



Excerpt: Wolnam by Yoanna Pak

Even with her limp, the girl moved about the rice paddies as though she knew them well. She knew which borders were firm enough to carry weight and which would collapse. Soon, Tae-Hyun stopped prodding her in specific directions, but followed her instead. As the walking became easier, the mood lightened and soon, the teasing in the platoon returned.

“Hey, I heard Geum-Ho’s thing is as big as a horse’s! In the dark it looks like a demon’s arm!”

“No way, I was there and it was nothing like an arm. Maybe a demon’s little finger!”

Tae-Hyun didn’t say anything. Laughter erupted and it felt like they were a group of friends going camping, rather than soldiers walking towards one of the worst VC strongholds in the entire country. After Seong-Min’s death, the men needed something to laugh about.

The girl came to a sudden stop. Tae-Hyun tried to push her forward but she made signs to walk into the flooded paddy instead of staying on its borders.

“What’s the matter with her, sir?” Minju asked.

“Something’s wrong. She knows something.” Tae-Hyun brought his face close to hers and then pointed to the ground. She shook her head, her dark eyes framed by long eyelashes that curled upward, searched deep into his. Tae-Hyun jerked his head back. “*Why no go?*” He looked back at the ground. She started to wave her arms around, in circular motions.

“What in the world.”

“She looks like she’s exploding. An exploding bomb!” Minju peered around Tae-Hyun’s shoulder. “He’s right chief.” Even Geum-Ho was watching her now. “Even the baby-san VC knows the VC’s secrets. I’d bet a million won that there’s a land mine there. Let’s test it out. Everyone step back.” He dug into his pack and pulled out a C-ration can and started to aim for the spot just in front of the girl.

“Wait Geum-Ho. Are you crazy? Everyone take cover.” Tae-Hyun pushed the girl over to the next paddy and pulled her down onto the ground next to him. They heard the thud of the can hitting the mud and braced themselves. Nothing happened. “That’s it? There’s nothing!” Minju’s voice came from somewhere to the left of Tae-Hyun.

“Let me try another!” Geum-Ho shouted back.

This time, they heard a click then the dirt was airborne. It rained down on them as they stood up, everyone soaked from the rice paddies. She had been right. It would have been pieces of Tae-Hyun falling on them had she not stopped. Thanks to her, he was still here. He turned to find her looking at him, a slight smile on her lips. He gave her a nod and placed her in front of him again. Grateful to share the burden of the lives of the men in his platoon, there was no more prodding. The soldiers lined up behind them, like chicks behind a hen, and they continued all the way to the coast.