

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Thirteen - In the Temple of Heaven

Michael P. Downey
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The flight from Incheon was only a short hop of less than two hours. The airliner was packed with folks on holiday and business. Guy and Jeong Sook were excited but a bit subdued. Kyle was mostly comatose. The International Capital Airport in Beijing was massive and jam packed. Flights from around China, Asia, and the world disgorged hoards of passengers into its terminals. The intrepid travelers joined the throngs and moved through the arrival hall in lock step with some of the largest crowds Guy had ever been swallowed by. When Guy had first arrived in Korea, one of the earliest impressions he had was how crowded it was compared to most of America. It was a small country with a large dense population. It took him years to come to terms with the constant bustling, jostling, and bumping that was part and parcel of living in Seoul. Now he was in a gigantic country with a gigantic population.

It took the team just as long to pass through immigration, claim their bags, and clear customs as the time they had spent in the air. Jeong Sook was

silently amazed at the ease with which she entered the country on her new Republic of Korea passport. Of course it brought to mind the first time she had entered across that cold, cold river. Both Guy and Kyle were traveling on American passports and the correct visa to enter for ninety days as tourists. All was in order.

When they walked out of the arrivals gate Jeong Sook quickly located Rev. Kim and greeted him warmly. He already knew Guy but hadn't expected to see him. He was more surprised to see Kyle but simply said hello to them both and then led them all out the exit doors where Nick Shin was waiting curbside in a van.

Getting out of the airport complex with its maze of exits, ramps, and signs was no simple matter. Both Shin and Kim were fully engaged in the endeavor. Once on the highway, Kim, who was riding shotgun, turned around to greet his guests properly.

"Welcome to China everyone. Is this your first time to visit?" Kim sounded for all the world like a tour guide. Kim was mainly addressing the two Americans so he used his best English. He wasn't sure who the third wheel was and how familiar he was with Jeong Sook's previous sojourn through China so he kept things as general as possible for the time being.

"Yup, it's my first time," Guy piped up. "Sure a lot of people here."

"Ah yes, you can say that again. Beijing, the capital city, has about twenty one million people. Managing such a huge population is a big headache," Kim continued his role as tour guide.

"I brought my family here two years ago. We did all the tourist stops. This time we're here on a mission," Kyle announced.

Guy kicked him on the ankle in an effort to warn him not to spill the beans. Although Kim was curious about what brought Jeong Sook and her entourage to China, he was sure it would all come out in good time and glossed over the remark.

"I'm Rev. Kim Soo Beak from South Korea. I'm a minister of the gospel and my church is in the city of Harbin. I hope you have time to visit us there."

"Thank you so much for driving down here to pick us up. We really came here to get your advice," Jeong Sook told him.

"You know I'll do anything I can to help you Ms. Kim. I'm a great admirer of your faith and courage. Today I have some business with a contact here in the capital." Kim continued, "He has been very helpful to us in the past and is someone you might want to meet, Jeong Sook."

"Sure, why not," she agreed.

"Good, in fact, he has offered to pick up the tab for our accommodations tonight. He is quite well off."

Guy and Kyle had no objection; after all, they were on a budget.

"In addition he has invited us to lunch at a famous restaurant," Kim delivered the news.

"It gets better and better," was Guy's comment.

"Yeah, better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick," Kyle contributed. He was thinking there would surely be some of that Tsingtao beer at lunch.

"Then it's settled. Depending on how bad the traffic is we should get to the hotel in about an hour."

In fact they arrived at the Nostalgia Hotel in a leafy residential district in the southeast part of the city a good hour and a half after they set out. Traffic was not bad at all, relatively. The hotel was recommended by their host. It was a well kept secret in the city that was not overrun by tourists but had all the perks of a five star franchise downtown. Twelve stories high with twenty rooms per floor, an underground parking garage, gift shops, and friendly pubs off the lobby; it was a favorite of wealthy industrialists to meet up with a mistress. Kyle noticed that the pubs were open for the lunch clientele when they were checking in and gave his approval.

They got three rooms. Jeong Sook had her own. Kyle and Guy were expected to bunk together and Kim and Shin would do the same. The rooms were all on the tenth floor for convenience's sake. They all agreed to meet in the lobby for lunch. Their host would swing around for them at three.

Jeong Sook looked out the windows of her room and thoroughly enjoyed the view. There were apartments interspersed with neighborhood shops and small pocket parks. On an early weekday afternoon there was a steady foot traffic of what she imagined to be mothers and housewives going about their daily routine. Small groups of women stood together in the parks chatting as they kept an eye on their kids running, swinging, and sliding. It made Jeong Sook long for such a normal life.

In the near distance, perhaps a half mile to the north, was a much larger green space. It was surrounded by a wall with a few gates. Inside the walls were trees, gardens, and walkways. There was also what appeared to be a paved or pounded earth courtyard. In the center were also several round buildings that might have been pagodas or temple structures. She wondered what it was and made a note to herself to ask Rev. Kim if he knew.

