

The North

Korean

Soldier

By Ethan H. Kim

When I was a young boy, my grandfather Kim Chankyu, who fought in the Korean War alongside the United States against the Soviets, Chinese, and North Koreans, would always describe such intriguing and scary stories about his time as a South Korean soldier. He told me how the North Koreans invaded South Korea by passing the 38th parallel, which was the division line that separated North and South Korea. I was so inspired by his acts of bravery and sympathy as a soldier and how he fought valiantly against the North Koreans and Chinese, that I too wanted to become a soldier to help my nation defend itself from foreign threats. Little did I know that it required incredible amounts of courage, discipline, and determination to become a soldier.

2000 February 5th

After the semester ended, I would immediately go to the convenience store, Seven-Eleven with my best friends, Hakun and Taehyun. The three of us have always done everything together and have been friends since elementary school. While everyone was preparing for the CSAT, which was the most important exam of our lives because it determined what university we would be admitted into, the three of us did not really care about it at all. Instead, we all desired a position in the army. After buying bottles of delicious Sprites and some refreshing *Melona* ice cream, we would all sit down and relax on a park bench, chatting about school and our chaotic lives. Out of the three of us, Hakun was by far the smartest. He had exceptional grades and took additional academic classes outside of school. While Taehyun and I were not necessarily the smartest, we were quite athletic, as we played many sports, one being Taekwondo. This martial art is considered the most common and popular “sport” in Korea, besides golf, tennis, and archery, of course.

I remember the days when we were young, naive, and immature, and joined our first class. If I recall correctly we were all three years old and Hakun cried and wet his pants, Taehyun thought it was a complete waste of time, while I was ready to throw that first punch and kick. I was ecstatic entering the *dojang* and meeting the master and instructors. At the end of each class, I remembered seeing the older students walk in with their black uniforms and belts with a degree between one and four, and doing their one-step sparring or defense techniques, *poomsae* or forms, but most importantly *kyorugi*, which is sparring or free form fighting. Think of it as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), but with protective gear. Essentially students wear gear and fight each other attempting to beat their opponent, by punching and kicking in certain areas like three points for a headshot, in the allotted amount of time of that round. Now that I am eighteen, I am a proud second degree black belt and one of those students. I became a junior instructor helping teach younger students with their technique and forms, while at the same time, beating my friends in *kyorugi*. Overall, Taekwondo was an integral part of my life and actually one of the first steps in becoming a South Korean soldier.

As we were walking in *Gangnam-gu*, we spotted the colossal Starfield COEX mall in the beautiful city of Seoul. We saw Jeonghoon and his buddies causing trouble as usual in the parking lot. Jeonghoon was very tall and had the build of a tiger. He had very long black hair and his eyes glowed with fury. He and his buddies were picking on Hajun, who was a very smart fellow, but was as skinny and annoying as a monkey, so he was easily targeted by the “bullies” of our school.

“Remember what I said, Hajun?” asked Jeonghoon. “Where’s my A? Were you slacking off again?!”

“Please ... understand ... I’ll make sure you’ll get a good grade next time... Okay?”

whimpered Hajun, quivering.

Jeonghoon glanced at his buddies and remarked, “This fella ought to show some more respect.” He stared back at Hajun, “Ain’t that right wimp?”

“That’s right, Jeonghoon, you show this idiot who we really are,” Lee nodded his head.

“Yeah bro, he needs to be knocked out to learn his lesson. This buffoon,” Min snickered, shaking his head.

“You know what that means Hajun, you’re going to wish you’d done well on my paper cause now you’re going to pay big time.” Jeonghoon declared with a frown and bared his teeth.

“That won’t be necessary Jeonghoon, let him go!” I yelled.

“If it ain’t Hyunjae, the all strong and mighty hero. I should be so scared now.”

“You better be, since we’re going to make sure that you learned your lesson by the time we’re through with you.”

“Why stand up for this small idiot? He can’t even stand up for himself, he’s a scaredy cat.”

“That’s enough!” I yelled.

