

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Sixteen - Spring Time in Harbin

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Spring usually comes late to Harbin and that year was no exception. On the day the intrepid adventurers arrived it was after midnight but the temperature was still in the mid 50s. Folks had already put away the down filled garments that had gotten them through the long bitter winter. Even at the late hour Jeong Sook noticed that the streets and sidewalks were still busy with residents enjoying the balmy weather.

For her it was an emotional return. She couldn't help recalling her arrival in the city some five years ago. She had been lost and on the run. At that time she had nowhere to turn when she had almost accidentally met Rev. Kim who had become her savior. Now she thought it must have been the hand of God guiding her. She wondered again what was fate, destiny, and what was the hand of God. Were they one and the same?

Although she had now embarked on a mission that she was convinced was her destiny, she was anxious about how it would turn out. In her eyes the whole thing had the potential for disaster. So much was not only out of her control but beyond what she could even know.

Was this her fate? It occurred to her that she had chosen her destiny and was actively pursuing it but her fate was out of her hands.

For Kyle, the trip to the city of Harbin was a pilgrimage of sorts. It was at the Harbin train station where his hero, Ahn Jung-geun, had assassinated the Japanese Governor General of Korea, Ito Hirobumi, in 1909. It would be hard to believe that there was another person in the whole wide world who had a likeness of Ahn's face tattooed on his chest. But Kyle did.

"Yeah, the train station is right downtown. We gotta go there tomorrow and check it out. This is historic!" Kyle was pumped.

They were sitting at a table outside of a convenience store two blocks from the New Light Mission. It was two in the morning but neither Kyle or Guy could sleep so they had stepped out for a few brewskies. Nick Shin was along, as babysitter and translator. They were in good hands.

"How about it Nicky, have you ever been to the train station where Ahn killed that bastard?" Kyle quizzed the chaperone.

"Oh sure," Shin replied. "It's the main train station in Harbin and is very busy. Most trains heading south to the capital or north to the provinces originate there. It's real old; built in the 1800s. I think the Russians built it the same as a lot of other buildings in Harbin."

"Was Harbin a part of Russia?" Guy wanted to know.

"That's pretty complicated. Harbin is in Manchuria. These three northeast provinces were once called Manchuria or Manchukuo. The Manchu people once rode down into China and conquered it a couple hundred years ago. They occupied Beijing and placed their dynasty on the Dragon Throne until the republican revolution in the last century." Shin knew the history well but he felt his English was a little short and tried to tell the story in broad strokes.

"Was that Genghis Khan's hordes?" Guy asked. Like most Americans, his knowledge of the fast sweep of Asian history over time and territory was rudimentary.

"No, those were the Mongols. China has always been vulnerable to invasion from the north. Geographically these flat wide plains have been ideal for nomadic tribes of horsemen. They say that Genghis Khan was a sort of organizational and military genius. He conquered not only China but lands far to the west, creating the largest empire ever. The Manchus ruled China for almost three hundred years.

Long before either of these peoples, the ancestors of the Korean people, known as Goguryeo, ruled all of this land as far south as present day Beijing. They were fantastic horsemen as well," Shin lectured with a certain pride in his voice.

"Can we go to the train station tomorrow? I've heard there is a memorial there," Kyle was intent.

"Yeah, absolutely. There is a plaque at the station but the Ahn memorial is in a different building. We'll go see them both." Shin was happy to be of service.

"Is his tomb here too?" Kyle figured he should do a few bows out of respect.

"Unfortunately nobody knows where he was buried. At the time of his arrest and trial, Russia was in its ascendancy and controlled Harbin. They turned Ahn over to the Japanese and they took him to Lushan which was Japanese territory at the time. He was tried as a terrorist and executed there. He was very popular among most Koreans and even the Chinese respected him as an anti Japanese freedom fighter. The Japanese never revealed where they disposed of his body to prevent it from becoming a pilgrimage site." Both Shin and Kyle were indignant.

With plans for the next day they headed back to the mission to get some sleep. At four am Jeong Sook was still awake and heard them stumble in. She was staying in the women's sleeping room and Guy and Kyle had their own room down the hall. When Guy saw the door open and her head pop out he signaled for her to meet him in the dining hall.

"You guys drunk again," she started out.

"Not much. We were just talking with Nick Shin about Harbin. You know Kyle is armored with this guy Ahn Jung-geun. He killed the Japanese guy here. We're going to the train station tomorrow to see the place where it happened. You want to go?"

"Why he so crazy about Ahn. I know he got that tattoo. He not even Korean."