At three on the dot a long chauffeur driven limousine pulled into the short driveway at the hotel's front door. The Sunflower, dressed for the occasion in levis, boots, and a navy blazer, made his entrance.

"Hello everyone. I'm the Sunflower and I'm your host for the day," He called out, happy to show off his English.

Rev. Kim made the introductions all around. Sunflower was beaming without a hint of the troubling circumstances that he was currently facing.

"You all must be starving. Let's go out for a bite," he invited them. They all piled into the limo with Nick Shin getting in the front with Bae In, the driver. Everyone else got in the back. There was plenty of room. The restaurant was literally just around the corner.

Sunflower was the perfect host. It was a private party in a room that could have easily seated twenty people. They feasted on a traditional Chinese course meal featuring duck, seafood, and samplings of a slew of specialties that Sunflower took delight in explaining. There was Tsingtao beer and five other varieties to choose from. Kyle was in heaven. They also toasted the day and each other with the clear fire water that the Chinese loved.

Over the course of the two hour feast Kim introduced the Sunflower as a frequent partner in rescuing North Korean refugees who were trapped in China. He then asked Jeong Sook to recount her story and she gave them the short and sweet version. In deference to the two Americans most of the conversations were in English but at times they did lapse into Korean and even Chinese.

Jeong Sook asked about the park and structures she had seen from her window and Sunflower was happy to fill her in.

"Yes, that is the Temple of Heaven. It is one of the iconic landmarks in Beijing. You mean to tell me you've never been there?"

"No," she admitted. "I've never heard of it before."

"During the Ming and Qing dynasties the emperors made offerings and prayed there twice a year for good harvests and blessings from Heaven." Sunflower was well versed in this bit of lore as most educated

Chinese were.

"What do you say we have a look. Is it open?" Kyle suggested.

"An excellent idea," Sunflower said. "It's a beautiful spring afternoon and we can walk there in less than twenty minutes."

Everyone liked the idea and after lunch they set off for the Temple of Heaven. Guy, Sunflower, and Kyle walked together and the broker told them stories about his time in America. Kim and Jeong Sook fell a little behind. She took the opportunity to explain why she had come to him.

"We've put together some money and we want to use it to ransom my father and daughters," she told him.

"Ransom, are you sure that's the right word? Sounds like you want to bribe someone."

"Yes exactly! But we don't know who to trust. I thought you might."

Kim was not so surprised. It was only natural and the issue was coming up again and again. Why not Jeong Sook? He didn't much believe in coincidences and his meeting with the Sunflower and Jeong Sook's arrival at the same time resonated with him. It confirmed in his mind that he was on the right track.

"God works in mysterious ways but I assure you that he does work. I am here today to meet with this broker, Sunflower, to arrange just such a project."

"Really? Of course I had no idea. Can he help us?" She was amazed.

"He says he can. I believe him but we have to be wise. How about Guy and the other guy; are they onboard?"

"Yes of course. I wouldn't have brought them if there was any doubt."

"Good, let's talk more tonight."

In the temple grounds Sunflower talked with them again about Chinese cosmology, heaven above and the earth below.

"The people are wholly dependent on the harvest to survive. In order to survive and even prosper people needed to have abundant harvests. Without a good harvest the people starved. In order to have good harvests it was required that it rained in the right amount and at the right time. Otherwise there was draught, famine or floods. The rains as well as the sun and winds were all under the domain of Heaven.

In the cosmology of China there was heaven above and the earth below. Humankind occupied the middle. They tilled the earth and beseeched Heaven. In this sense humans played the central role. Without their sweat the earth would return to the wild. Without their intercession, Heaven was cruel. This temple was built some hundreds of years ago but the concept is much older and can be found in Buddhism, Taoism, Shamanism, and various folk religions. Mankind is in the position to mediate between Heaven and the Earth. We humans live out our lives dancing between Heaven and Earth." In this way he tried to explain the significance of the rituals practiced there.

In the light of the setting sun Jeong Sook had a near mystical experience where she imagined that it was she that was dancing between Heaven and Earth. She was dressed in the robes of a Shilla Dynasty court dancer and was gracefully spinning in order to remain upright and fulfill her mission. She had seen this very scene in a painting and now was acting it out.

Later that evening as Kyle, Nick Shin, and Bae In sat in a pub and tried to drink their way through the wide world of bottled beers, Rev. Kim, Jeong Sook, and Sunflower held a strategy session in the coffee shop. Both Kim and Sunflower were stunned when Jeong Sook mentioned her dealings with Rhee and Hee Soon.

"This is not a good thing. This guy is known to take money and then sell the client to the highest bidder. Around here that's usually the CCP," Sunflower told them.

"What can we do now," Kim asked.

"Look, this is really serious. Have no contact with Rhee or the woman. If they call, tell them you have no money and have changed your mind. Stay here tonight but first thing tomorrow you'd better move. Better go to Harbin."

The meeting and the day ended on this somber note.

That night Jeong Sook dreamed once again of dancing between Heaven and Earth.