“Whatever,” Jeonghoon said as he lifted his fist, ready to throw a punch.

In a matter of seconds, I dashed towards Jeonghoon, while he threw a punch at me, but I was able to block it and swipe his legs. Hakun and Taehyun jumped in on the fun and fought Lee and Min and we all had a little showdown.

“You’ve just made a grave mistake, Hyunjae,” Jeonghoon replied as he was rising from the ground.

Jeonghoon got right up and tried to kick me in the stomach. I dodged it quickly and was able to counter with a punch to the nose. Blood flowed out of his nostrils. Jeonghoon quickly wiped his nose and I smiled. He frowned and threw his leg up to my face. I blocked it again and back kicked him right in the stomach. He fell backwards.

“It’s over, go home!” I triumphantly shouted.

Hakun and Taehyun pinned Lee and Min down to the ground. Their faces were covered with sweat and scratches. Jeonghoon got up one last time and before he could do anything, I kneed him in his stomach and he was done. All three of them were struggling to get back up.

“This isn’t the end, Hyunjae!” Jeonghoon shouted, “I’ll get you back someday. You’ll see.”

The three of them sauntered out of the parking lot and into Min’s Hyundai. As they were driving off, Jeonghoon pointed at me and signaled the “you’re dead” gesture.

“Thanks,” Hajun said timidly.

“No problem Hajun, but you really have to defend yourself. I won’t always be around.” I patted his back.

After the quarrel, Hakun, Taehyun, and I stopped by *Palsaek Samgyeopsal* on the way home.

“That was an awesome showdown!” Taehyun exclaimed as he raised his hands up in the air.

“Yeah, Hyunjae you got some good moves,” Hakun pointed out. “Jeonghoon could never land a punch or kick you. You practically dodged and blocked every single attack!”

“Thanks, but if it weren’t for you two, it would have been a much different story,” I replied, while rubbing my cheeks and checking my ribs.

“True, but who cares, you could have beaten them easily!” Taehyun yelled.

“I bet you will be the next Master Sonu!” Hakunk elbowed me.

“That’s why out of the three of us, he’ll be the first one to get a cute girl,” Taehyun smirked. “Speaking of cute girls, got a girlfriend yet, Hyunjae?”

“No, not now anyways,” I said with some disappointment.

“Don’t sweat it, one will come around. Just wait,” Hakun smiled.

“What about Ara?” Taehyun hinted. “She’s the cutest girl at our school!”

“Maybe...” I smiled.

We all laughed and chugged our Sprites. The server placed some sizzling and hot *kalbi* and *bulgogi* on our table, with some additional side dishes, like *banchan*. We were all famished and therefore devoured all the dishes in seconds.

“I can’t wait till I’m twenty. Then I can drink a real man’s drink, like *soju*,” exclaimed Hakun sitting there with Superman's pose.

“Bro you can’t even get a girl yet, stop acting like once you’re twenty, you’ll be The Man,” Taehyun remarked, giggling.

Those were the last good moments I had, before I officially became a soldier at the DMZ. The last time I would ever be able to have fun with my buddies and to enjoy the pleasures of life.

2000 December 10th

It was a breezy and cloudy day here at the Demilitarized Zone. I stood at my typical spot in a firm Taekwondo stance, just standing there waiting for something to happen. I wore sunglasses, a black helmet, a dark green camouflage army uniform, a walkie talkie attached to

