

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Three - A Way Forward

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The White Cloud fellowship was an informal self-help organization of refugees from the north who were living in South Korea. They didn't have regular meetings, an office, or even membership roles. They did network with each other on common issues. They were all women but did get advice and support from their men folk.

The most common issue that they were all dealing with was the family members and friends that they had left behind. By daring to escape from that paradise in the north they had risked their lives. Not only that, they put the lives of their loved ones in jeopardy. The totalitarian state could only take out their revenge on the family and associates of those who dared to leave since the escapees were, at least temporarily, out of arm's reach. If at all possible this desire for revenge took the form of arrests, torture, and a sentence in the camps. At the very least jobs, resident permits, and position in the social order were taken away.

It had become well known, at least in the refugee community, that the new market economy was playing the leading role in the changes taking place in North Korea. The fall of the Soviet Union and

the loss of its huge subsidies had just about brought the small communist nation to its knees. By the mid 1990s the cash and food had run out and people began to starve. How many died of hunger and its resultant diseases is controversial but after the first million it becomes a moot point. Everyone knew someone or had relatives who had starved to death. Then there were those who were simply shot for stealing food. Many recalled being forced to watch the public executions as the government struggled to maintain control of the population.

Funny thing was, those who were the best communists and were most loyal to the Kim regime in word and deed, died first. The rebels, the sceptics, and the adventurers turned to the markets and survived.

Kim Hee Soon's mom was one of the market pioneers in their home town in the northeastern rural provinces. After watching her own father turn into a bag of bones and pass away, her mom determined that she and her children would survive. It began small with five pitiful looking half rotten sweet potatoes. She had unearthed them almost accidentally when digging an outhouse. But they were edible and so worth their weight in gold. She boiled two and fed them to her ravenous kids for an unexpected evening meal. The other three she bartered to a neighbor for three cups of oil and a large handful of barely. It was a revelation and a way forward. By hustling around she began to not only feed her kids but also to build up a surplus. She bought an old bicycle with a basket and was able to move around the villages in the district always with an eye out for anything that could be sold. Several bicycle vendors would meet up at a crossroads, lay out their wares on blankets spread on the ground, and people would come. Of course, someone would always watch for the police. When the coppers approached on foot, the entrepreneurs would throw everything onto the bikes and pedal off.

Some, like Hee Soon's mom, were naturals at it and they branched out into used clothing, shoes, alcohol, and anything that there was a demand for. The markets expanded and sprung up like mountain mushrooms after a spring rain. The local authorities did their best to suppress this decidedly ideologically polluted activity but a full belly trumps ideology every time. It was dangerous and if caught a marketer faced severe punishment. But a bribe into the right hands often mitigated that.

Hee Soon began helping her mother early on and she found that she also had a talent for buying and selling. How wicked, she thought. Before long she initiated her own enterprises. Her specialty was hooch, a kind of homemade alcohol. She scrounged for the basic ingredients which were some kind of fruit, sugar, and copious amounts of water. It was close to rotgut but had the desired effect and there were always customers.

For a twelve year old girl the effect was powerful. By engaging in her own business activities she became liberated. She made her own choices and would live or die by the results. She was freed from the thought control imposed by the Workers Party of Korea and the ruling Kim family. She began to think for herself and it was exhilarating. On top of that she ate every day and she and her mother became the saviours of their family and many others in the neighborhood. She and the other marketers her own age became the 'Market Generation.'

In order to crush the markets, somebody got the idea of devaluing the North Korean won and the 'Current Kim' thought it was a good idea. Overnight the North Korean won became worth almost nothing. Anyone who was paid by the government became destitute. The markets not only continued to flourish but greatly expanded using hard currency obtained from over the border in China. It was then that the bribe became a primary financial instrument. After all, the police chief, the mayor, and all the other officials also had starving families to feed.

Then there was China. The marketers originally began crossing over to get food, products to sell, and hard currency. They crossed over and back by paying the right people. It was not without risk but the risk was worth it. Next, women began to realize that it was possible to escape their hell on earth through China and the mass exodus began.

By the time Hee Soon had reached the ripe old age of eighteen, she had been across to the bright lights of China more than a dozen times. She knew the ins and outs of the smuggling business and had dealt with many of the brokers who moved people, goods, and money back and forth. She herself was in the consumer electronics trade. She was able to arrange for Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, and even American products to be smuggled across the border. In the red hot market economy that had sprung up, such things had become some of the most sought after items, especially among the petty tyrants that made up the governing class outside of the capital city. But her real dream was to get out and live in freedom. She and her mother had the same dream. With their skills and a good chunk of change they were able to get out and on to South Korea without getting their feet wet in any of the rivers that had to be crossed.

