approaching dogs.

Soon Seung-Jae observed that the dog handlers were running right behind the dogs. They were obviously fit and prepared for this type of hunt, as the dogs were still leashed, but the whole group of four dogs and eight soldiers was moving at a hurried pace and covering a great distance. They passed only twenty-five meters from his tree, but they didn’t pause at all, and soon they were well down the path that the two North Korean privates had taken.

He hadn’t been discovered! It seemed like a miracle, but he also knew that he hadn’t done anything to prevent their following his two comrades. What a coward he was! But as he rationalized his situation, he had to admit that he would never have survived a battle with eight enemy who were well armed, as well as alerting the rest of the South Korean soldiers nearby piling from the helicopters and swarming the bushes. And separating himself from the two privates was part of his plan.

Seung-Jae soon heard shouts and gunfire. It was obvious that his two partners had been caught, but were putting up a fight nevertheless. It was over in a matter of minutes, and an eerie silence followed. No doubt the North Koreans had been killed, and most likely Seung-Jae was alone. A decision had to be made soon. Should he stay in the tree, or would that lead to a sure death? Or should he continue his escape on the ground. He was most likely surrounded on all sides by the South Koreans now, so he may be better off staying put for the moment. And that’s what he did.

During the remainder of the day there were several South Korean patrols that came quite close to Seung-Jae’s hiding place, but they weren’t with dogs so his chances of being discovered were slim. His hiding place high in the tree had proven to be a good one, so another night or so in the tree wouldn’t hurt his chances he thought.

That extra time in the tree turned into three days and three more nights. Seung-Jae had shown great patience to wait out the enemy like that. He had left his hiding place only once a night to get drinking water from the creek below. But he was now out of food and was famished. However, the tree’s safety was more important than sustenance at that point in time, so rather than foraging for food, he stayed put. He had to put up with his rumbling stomach and the weak feeling that accompanied the lack of nutrition.

On day four, in the late evening, Seung-Jae hadn’t seen or heard any enemy for quite some time, so he assumed that the search had been called off. It was time to leave, get some food into his belly, and then

continue his journey. Not long after he came upon a farm with a huge vegetable garden. He loaded his backpack with several kilos of vegetables, and as he sneaked away he crunched away on several carrots and ate a handful of raw pea pods. That would have to do for now, but a real breakfast with kim-chee and boiled rice would be something he wouldn't say no to.

So, early on September 22, 1996, Seung-Jae Park clasped his mother's letter in his hand, said a little prayer for her, and then, just as he had promised her, he turned south towards Pusan, South Korea.

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