my waist. I always thought that being a soldier would be a lot more active and exciting, but I was proven wrong. I would stand for many hours and would sometimes half fall asleep, but when the military officer, Chinhwa walked around with his painful metal baton, I would make sure that I was fully awake and ready for action. I didn't know what Hakun and Taehyun felt about the DMZ. Most likely the same way I did, but Hakun probably would want to read a book as he was standing guard. Taehyun would want to go play a game or rouse some guys up for a party. Having said that, the DMZ was no place to fool around, considering that there were many security cameras watching your every move and dangers lurking around. There is a one-hundred-fifty mile electrical wire and over a million mines to ensure that no one from the North escapes to the South, unless they wanted suicide. I always remembered long ago the reports of North Koreans endeavoring to cross the DMZ to hopefully leave their suffering and impoverished nation to a wealthy and safe South Korea. I heard the news of a tunnel located in North Korea that connects straight to my home city, Seoul. I worry about the safety of my family and pray that if something were to go wrong that nothing horrific would occur to my *Omma*, *Appa*, *Samcheon*, *Soogmo*, Hakun, and Taehyun. I would lay down my life for their well being. As I was walking near the two blue structures, where the two nations make compromises, I spotted a skinny North Korean soldier staring at me in a rather odd way. He had a flat nose and the way he sauntered reminded me of someone I once knew. He tilted his head and his eyes motioned for me to come to him.

I was very confused and thought at first "Is this a dream?! "What on earth is this man doing?! Is he trying to get himself killed?!" I could be punished severely and even be put to jail for communicating with a North Korean soldier. People would think I was insane and a traitor to my nation. Instead, I walked away pretending I never had seen him. As I approached one of the

ten wooden watchtowers, I felt relief, as Hakun and Taehyun were both watching the North side. I quickly walked up the stairs into the tower's second-story. Hakun as I suspected was being as strict as he could possibly be with himself and stared endlessly at the glass window, while Taehyun sat on a chair humming quietly. They were both just as bored as I was, which was not shocking at all. Most soldiers at the DMZ barely do anything, besides standing and being a complete robot and only talking when spoken to by an officer or higher ranked official.

“Bro this place sucks. When will we be able to experience some type of brawl?” Taehyun whined as he punched the air.

“We need to stay focused, come on,” Hakun barked.

“Whatever, I didn't sign up for this,” Taehyun whispered under his breath.

“Something interesting happened today to me though,” I said with optimism.

“Spit it out,” Taehyun demanded.

“Well,” I said as softly as I could, “A North Korean soldier was looking at me funny and made some sort of small gesture.”

“What?!” Hakun replied. “You know you can get in huge trouble for even making eye contact with a North Korean soldier? Right?”

“Hyunjae, what the hell were you thinking?!” Taehyun asked, while gritting his teeth. “Do you wanna end up like one of those imbeciles on the news?!”

“Of course not, but I kind of want to meet the guy,” I replied reluctantly. I knew that acting this way was extremely dangerous, but I was too curious. The way he gestured me over seemed quite urgent. I thought, “What if he needs something from me or needs help?” Considering that it's not every day that you make eye contact with another soldier, especially a North Korean.

“You and that fellow are gonna be dead in seconds with that mindset,” Taehyun frowned with a bitter face. “You can’t possibly be this dumb, Hyunjae. C’mon now. I expected more from you.”

“I know, but there’s something about him... Like I know him,” I said hesitated, frowning.

“Hyunjae, as a friend, I ask you to forget this ever happened,” Hakun demanded.

“Fine, you’re right,” I lied. I kept thinking about the soldier and wondered who this man could possibly be? Does he know me? Do I know him?

“He sure is!” Taehyun yelled, right until Officer Chinhwa barged in and we all looked at him and saluted.

“What are you all doing? Quit chatting and get to your stations!” He growled.

Chinhwa was a very bulky South Korean from Busan and was feared by all of us. Sure, he was a reasonable man at times, but usually he was extremely strict. Probably due to the fact that he despised the three of us for our brotherhood. We all knew that officer Chinhwa could have been a successful and happy man, but he lost his chance when he was put into military service at the DMZ.

A couple days later, I was anxious to chat with the North Korean soldier, but after talking to my friends and thinking about the frightening consequences, I just could not execute. Unfortunately, my inner conflict would not be resolved and the rest of my time here at the DMZ would be completely miserable. I asked myself, “What if he was someone I knew... What if we were somehow related and I just never glued the pieces together?” If I did not confront the man, I would surely never be able to discover the truth. I couldn’t resist any longer. For that reason, I decided to deliver a message to the North Korean soldier to meet me behind the tall building that people rarely went to.

