

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Seventeen - Sisters

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October 24, 2020



The bonds between the two women ran deep. They had been formed on the banks of the Tumen River when their common destiny had thrown them together. Crossing the waters, the sudden death of their companion on the ice, and their betrayal by the brokers cemented the ties. The affinity of Koreans to naturally become close based on family-like relationships cast Jeong Sook in the role of an older sister, advisor, and protector to Hyo Jin. Of course she always addressed Jeong Sook as Onni or elder sister. When they were torn apart and sold by the traffickers Jeong Sook had been devastated more by the cruel fate of Hyo Jin than by her own.

The daring rescue of the younger woman from the world of prostitution and semi-slavery that she had been forced into had raised them up together to almost unsustainable heights of optimism. Before long it became clear that their paths would diverge once again as they each followed their own destiny. They had faced death, the depths of despair, and also the joys of near redemption. Their relationship would be best described by the Korean word 'Jang', an unbreakable connection of heart forged in the furnace of a shared destiny.

Once Jeong Sook had decided to cross another river to reach South Korea and Hyo Jin had decided to remain in China, they had promised to meet again someday and today was that day.

"Onni, Onni, Onni, how amazing it is to be with you again. When you promise something I should believe you without doubt," Hyo Jin gushed.

They were in the kitchen dining hall of the New Light Mission. It was past midnight but neither of them was ready to turn in so they sat together in the dim light and marveled at the moment.

"Oh, I don't know Hyo Jin. We both promised and here we are. I can't help thinking it was our Father in Heaven who has had his hand in this."

"Of course you are right. We mustn't forget that," Hyo Jin replied without much conviction.

Her circumstances had greatly changed since the two women had last been together. She was now a married woman and would soon give birth to her first child. Her husband was Rev. Nick Shin, the assistant pastor at the mission. That would make her a highly respected lady to the church members. She lived with her husband in a small apartment a short way away. Although her life was no longer the nightmare that it had been not so long ago, she really thought she should be more happy by now. But the happiness she expected had somehow eluded her. She tried to hide it from Jeong Sook but she couldn't manage that either.

"Aren't you hungry Onni? We can raid the refrigerator and find something tasty."

"You must be joking. I'm so stuffed I may not eat for a week," Jeong Sook laughed. "But you go ahead. You are eating for two now."

"Ah yes. Lets just have some tea. Breakfast isn't far away. I can wait. That was a real feast we had, wasn't it?" Hyo Jin agreed.

"I can't believe you are going to be a mom Hyo Jin. You must be so happy. My Hyo Jin has come a long way since we last met," she was still enchanted by the 'happily ever after' narrative.

"You know, after you left for South Korea I often felt a lot of regret for not going with you. How much better my life might be if I lived there."

"But you are doing so well here. You have a husband that loves you and a baby on the way. He is your knight in shining armor, right?"

"Yeah sure. At least I thought so when he asked me to marry him. Problem is, there is a huge gap between us. We are both Korean but our experience in the north is so far removed from his in the south. He just can't understand my darkest feelings. Maybe he doesn't want to," Hyo Jin tried to explain.

"Oh come now Hyo Jin. You sound so gloomy. It can't be that bad. I'm sure Rev. Shin is a good man and he loves you. What is it that is really bugging you?"

"Oh, you are right Onni. He is, surely, a good man. Maybe the problem is me. I just feel so empty inside. I suppose you could say I'm damaged goods," she said dejectedly.

"Don't say such a thing. You are my brave one and many people love you," Jeong Sook implored her.

"Yeah, it sounds good but I just can't feel it. Instead I feel empty and guilty for all the bad things I've done."

"Don't ever forget that those things were not done by you but to you. And you not only survived but escaped. I respect you so much for your guts and your ability to overcome such circumstances."

"Then why do I feel like this?"

Jeong Sook was trying to cheer her up but knew the feeling well. She was silent and reached out to take Hyo Jin's hand. There were no easy answers. All she could do was sympathize and maybe tell about her journey.

"When I arrived in South Korea I also had a hard time. It was no bed of roses. I was lonely, feeling guilty, and was definitely not happy. I couldn't understand why there was so much suffering in my life. I began to think it was my own fault. It was only when I heard Rev. Kim talk about life being a veil of tears that I started to think that it was not only me who was having a hard time. He said that life is filled with suffering due to the very nature of being. The way to overcome the suffering was to voluntarily accept it. According to him, this is the essence of Jesus' victory on the cross. He voluntarily accepted his fate. It made a lot of sense to me."

"I didn't know you were not happy in the south. I always thought of you living in prosperity and happiness. I'm sorry Onni."

