CHAPTER 4

Origin of the Seven Stars of the Great Bear

Once upon a time, in Ch’ŏnhagung (the Galaxy Palace) lived Mr Ch’ilsŏng, who was seventeen, and in Chihagung (the Earth Palace) lived Ms Oknyŏ, who was sixteen. Ms Oknyŏ proposed marriage once, but Mr Ch’ilsŏng was not at all interested. After she proposed a second and then a third time, he accepted it as fate.

After sending the document in which the four pillars of the birth year, month, day and hour of the bridegroom-to-be are written to the house of his fiancée, and choosing an auspicious day, Mr Ch’ilsŏng was to be married. Extravagantly dressed with a huge sunshade to the right and a big pole to the left, he gallantly crossed the rainbow towards his bride’s home. He arrived, looked into the marriage ceremony hall, and found it splendidly decorated and prepared. Folding screens were spread on the left and right, a tent was set up, all kinds of flowers were arranged, and a chicken and rooster were prepared on the table. Arriving at the ceremonial hall, Mr Ch’ilsŏng drank the nuptial wine, then entered the decorated room, and consummated his marriage with Ms Oknyŏ.

But after ten years of marriage they had no children.

One day, Mr Ch’ilsŏng said to Mrs Oknyŏ, ‘Dear wife, other people my age have sons and daughters, and raise them well. We have none, so let us bear offspring through devotion.’

The couple made offerings to the Buddha, built a shrine dedicated to the Big Dipper in the back garden, and prayed sincerely for three months and ten days.

One evening, Mrs Oknyŏ had an auspicious dream. Seven stars fell at her feet and when she gathered them in her skirt to look at them, she woke up from the dream. From the fifteenth day of that month, she showed signs of pregnancy, and after ten months, there were signs of labour. After praying with devotion to the Birth Grandmother for an easy labour, she gave birth to a boy as easily as a boat gliding over ice. After the boy came out they waited for the afterbirth but instead another boy came out. Again, they waited for the afterbirth and yet another baby came out. Again it was a son. In this way she continued to give birth to four, five, six, seven babies.

When Mr Ch’ilsŏng heard a voice from outside saying, ‘Tell Mr Ch’ilsŏng that all of his offspring are born,’ Mr Ch’ilsŏng asked a maid, ‘Has she given birth to a boy?’

‘Yes, she has’, said the maid.
Mr Ch’ilsŏng was joyous, so he hurried into the delivery room to record the birth year, month, day, and hour of birth with charcoal and paper. Mrs Oknyŏ and seven children were lying side-by-side on the floor. Mr Ch’ilsŏng saw this and stepping back said, ‘Even the lower animals say that more than two offspring is too many. But how can a human give birth to seven on one umbilical cord? I cannot raise them. I haven’t enough milk or rice.’

Mr Ch’ilsŏng abandoned his wife right then and there, went up to the country of heaven, and remarried. ‘How can I part from my husband overnight and raise fatherless children?’ Mrs Oknyŏ heaved a sigh, so she went to the Evergreen Waters to offer the children as food for the Dragon King, but suddenly the sky rumbled and someone called her, ‘Mrs Oknyŏ, those offspring are sent by heaven. Even if you put them in water or fire, they will not die and will grow up on their own. If you throw them out here, you will become a cripple. So hurry back. If you feed them three spoonfuls of porridge at night and milk seven times during the day, you will see a difference each day.’

After listening to this, Mrs Oknyŏ returned home, made pillows stuffed with black sand, and laid the babies here and there on a blue yarn coverlet. When she gave them three spoonfuls of porridge at night and fed them milk begged from others seven times during the day, the babies grew up quickly and she saw a difference each day. In this fashion, fifteen years passed and all of the children reached the age of fifteen.

One day, the children came together and told their mother, ‘Mother, if we don’t study letters, we will become common ignorable people. Please, teach us letters.’ So Mrs Oknyŏ enrolled them at a village school where they learned to read and write.

One day in spring, while the schoolteacher was sightseeing in the mountains, the students teased the seven children by saying they were bastards without a father. The seven children were startled and came home crying, ‘Mother, if father is dead, tell us where his grave is. If he is alive, tell us where he went.’

To this the mother replied, ‘Look, my children, how can I deceive you now? Your father was shocked that I bore seven children in one womb, so he went up to Ch’ŏnhagung and remarried.’

‘Mother, we will go and look for our father,’ said the seven children.

Accordingly, the mother prepared for them seven pairs of trousers, seven shirts and seven pairs of lined socks and shoes, and the children set off on their journey. As she watched the children going further and further away, Mrs Oknyŏ was dumbfounded and waited for the return both of her lost husband and now her offspring as well.

The seven children went up to Ch’ŏnhagung and asked a passer-by, ‘Which is the house of the man who was married to Chihagung, but came here and remarried?’

‘It is the house with the blue-tiled-roof over there’, said the passer-by.

The seven children arrived at the blue-tiled house and watched from the