That night, it had to be 0100, when most people were dead asleep. I swear Taehyun was snoring like my grandfather. I tip-toed outside of my barracks. As usual, it was very cloudy, but the full moon still shined in between shifting clouds. It was windy and had to be at least four degrees Celsius. To my luck, nobody was out and about, but some of the soldiers who had night shifts were at the watchtower. This was a relief as I was heading in the opposite direction. I sprinted towards the tall abandoned building and saw the North Korean soldier. We were both obviously still on separate sides, but could whisper to each other through the barbed wire fence. I was shaking like a dog during thunder and was worried if someone would spot us.

“Who are you and what do you want?” I gulped as I was looking at the watchtower.

“My name is Noh Heeju and I’ve been watching you,” he said with a cracked voice.

“What?!” I replied with major disbelief, “Why did you choose me?”

“You look the most friendly and willing to take risks.”

“I guess so,” I said with a smirk.

“Please, if you could deliver this message to my parents,” he whispered, but was interrupted when two guards were walking towards us. He handed me something and ran towards his barracks. I was completely speechless. I felt scared and my heart was pounding rapidly. While heading towards my barrack, I chose to make a quick stop to the restroom and read the letter. If I was to do this kind act, I should be able to see what this man had to say. I entered the bathroom and locked the stall to make sure no one was around and opened the letter. I could not believe the address: *Yugsam dong Teheran Apartment #205*. I could not breathe; this was for my first aunt and uncle, *Soogmo* and *Samcheon*.

Dear *Omna* and *Appa*,

I have so many things to catch you up on, but I feel that time is running short. I hope this letter reaches you, before it's too late. You see, *Halmoni* isn't feeling that well and she has been coughing a lot and sleeps all day. I'm afraid that she has bronchitis. There are no doctors to see her and no one will give us any help. I have joined the military and have been here at the DMZ for over 5 years, so that the government will not cause any trouble or hurt us. I really need to ask for a favor to send some medicine for *Halmoni*. I don't think she can survive much longer without any medication and she is all I have left in North Korea. Everyone here has either died of hunger, been to jail, or executed. Please send the medicine to the soldier that delivered this letter. Thank you so much and stay well.

From,

Noh Heeju

I dropped the letter to the ground and stood there, frozen. I could not believe what I had just read. Is he actually my long-lost cousin? I remembered hearing some stories about Heeju when I was very young. *Soogmo* claimed that he was a timid, but clever boy, who was passionate in helping those in desperate need. They also told me that they were unfortunately separated. I had just met my cousin and was going to deliver the shocking news to my *Soogmo* and *Samcheon*.

When it was my day off, which was Sunday, I went straight home and first told my parents the news. They were speechless that their nephew had been in the suffering and living in cruel North Korea all these years. Then I went to my *Samcheon* and *Soogmo*'s apartment and rang their doorbell.

“Hyunjae, it’s so nice to see you again,” *Soogmo* said joyfully. “You’re just in time. Come inside and join us for some lunch.”

“Hey *Soogmo*, it’s good to see you too,” I said as I looked down. “I have something to give you.”

I handed the letter over to her and she instantly put her hands to her mouth and fell to the ground in tears. *Samcheon* came over and looked at his wife with confusion and then looked over at me.

“What’s going on?” he asked. The words were stuck in my throat.

“Hyunjae, what on earth did you say?” he demanded with a hoarse voice.

I took the letter from *Soogmo*’s shaking hands.

He read it and looked up at me. I had never seen him so upset. Tears slowly escaped his eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Our son is still alive,” he said with joy as he hugged *Soogmo*.

They both stood up and *Soogmo* ran into the kitchen and gathered all of the medicine they had and put it in a plastic bag. She handed it over to me and said, “Thank you so much Hyunjae, if it wasn’t for you, we would have never known that our son was still alive.”

“Glad I could help,” I replied, almost tearing up.

I walked out of the apartment with hope and happiness. I had a mission to not only deliver this message, but to bring my cousin home. It was going to be a huge risk and challenge, but I was determined and ready for anything coming my way.

