

Between Heaven and Earth: Book One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Five - In the Market

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The market town was twenty minutes by truck over the rough dirt roads of the district. Its location near the convergence of several actual paved roads made it the commercial center of the surrounding area and the home of the itinerant five day market for the local farmers. The town itself had a population of 80,000 souls and had a thriving business center that boasted two twelve story buildings. Most of the other structures were two and one story concrete and wood homes, small factories, and warehouses. The market district consisted of three streets on the south side of town that were blocked off on market days. The streets were lined with open stalls where vendors sold all manner of products, the greatest majority having been produced on local farms. There were also goods ranging from clothes, electronics like game consoles and cellphones, and toys for kids of all ages. Restaurants and street food stalls were everywhere. Chicken and pig's feet were popular and there was no shortage of noodles in several varieties. At every food stall, with the exception of the doughnuts and kebabs, the fiery clear liquor that Chinese people were fond of, was served. Depending on the size of the enterprise, most eateries had a number of round plastic tables with stools set up outside where customers sat to eat and consume shots of liquor.

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The first order of business was to unload their eggs and start looking for a good price. Hyungsang told her to wait by the truck and he would be right back. He returned with a hand cart and they loaded their wares onto it. Jeong Sook had her stash wrapped in a scarf and inside the burlap sack that she carried. She reminisced about the knock-off Gucci bag her father had given her as a university graduation present. It had been one of her prized possessions. How frivolous she had been she now thought.

Hyungsang knew where he was going and led the way. The streets were packed with shoppers and they had to work their way through the crowd. They turned down a side street and entered the poultry market. The street was narrow and was lined with stalls selling chickens and ducks in all configurations. There were cages of live birds all along the right side. On the left were birds hanging by their feet, some still feathered and others naked. Old and young guys in sleeveless undershirts sat at chopping blocks made of tree stumps and chopped off heads, feet, and gutted the birds to the specifications of customers.

Jeong Sook followed close behind Hyungsang as he worked his way down the street with the hand cart. Vendors hawked their wares and called out prices in all the languages used in the region. Immediately she heard several shouting in Korean. There was also the local dialect and a little of what she knew was Mandarin Chinese. At the end of the street was where chicken eggs, duck eggs, and the eggs of other birds were being bought and sold. Hyungsang stopped at several stalls and bantered in his dialect. Jeong Sook did her best to catch how the dealing was going but it was confusing. At one stall Hyungsang pushed her to the front and made it known that she should ask the middle aged woman what today's price was.

"She's from your country. Speak Korean," he told her.

Jeong Sook put on her best smile and engaged the greasily dressed auntie. When she lived in Pyongyang

she always shopped in the state run department store or at specialty stores where only the elite with hard currency shopped. She had no idea how to haggle with a vendor but she had to learn.

"Good morning auntie, have you eaten?" she started out.

The woman looked up at Jeong Sook with wide eyes and an open mouth as if a rare tropical bird had flown in her window and perched on a chair.

"And who might you be, a princess from the land of fairies?" She grunted in the rough speech of the hinterlands of North Korea.

"No ma'am, I'm now a simple farm lass here to do business," Jeong Sook let her know as politely as possible.

"Is that so? I would recognize your Pyongyang accent on the other side of the moon. You may be a spy or an agent here to cause trouble for everyone."

"No ma'am, I assure you I'm not. We would like to know what price you could give us for our eggs. We have about 100 pieces and they are quite fresh."

Hyungsang stepped forward and showed the flats of eggs on the hand cart.

"So a princess has eggs to sell. Tell your man he could make more money if he sells you to a bawdy house. Or I could sell you to the cops."

It wasn't going as well as Jeong Sook had hoped and she just smiled and turned to walk away.

"Where you going woman. Don't be so thinned skinned. Let's take a look at those eggs." Having established her early negotiating position, the auntie was now ready to talk turkey.

