

Between Heaven and Earth: Book One - The Cost of Freedom – Chapter Two - Chinese Dreaming

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Sleep came slowly. It was freezing cold on the floor of the unheated cabin. Hunger gnawed at her stomach. Jeong Sook tried her best to put the horror of Myung Oke laying out there on the ice out of her mind. Most of all she wrestled with the thoughts of what was next.

Like many before her, Jeong Sook had only a vague idea of what she would do once she had crossed the border and arrived in China. In the back of her mind was the thought of getting to South Korea. Growing up in Pyongyang, even as a part of the elite class that enjoyed the most privileges, there was almost no information about life on the other side of the borders. With more questions than answers and Hyo Jin in her arms she finally drifted off.

In fact they were now hiding in a hut that was on the north bank of the Tumen river. The three northeast provinces of China were a relatively flat land that, due to its geography, had been at the crossroads of much of northeast Asian history. In ancient times it had been the home of the first Korean dynasty. Most recently it

had been known as Manchuria and then Manchukuo under the Japanese. Since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, it had been part of The People's Republic of China, less than affectionately known as 'the rust belt' of Asia.

The rise of China as an economic and regional military power had been wildly uneven. The rural provinces, especially these three, were still poor. The former industrial infrastructure built by the Japanese for the most part was no more than crumbling monuments to the past. In addition there were severe shortages, especially of woman. Whenever possible the young and smart women of the region had joined the mass migration to the booming cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Canton. The exodus of North Korean refugees escaping the starvation of the latest famine were 70 to 80% women. The traffic in women became big business. The younger, healthy, and or pretty were usually dealt directly to brothels, massage parlors, and other adult businesses by the brokers who acquired them from the smugglers who brought them across the river. The older women, those above thirty, were often sold to dirt poor farmers as 'little wives'. As Jeong Sook and Hyo Jin slept, their future was already being haggled over. They would soon find that they had no say in the matter.

"Older sister, I'm so hungry," the young girl whispered.

Jeong Sook slowly untangled herself from Hyo Jin's limbs and looked around. She had no idea how long she had been asleep but the pale winter twilight was visible through the only window in the room.

"Be still little one and wait a little longer."

Jeong Sook was also ravenously hungry but after the violent events of the last night she was abundantly cautious. Their guide was on a raised platform on the other side of the room sleeping with one eye open. Having no choice Jeong Sook stood up and began looking around for a place to relieve herself.

"What do you want?" growled the broker.

"We need the toilet and something to eat," she let him know.

She was scared to death of this violent beast but knew he was their only connection and they needed his help. He roused himself and kicked a wooden bucket across the room indicating that it was the toilet. The bucket had a crude cover and when she removed it the odor of stale urine wafted through the closed room. Jeong Sook turned her back to the now lounging man, pulled down several layers of outer and underclothes, and squatted to do her business. The broker watched with interest. Next Jeong Sook got the younger girl up, pulled down her pants, and sat her on the bucket. When she was finished the broker stood up, reached into his pants and urinated noisily into the bucket with no concern for modesty. When he was finished he wiped his organ on his shirt tail and put it away.

"We need water and food older brother. Please help us," Jeong Sook implored.

"We aren't out of the woods yet," he told them. "The Chinese border patrols pass here regularly and if they have any reason to look in this hut, you two will be on your way back. Now just wait. After dark someone is coming to take you to the next stop. They'll have some food and water."

Hyo Jin had lots of experience enduring an empty belly, Jeong Sook didn't. Nevertheless they waited. Sometime later, it was after full dark, the door of the hut flew open and two people entered. All three occupants of the hut stood up, if not to greet the visitors then to fight or flee. They were the folks the broker had been waiting for. They seemed to be a man and a woman but at first Jeong Sook was unable to tell due both to the darkness and the mountain of clothes they were wearing. They immediately removed large parkas and used them to cover the only window. The taller one produced a small battery powered lantern and used it to examine the two women. Then the negotiations began.

It took more than twenty minutes for the deal to be closed. It was conducted in three languages, Mandarin Chinese, some local dialect, and the only one the two refugees understood, coarse Korean. In the end, a small bundle and a thick roll of what looked to be dollars wrapped in rubber bands were exchanged. Their broker counted the bills, rewrapped them and took his leave without another word.

The new woman then produced four small half frozen sweet potatoes and told her new charges to eat quickly. Jeong Sook and Hyo Jin scarfed the sweet potatoes down peels and all. The new brokers turned off the lantern and removed the coats from the window.

