



BJORN CHRISTIAN TORRISSEN

People bowing at a monument in Pyongyang to show respect for North Korean leaders.

Escape from North Korea

A guard and his prisoner made a desperate run for freedom one night. They were prepared to die if they failed. ZACHARY JOHN brings us their story.

“If they stopped me, I was going to shoot them and run. If I couldn’t run, I was going to shoot myself.” That was Jeon Gwang-jin’s plan. On 12 July 2019, the 26-year-old North Korean prison guard escaped North Korea — a crime punishable by death — along with one of his prisoners, Ms Kim (not her real name).

Mr Jeon shared his dramatic story with a BBC reporter. On the night he escaped with Kim, he had volunteered to do an extra-long night shift. He prepared two backpacks, filled with supplies for their journey — including a gun, a knife, and poison.

After his boss had left for the night, Jeon cut the wires to the surveillance cameras. At around midnight, Jeon woke Kim up in her cell. He led her out of the prison, through a window, to the prison fence. They could hear guard dogs barking in the distance and the fence was lined with bells that jingled upon the slightest touch. But, they managed to scale the fence without raising any alarm.

Once they were over the fence, the guard and prisoner dashed across rice fields to the bank of the Tumen River, which separates North Korea and China. Kim did not know how to

swim. Gripping his gun in one hand and dragging Kim with the other, Jeon stumbled across the river.

“When we got into the middle of the river, the water was above my head,” Jeon told the BBC. The pair were ready to lose their lives trying to escape. “Once I was prepared to die, nothing scared me,” Jeon added.

Moments before being engulfed by the river, Jeon managed to find his footing and dragged Kim with him into China.

Harsh conditions

After days of hiding in the mountains, they met a local and borrowed his phone. Kim called a “broker” she knew, who arranges journeys for North Korean escapees. He told her that North Korean and Chinese authorities were looking for them. In spite of the man-hunt, Jeon and Kim were snuck out of China via a network of safehouses.

“Never in North Korean history have a prisoner and a guard escaped together,” Kim told the BBC. Kim, who was a broker herself, had been caught **facilitating** a phone call between a boy in her village and his mother, who had escaped North Korea. Kim

was sentenced to four years and three months in a North Korean prison camp.

North Korean prison camps are home to notoriously harsh conditions, with frequent reports of human rights abuse. Kim had been arrested before for brokering escapes from North Korea. She was sentenced to five years in a prison camp. After her release, she felt facilitating calls or bank transfers was a less risky form of brokering — but she was wrong.

The idea of returning to prison led Kim to consider suicide many times. Before she could be transported to the prison camp, however, Jeon told her he would help her escape. Jeon had spent ten years in the military as part of his national service. His childhood dream had been to be a police officer, but North Korean society would not allow it. His father and grandfather were farmers, so it was expected that Jeon would be a farmer too. To become a police officer in North Korea, one has to be from a rich or influential family.

Living in hiding

When Kim was placed in Jeon’s custody in May 2019, her refined appearance caught his attention. Over

North Korea: why people try to run away

North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world. The United Nations says that 11 million North Koreans, or more than 40 percent of the population, do not have enough to eat. Things are much better next door in China. Koreans in South Korea are even better off.

The North Korean government should be trying much harder to improve people’s lives. Instead, it wants everyone to act as if nothing is wrong. Even whispering criticisms of the government can get one arrested. Those considered to be **traitors** are punished by being made to live in **inhumane** conditions in prison camps, often along with their entire family.

two months, the pair grew closer and closer during whispered conversations through the bars of Kim’s cell. Jeon had even started to call Kim “sister”, when usual prison rules dictated that prisoners were not even allowed to look at guards eye to eye.

Jeon felt he and Kim were “connected”. After years of service to a country that would not allow him to fulfil his dreams, Jeon felt he had nothing left to lose. Instead of allowing Kim to be transported to a prison camp where she might not survive, he chose to risk his life to save hers.

Today, Jeon and Kim are still in hiding. Jeon is learning English and seeking **asylum** in the US, but Kim is unlikely to follow him there. Jeon told the BBC he does not regret his decision to escape North Korea. He said, “Looking back, we all lived in a prison.”

VOCAB BUILDER

broker (say “bro-ker”; noun) = a person who makes deals for their clients.

facilitating (say “fe-sili-tay-ting”; verb) = helping to make something possible.

asylum (say “e-sai-lem”; noun) = protection granted by a country to people who are forced to flee their own countries for their safety.

traitors (say “tray-ters”; noun) = people who betray their own country.

inhumane (say “in-hiu-may’n”; adjective) = extremely cruel.