"Anyway, the point is that we all have to go through difficulties in our lives. The best thing is to do our best to accept it and try to make it mean something."

"Why do you say that? How can sorrow and suffering mean anything?" Hyo Jin was perplexed.

"Well, the sorrow and suffering don't have much meaning. They just are. It's just a part of life. Probably they are unavoidable," Jeong Sook tried to explain.

"If the suffering of life is unavoidable then what about meaning?"

"I think that if we can find some meaning in our lives and if that meaning is big enough, then it makes the suffering worth enduring. Otherwise life becomes futile."

"Yeah, futile; I guess that's how I'm feeling these days," Hyo Jin said.

"Ah well, not all things can be solved in one day. Let's get some sleep and we can talk more tomorrow," Jeong Sook suddenly realized she was exhausted and thought her younger sister must be too.

Morning came early at the mission and so after less than two hours of sleep, both women were up again for the dawn worship service. The singing, reading, and praying always buoyed Jeong Sook but less so Hyo Jin. Having no schedule and in need of more shut-eye, after a quiet breakfast, it was back to bed for a few more hours.

Neither Guy or Kyle were inclined to attend the morning service and since they shared a private room they were able to sleep in. And they needed it; it had been a long night. Kyle was up first. Sometime after eleven he pulled on gym shorts, a sweatshirt, and his hiking boots and went out for a walk. They had been

encouraged by Nick Shin not to go out alone; too much potential for getting lost or into some other kind of trouble. Kyle didn't think that applied to him. Chinese phrase book in hand, his first stop was the convenience store for three cans of liquid breakfast. After polishing off the tsinghua and feeling a lot better about the day, he set out at a brisk pace in a direction that he had no idea where he would end up. Seven long blocks away he came upon a stream running through the urban neighborhood. It was about eight yards across, was lined by well maintained eight foot banks, and had a walking path with benches along the near bank.

There were lots of folks out strolling and enjoying the fine spring day. Kyle sat on a bench, studied his phrase book, and smiled at folks hoping to make contact. After several aborted attempts he struck up a conversation with a pretty young lady wearing a flowered skirt, a cardigan, and sneakers. They were soon joined by an earnest young man. Using the phrase book, a smart phone, and body language they were able to establish the basics; he was an American tourist and they were college friends. It took awhile, but Kyle was able to deduce that they were Christians and were talking to him about their church. Kyle wasn't put off and asked questions about the church. The oddest thing, Kyle thought, was the church's name; The Church of Almighty God. He had never heard of it before and they let him know that it was the fastest growing church in China despite the heavy persecution by the police. They wanted him to go with them to the church and learn more but Kyle declined. He wanted to find another beer store. All in all, it was a pleasant encounter. Kyle immediately lost the scrap of paper where they had scribbled their phone numbers.

When Kyle arrived back at the mission three hours later after losing his way at least twice, Guy and Jeong Sook were in a meeting with Rev. Kim. Kim was as nervous as Jeong Sook had ever seen him. He had a lot on his mind. There was still no contact with Sunflower and the pastor was on his own with briefing them all on what was going to happen, when, and where. They would be leaving for the border immediately after morning service the following day. That would give them plenty of time to make contact with a broker and get set up before dark. They would be traveling in two vehicles, the mission van and Shin's SUV. Shin, Kim, Jeong Sook, and Kyle would all be riding together in the van. The SUV would follow, driven by a trusted native Chinese church member. On the return trip they had to be ready to carry three additional passengers.

The other loose cannon in Kim's opinion was Kyle. With his drinking and free roving spirit, Kim thought it best to leave him in Harbin. Both Guy and Jeong Sook were inclined to agree but they convinced the reverend that he was a full team member and promised to keep him in check. It was decided that he could go to the border but would be kept close.

That evening Jeong Sook and Hyo Jin had to say their goodbyes.

"Onni, did you find the meaning of your life?"

"I think I did. I came to know that I had to do whatever I could to rescue my honorable father and my precious daughters. Although it is a heavy burden, I knew I had to try. Rev. Kim says I was called by God."

"Called by God? Do you believe that?"

"Maybe I do. I can't say for sure but I am acting like I believe it. It has filled my life with a purpose and given me a destiny to go after."

"How about this American guy?" They had not yet spoken about Jeong Sook's man and how he fit into the picture.

"Seems he's a part of my destiny," she replied wistfully.

In another round of hugs, tears, and kisses they bid each other farewell.

Hyo Jin, in her final words, implored her big sister, "Onni, promise me again that we'll meet soon. I'll always believe you."

Jeong Sook was reluctant to promise. The events of the next day would tell the story but she said, "Yes, dear, I promise." And as the elevator door closed Jeong Sook turned to meet her fate.