The egg lady stood up and told Hyungsang to hand her two eggs. She examined them turning them over and over in her boney hands. She shook them both at her left ear and listened. Satisfied, she pocketed one egg, reached under the plank that was her counter, and came out with a bowl. She then deftly, with one hand, cracked the remaining egg into the bowl and stared at what was inside. Hyungsang joined her in peering into the bowl. Jeong Sook wondered if this was a fortune teller and was going to give them a reading. But no, assured of the quality, she made an offer in the local dialect. Now Hyungsang took over, rejected the first offer and made a counter offer. Jeong Sook tried to follow the negotiation but she was quickly lost. At one point Hyungsang grabbed the hand cart and made his move to break off the dealing. The woman immediately reconsidered and within less than five minutes a deal was struck. As Jeong Sook unstacked the cart Hyungsang counted out the bills. She saw the wad of bills he put in his pocket but she didn't dare ask at what price per egg they had settled.

The deal done and the details known only to him, Hyungsang told Jeong Sook to meet him back at the truck in two hours. He was familiar with the ways of the market and was off for a smoke, a drink, and to get his ashes hauled.

"Bring the cart back to the truck and wait for me," were his final instructions.

Jeong Sook had time to look around. First things first, she struck up a conversation with the egg lady.

"Auntie, do you mind if I ask where you are from?"

"Look, around here it's better not to ask too many questions. We have to be real careful. Nobody wants trouble with the cops and their spies. I'm not really sure about you yet. Never heard such an accent around these parts before. Is this your first time in the market? I've seen that yokel here before with his eggs but not you"

"It's my first time. I just arrived last winter and I usually stay close to the farm."

"Who's the youngster? You get sold to him as a 'little wife'?"

"No, sold to his father. It's not a good situation and I'd like to get away."

"You need to be real careful. If you run away you may be getting out of the frying pan and end up right in the fire. If you get caught by the cops with no papers you'll be going right back across the river. The other thing is, if the gangs get you they'll traffic you into a situation that'll make you wish you were back on the farm."

"I've heard about that but I just have to get away. If I could earn some money I might be able to pay off the farmers."

"Well I've heard that before. How will you earn money. You aren't that good at dealing in the market. Anything else you good at?"

"Well, you buy eggs and I've got these." Jeong Sook made her move.

She reached into her bag, brought out the package, and proudly showed the dozen eggs she had.

"So you are a thief. Hope you are good at it. What do you want me to do with these?"

"Will you buy them?" She was almost pleading, not a good marketing technique.

"I don't know. What do you want for them?"

The egg lady was trying to hide her smile now. Everybody had to learn someday and this one was going to learn the hard way.

"Please give me the same as you gave the boy." She was really out of her league.

"Oh ok, do you know what he got for his eggs?" The egg lady was almost laughing now.

Jeong Sook saw the mistake right away but had no idea how to recover. If she threw herself on the mercy of this stranger it could only get worse. If she took her eggs to another place she might get reported to the police as a thief. At least here she would get something.

"Then what will you give me for my eggs? I hope that our common blood will allow you to do your best. In the future we can help each other. You remind me so much of my dear older sister."

Despite herself the egg lady couldn't help being impressed by her flowery words. This woman seems to be a fast learner. Maybe she can be of some use.

"Easy now. Such sweet words have little value in this market. Tell you what I'm going to do. I'll take your eggs and give you what they are worth. You'll just have to trust me on that. Then I'll teach you a few little practical things like what Chinese and American money is worth. Chinese money is worth just a little more than toilet paper. Dollars are like manna from heaven. Whenever possible do business in dollars."

When Jeong Sook handed over her eggs the egg lady accepted them without the verification process and gave her three bills of different denominations.

"Didn't you say I should do business in dollars? Won't you give me dollars older sister?"

"I said whenever possible. Now it's not possible. You use newspaper to wipe your ass and save your money. I believe you're a good thief. When you have enough I'll change it to dollars."

The egg lady then spent ten minutes giving Jeong Sook a rough tutorial on the denominations and relative value of Chinese currency in relation to eggs. She liked this princess' pluck and just adored her high class accent. Before she left with the cart, the older woman gave her new friend a hand full of Chinese coins.

"Here, buy yourself a treat, there is ice cream and doughnuts out on the main street."

"Oh thank you so much older sister. Please teach me some more when I come back."

Such flowery words, like honey in my ears thought the egg lady.

Back at the truck Jeong Sook waited for what seemed like most of the afternoon. When Hyunsang returned he was more than a little drunk and amorous. She didn't want to fool around with him or ride in the truck with him in his condition but again she had no choice. Seemed to be the story of her life.