"Stand up and follow me," the man said. "No talking, no noise! Your life depends on it." He was out the door and the woman pushed the other two into the night.

An hour later all four were in the back of a farm truck that smelled like pig shit, covered with a tarp, and heading north. The ride was rough and cold. The two brokers occasionally exchanged words in a dialect that Jeong Sook couldn't make out. When she asked about their destination in her cultured, city Korean she was told to shut up. Hyo Jin cried a little but then fell asleep.

Before dawn they had passed several checkpoints where currency was collected by the police. Before sunrise they had entered the outskirts of a small city or town. Their final stop was on a back street of low slung dung colored buildings. After the long ride, immobile in the cold, it seemed to be the hardest thing Jeong Sook had ever done to crawl over the tailgate of the truck and stand up. The truck roared off and the man led the way behind one of the buildings, stopping to kick a mongrel dog on the doorstep.

Jeong Sook and Hyo Jin were pushed into a small room in the back of the house and the door was locked.

"We need to eat and water," Jeong Sook insisted as she knocked on the door.

"Wait!" was the reply.

The room was dark with only a sliver of light coming through the incompletely covered window. The floor was of old yellowed linoleum but a little precious heat could be felt. They wrapped themselves in a threadbare quilt they found on the floor and began to thaw their bones. Jeong Sook had to pee again. After a search of the room, the slop bucket was found, as much as by smell as by sight.

What seemed like hours later the woman broker unlocked the door and pushed in a bowl with four half ears of corn. It was followed by a pot with some corn gruel. There were two bowls and two spoons were stuck in the pot. The refugees took to it as if it was a five course meal. While they ate, the woman left the door open and watched them.

"If you behave and do what you are told you may just survive and start a new life. You are in China now and you have no legal status here. If the authorities catch you you will be sent back. The police here are looking for you. If they stop you, you will be arrested and sent back."

For the first time they were getting information that would be critical for their survival. Jeong Sook listened carefully. Hyo Jin licked her gruel bowl and wondered if she could get seconds.

"Where can we go now?" Jeong Sook asked. Not sure if she should trust this rude looking woman but what option did she have?

"You can't go anywhere now. If you go outside this house the cops will pick you up and back you go. We have made arrangements for you. You both need to work and pay back the debt you owe. We have found jobs for both of you."

Now this was news to Jeong Sook and she had a million questions.

"Debt, what debt? We paid the broker already. How much debt?"

"You paid the broker on the other side but you haven't paid me yet and your debt is getting bigger as you sit here and eat. You owe a fee for transportation, housing, and a fee for getting you a job. The sooner you pay all your debts, the sooner you can be on your way."

"What kind of job?" her head was spinning with this talk of unending debt.

"We have found you a position on a small farm outside of town. As I recall it is a widower, his mother, and a son."

"What? I'm no farmer. I'm a university graduate and an art teacher. I don't know a thing about farming."

"Not here you aren't. Maybe you can paint their house." She said with a snort.

"Will Hyo Jin be going with me?" She had quickly developed a deep concern for the girl who had survived the night on the ice with her.

"Who, the young pretty one? We found her a place in the entertainment field. With her face and body she'll do real well there."

"Entertainment field?" Jeong Sook wondered what that was; like a singer?

"I'd rather do something more in line with my training, maybe working as a teacher." She was sure this was only reasonable.

"Don't be a fool. You have no papers. You have no choice. At your age, all you are going to be is some dirt farmer's wife. Besides, it's a done deal."

The old lady slammed the door and told them to shut up. In the evening the door was opened again and they were told to strip naked. They needed to get cleaned up in order to meet their new bosses tomorrow. Both women declined and the silent man entered the room, grabbed Hyo Jin, and began to roughly strip her clothes off. Jeong Sook resigned to the inevitable, removed her own clothes. Together the old woman and her partner carried in a plastic tub of tepid water and set it in the middle of the room. They both watched as the two naked women scrubbed themselves and each other. Two or more weeks of accumulated grime came off slowly with the help of a bar of brown soap and some coarse rags. Once finished and inspected by both their jailers, they were each given a set of padded winter garments and one set of woolen underwear.

Sometime in the middle of the night, the door was unlocked and the old woman told Jeong Sook to come out. As she exited Hyo Jin sat up and watched her go. The silent man entered the room and the woman locked the door behind him. Jeong Sook and the old woman sat on the floor and listened to the sounds of rustling, pleading, and several slaps.

Later the refugees cried each other to sleep over their Chinese nightmare.