

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Twenty - The Deep End

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The rear guide hissed and put a finger to his stained lips and urged silence. It was time to eat for the baby, Sung Hwa, and she wasn't shy about letting the world know. As fast as she could, mom got her blouse open and a teat in baby's mouth. The others sat or lay on the tramped down grass and strained their eyes in the direction they had seen the boss guide go. The darkness played tricks on Jeong Sook's eyes and she was real nervous squatting on the bank of another river. Several yards upstream the bank itself seemed to move. Just as soon as she had convinced herself that it was nothing but an illusion, the bank shoved off and hit the water with a splash.

Their remaining guide flicked on his flashlight and pointed it. "No worries, cros."

Those lying on the ground were nowhere near reassured. After what seemed like all night, the boss guide appeared a few minutes later from whence he had gone and splashed up on the narrow muddy beach. He grinned and said,

"Ok, no deep, no fast." he held his hand at waist level to indicate the depth of the water.

"You come," the boss pointed to Young Mi.

She wasn't sure about this guy, or the river, and she sure as hell didn't want to go first. He took her by the wrist and led her into the water. She gave up and meekly tagged along. After all, he was the guide.

"You wait," he ordered the others.

He returned within minutes and led Young Sook across. On the third trip he took Mrs. Bae by the arm and waded into the dark moving water again. He turned and pointed to Jeong Sook and told her to bring the boy and follow him.

The reality of crossing another river brought back the nightmare of the night on the Tumen in the freezing season. She stood but her body froze and it took all her strength to move forward across the beach and put one foot in the water. The boy was dozing on her back and she tried to keep the guide in sight. She felt her right foot sink in the mud and she immediately pulled hard to free it. The foot popped right out but without the shoe. By this time the guide was out of sight and she pushed into the water without the shoe.

Not knowing where the guide was, she wadded straight across, well as straight as she could. The current

was pushing her downstream and the deeper the water got the faster she was pushed to the left. At halfway across she could make out the far bank and the water was only slightly over her waist. Then she stepped off the edge of the world. She lost contact with the bottom and her head went under. The boy let go with his arms and legs and was gone.

Once she had lost her footing, it was as if she had stepped into the deepest part of the ocean. Although her eyes were wide open, the water was black and she couldn't even see her hands. She had the sensation of sinking but none of either up or down. She may have been tumbling.

First there was panic and then despair. She had the presence of mind to hold her breath until she couldn't any more. Then she inhaled and got both a mouth and lungs full of water. Now she was drowning. It would soon be over. For some reason she remembered Kee Ho and the girl she had left to die on the ice. No, not again she screamed inside her head. Her whole life and whole world narrowed down and focused on only one thought; save Kee Ho.

Without conscious thought she acted. When she let a little air out of her mouth she felt the bubbles tickle her nose and surmised that direction was up. She dove down deep until she hit the bottom. Knowing which way was up, she got her legs under her butt, pushed hard, and kicked for the surface.

When she broke the surface, she coughed twice and breathed in the air that was life. In an instant she had to choose; get to dry land or go back down for the boy. She understood that if she saved her own life, it would no longer be worth living so she took another breath and plunged again into the belly of the beast.

Once more she was engulfed in darkness. She was aware of the current pushing her and she blindly moved her arms back and forth hoping against hope that she would, by some divine intervention, find the boy. She was resigned that she would die in the dark but as the oxygen ran out, her body took over. She exhaled the last of the air and saw the bubbles were moving up. She stretched her legs down, found the bottom, and pushed off for the surface.

On the way up she bumped into something solid. It was either a large snake, a crocodile, or a small boy. She grabbed on to it and dragged it up until her head was again above water. As she clung tightly to the living form, she was pretty sure it was the toddler, she cleared her lungs and inhaled deeply. She held Kee Ho's head up as well as she could and tried to find some footing.

By this time she was a ways down from where she had entered the water and the two guides were knee deep in the river and were reaching for her. With not a little effort they managed to haul the two half drowned rats up onto the beach. Jeong Sook immediately collapsed on her belly and went into a fit of coughing producing copious amounts of water. The two men rolled the boy over, turned his head to the side, and pounded him on the back producing similar results. When Jeong Sook was able to breathe again, she looked up to see the others had gathered around them. Kum Hee was cradling and rocking her son. He was crying and clinging to his mom. The boss guide said to Jeong Sook, "why no follow? Hole deep."

She ignored him. After she was able to sit up, she continued to take deep breaths. A great feeling of gratitude and peace washed over her. She was alive and out of China. She watched mother and son and tried to see if Kee Ho would be alright. Hard to tell but he was already moving and complaining that he was hungry. She figured they were good signs. She laid back and looked up. Behind them, on the other side of the river, the sky was becoming light.

The boss guide also noticed the approaching dawn and barked,

"We go now. Car waiting."

And waiting it was. Down a short trail and over a berm was a dirt road and a Japanese mini-van. The walk was short and Jeong Sook felt as if she was floating on a cloud. Her bare feet barely touched the ground. Kum Hee refused to give up her son and carried him in her arms to the van. Young Mi and Young Sook argued about and took turns carrying the baby girl. As Jeong Sook stepped up into the back seat, the boss guide stopped her and gravely said,

"Now begin the new life, old life finished in water."

Jeong Sook smiled at him and thought, Yes, that's exactly right. I died under the water and now I'm born again.

Two hours later they stopped to eat. It was a roadside joint with tables set up outside for dining. They were all famished, especially Jeong Sook. She ate so much that she thought she might become a fat woman in her new life. The sisters were doing a bang up job looking after the baby but when they gave her back to mom for breastfeeding, they sat in front of Jeong Sook and peppered her with questions. They wanted to know what had happened. Jeong Sook just said she didn't know. She must have stepped in a hole. She didn't want to talk more about it. She still had not digested it herself. Kee Ho was looking better. He ate two bowls of rice and three chicken pot stickers. Maybe he was recovering.

"Two hours to Thailand. We go," the boss guide announced. "Be happy. A bridge," he assured them.

It was a very nice bridge. The Myanmar border control officers took the driver and the guides aside and held a summit. They returned all smiles and the van started across the bridge. On the Thai side it was a bit more complicated. The refugees were all carefully interviewed. They were asked if they wanted to claim asylum and they all answered in the affirmative; the procedure began. They were detained and placed on a police bus to take them to the detention center. Before their departure from the border a Thai officer who spoke fair Korean talk to the group about what they could expect.

"You will spend the night at a detention center in Bangkok and an official with the South Korean embassy will visit you tomorrow. Then you will apply to go on to South Korea. Don't worry at all. You are safe now. You will rest and eat well as long as you are with us. Welcome to the Kingdom of Thailand." The refugees weakly cheered and applauded.

Jeong Sook's stay at the detention center was closer to three weeks. She was given casual clothes and shoes to replace those that she had torn up and lost on the journey. She met with officials from the South Korean embassy and answered their questions many times and she waited. For those who arrived together there was little contact with each other. They were separated for processing and their stories were checked and rechecked against each other by both the Thai and Korean officials. At some point everyone was reasonably sure she was a legitimate refugee from North Korea.

After twenty one days she was issued a temporary passport with The Republic of Korea stamped on the cover. She was driven to the airport by a couple embassy officials and was put on an airplane. Four hours later she landed in Seoul and into the welcoming arms of the South Korean National Security Service.