When I arrived at the DMZ, I had a game plan all ready and informed Hakun and Taehyun privately in Seoul. To my surprise, they were willing to help. We would sneak out at 0200 and meet Heeju at 0210 at the shelter covered with many bushes. Then I would tell him of the news and deliver the medicine. My friends would serve as watchers and ensure that no one

was on our trail or coming our way. If everything went as planned, everyone would be happy and it would be a night to remember. I was going to bring my cousin home, where he belongs.

At 0200, we left the barracks and ran to the building that was covered with many bushes. I saw Heeju standing patiently. My friends took their positions and stood tall and alert while I met with Heeju.

“I can’t believe you’re my cousin, man,” I said as I placed my hands behind my head.

“Really?” his eyes widened. “That’s unbelievable,” he said.

“By the way, your parents are very happy that you and our grandmother are still alive,” I said. “When I gave them the message, your *Omna* broke down and your *Appa* was too shocked to speak.”

I reached into my pocket and took out the plastic bag with the medicine in it.

“Thank you,” Heeju said while taking the medicine.

“Any time,” I said. “I hope our grandmother gets well very soon. Also, I have a plan to bring you home.”

“Really?” he asked with major disbelief and refusal, “No... it’s not safe!”

“Yeah, but it won’t be easy,” I pointed out, “We have to ...”

“We got company!” Taehyun announced nervously.

“Better wrap things up... Chinhwa and two guards are coming over!” Hakun said, biting his fingers.

“Go!” I whispered.

“What about you guys?” he asked with a stutter.

“Don’t worry, just get out of here.” I said and motioned.

He bolted and we were about to do the same, but Chinhwa and the two guards were on to us. I heard them yell, "Halt, stay where you are!" and through their walkie talkies they told others to send backup. There was no escape.

"You all have just made a grave mistake and are about to pay an unbearable consequence," Chinhwa announced with a smirk.

I was confused and shocked. How did he figure out that we were going to meet with Heeju?

"If it wasn't for this fellow over here, I would never have known," he remarked as he put his hand on the soldier's broad shoulder.

I looked over and my eyes couldn't believe what they were seeing. That soldier turned out to be Jeonghoon. It had been a couple of months since I had last seen him; He looked like a bear, as he must have grown two inches and gained at least thirty pounds of muscle. His face looked even more menacing as his eyes glared at us and he had a big animal-like grin on his face. I knew that he had something bad planned for us.

"Remember me, Hyunjae?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Jeonghoon, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"I told you that I'll be back, don't you remember that?" he barked with anger. "You're in huge trouble now."

"You want a rematch?!" I shouted in a fighter's position.

"You moron... if you even try to fight me, your time in jail would be forever," he declared. "Even if you weren't, I would still find a way to lock you up in that cell, where you belong."

"That's right, Hyunjae," said Chinhwa, "you've been with a North Korean soldier, which is absolute treason!"

“You’re a traitor!” The other guard barked.

“Nothing you can do now, you’ve just lost.” Jeonghoon started laughing.

“He’s right, there is nothing we can do,” Hakun pointed out, his face looking at the ground.

Taehyun turned me around and held me by the shoulders, “Look Hyunjae, I don’t normally like going down without a fight, but this isn’t going to work.”

I couldn’t think straight. Taehyun, the man who was extremely brave and aggressive, wouldn’t even try to rebel against them?! I closed my fists, my heart pounding, and I was concerned about whether or not Heeju had been seen by Chinhwa. I looked at my friends and then back at Chinhwa and Jeonghoon. We couldn’t do anything; it was too late. However, I knew that Heeju was going to be alright, since he had the medicine. Even if I couldn’t bring him back home, at least his parents know that their son is still alive. At this moment, I now knew the importance and my true purpose in joining the military and becoming a Korean soldier at the DMZ. Most likely my friends and I would now be kicked out of service and sent to prison. My family would be notified of my charges. I knew that there were consequences for my actions and I was afraid, but meeting my long lost cousin and helping save the grandmother that I never knew was still worth the risk.