Once arriving in South Korea they quickly learned that they were hustlers and entrepreneurs in a land chock full of hustlers and entrepreneurs and it was hard to get a leg up. As good business people are wont to do, Hee Soon identified her niche market and began to cater to it. Other refugees were desperate to help their folks back in the old country. With her contacts, Hee Soon was soon assisting them in moving some of their hard earned money back where it would do the most good for their loved ones.

She was the initiator of the White Cloud network and also set up several other foundations and NGOs focused on assisting refugees in the south and their families still in the north.

The other reason that Jeong Sook shied away from the self help groups was more personal. Coming from a family that was in the highest and most privileged political and social class of North Korean society, she was acutely aware that she was vulnerable to harsh criticism from others who had suffered a lot under the system. Her Pyongyang accent would quickly give her away as a 'Princess.'

Nevertheless, she had to reach out to somebody. Through a church friend, who had mentioned White Cloud and what they were doing, she had asked for an introduction. The meeting was set up for the first Monday in February at a coffee shop near Seoul City Hall. Jeong Sook didn't mention the appointment to Guy. If it worked out she would take the trouble to explain the complicated relationships in the refugee community to him. If not she would just forget it. She was quite nervous in the time leading up to the meeting but she kept telling herself that if it was meant to be it would happen. She didn't really have a 'plan B'.

"It's a little ironic don't you think?" Yu Hee Soon asked Jeong Sook bluntly.

She had done her homework in preparation for the meeting. She had asked around and knew that Jeong Sook was the daughter of a highly placed official in the Kim regime. In short, a collaborator with the brutal dictatorship.

"When we were starving you were enjoying your privileged life and eating all you wanted. We turned to the markets to survive and became the market generation. Now you come to us with your hat in hand. What is it you expect us to do for you?"

During the Japanese colonial period there were those who, for whatever reason, chose to cooperate with the Japanese. After liberation they were scorned by the people who had suffered. Among the refugees, those who were deemed to have been a part of the Kim regime were held in similar contempt.

"You are absolutely right. But we are all in the same boat now. Our family also suffered terribly. My father is a good man who only tried to protect his people. He said no to the regime and now is in the darkest hell. I beg you to understand and to help me." Jeong Sook went on to tell her story to Hee Soon as

calmly as she could.

It was not easy for Hee Soon to swallow her built up resentment but she could understand that everything wasn't always black and white. In the end she decided to do what she could to assist this Pyongyang Princess turned survivor.

"So what is it that you think we can do for you?"

"Well I'm not sure but first I could use your advice. When I left the north more than three years ago, my father had already been transported to the Hoeryong labor camp to serve out his sentence for treason. I've had no contact with him since then. I am not even sure if he is still alive. How can I get news of him. If you can advise me on this I will be in your debt."

Hee Soon thought for a moment and replied, "There are ways to find out such things. Already I know who your father is and what his former position was. As a former public official, news of his fate should be obtainable. Of course nothing can be done for free and if you can pay the required fee I will do what I can."

"Yes of course. How much would the fee be?" Jeong Sook knew that she had no money but she was not deterred.

"I can't say for sure but it would depend on the operative we use and how adept he is in turning up information." What she really meant was how corrupt and greedy the bum was.

"My best guess would be about two million South Korean won or two thousand dollars. That would be two to three days of legwork. If you agree, I'll get the ball rolling."

"Yes sure, please start right away." Jeong Sook pushed the thorny problem of how to get that kind of money out of her mind.

"If he is still alive, I want to get him out and into South Korea," Jeong Sook said with a trembling voice but with great conviction.

Yes of course thought Hee Soon. How could it be anything else?

"I understand your feelings. It is only a filial daughter's duty but I have to be honest with you; that's a pretty tall order. I've heard that such things are possible but the cost is going to be high."

"How high?" Jeong Sook shot back as if she had access to unlimited funds.

"Surely I don't know. I've never attempted such a thing before. You better think in terms of twenty thousand dollars at least."

Jeong Sook almost gagged but smiled sweetly. The two women parted with Jeong Sook promising to get the two grand so the search for information could begin. Hee Soon thought that this was surely a princess but she didn't look like she had any money. But we shall see. She had learned that folk's capacity for doing the highly unlikely was surprising.