"Who knows? He says he's a patriot and gave up his own life for Korea. More likely Kyle has lived in Korea for a long time and likes the attention," Guy told her.

Jeong Sook was a bit troubled by the Ahn narrative. She knew he was a Catholic christian and so he must have been influenced by the Jesus story of giving his life to save others. Was that his destiny? Apparently he thought so but what he did was wrong in her opinion. Assassination for a political end, no matter how just the cause, didn't seem very Christ-like to her.

Jeong Sook slept fitfully for what was left of the night and dreamed once more of dancing between Heaven and Earth. She woke at six thirty along with her roommates and went out with them to attend early worship service. The singing and scripture reading were a comfort to her. Rev. Kim spoke about the disciples after the death of their Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. She didn't know much about the Holy Spirit but thought she could use some more comfort.

Guy and Kyle, of course, slept in. At ten thirty they roused themselves, showered, shaved, and went out to the same convenience store for breakfast. Guy had coffee and a bagel. Kyle made do with three cans of Tsingtao and a cheese stick. He was busy with his Chinese phrase book and was bent on starting a conversation with some locals. Most everyone he tried to talk to in the vernacular failed to understand his strange flat tones and either walked off or switched immediately to English.

"Keep trying, dog. You'll get the hang of it," Guy assured him.

Back at the mission they hooked up with Shin and set off on their field trip to the railroad station. Jeong Sook had decided to tag along and on the way downtown, she and Nick Shin caught up on what they had been doing since they had charged into the enemy camp along with Rev. Kim to rescue Hyo Jin from the traffickers. Most of all, Jeong Sook wanted all the details of the romance and marriage of Shin and Hyo Jin.

"It's like a western fairytale isn't it? The knight in shining armor rushes into the dragon's lair and saves the princess. Then they fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after." She wasn't sure of the details but the narrative was classic and touched her heart.

"Not sure if that's exactly how it happened but it sounds good. Truth is we haven't got to the 'happily ever after' part yet," Shin smiled warmly recalling the first bloom of their courtship.

"When is the baby due? I'm sure Hyo Jin is so happy." Romantic stories warmed her heart and she thought everyone should live happily ever after, even if she couldn't imagine it for herself.

"You can ask her yourself. She'll be joining us for dinner this evening. She is dying to see you."

The Harbin Train Station was in fact old and cavernous. The main hall was huge and the cathedral-like vaulted ceiling reflected the grandiose civil architectural style of the 19th century. Guy couldn't help muse that they were attempting to replace the religious buildings of the past in the same way modern rationalism had replaced the mythical faith of the ages. The Ahn memorial was a brass plaque on the wall pointing to a platform thirty yards away where the incident had taken place. It was in both Chinese and Korean characters. Shin translated the simple account of Ahn's deed for Guy and Kyle. Although half in the bag, Kyle maintained a reverent attitude.

The actual memorial hall was a lot more interesting. It was located in a building several miles away. Although small, the hall was well done with a lot of artifacts of Ahn's life including photographs, examples of his calligraphy, and the brushes and inkwells he had used as he waited for his execution. They were all happy to pay the \$10 entrance fee that was said to go towards maintaining the exhibit.

Over coffee and tea at a nearby shop they talked more about Ahn and why he was so popular among modern day Koreans.

"Face it, the guy was a hero. He may not have been completely right or justified in killing Ito but he had the right heart and acted on it." Kyle was amazingly articulate on the subject especially considering he had been imbibing all day from a series of brown paper bags that looked for all the world like 16 ounce beer cans.

"Why you think he a hero Kyle," Jeong Sook sincerely asked.

"Cause he jumped in and took action just like a hero on a battlefield. That makes him a hero in my book."

"You may be right," Guy agreed.

Dinner that evening was hosted by Rev. Kim at a restaurant near the mission. The menu was seafood; raw, grilled, and baked. The highlight of the evening was the reunion between Jeong Sook and a ready to give birth Hyo Jin. When she entered the room Jeong Sook jumped up, flew across the room, and about knocked her down. They laughed, cried, and the older sister rubbed the pregnant lady's belly. She couldn't get her arms all the way around the girth. The two long separated friends ate together with Jeong Sook picking up the most delicious morsels with her chopsticks and feeding them into the overgrown baby bird's mouth. Guy tried his best to keep Kyle, who was in the advanced stages of his drunk, propped up.

At the end of dinner, Rev. Kim took Jeong Sook and Guy aside and let them know that time was short. Things were moving forward and the day after tomorrow they would need to leave for the border. Kim was deeply concerned over his lack of contact with the Sunflower all day and he would try again in the morning. It was not essential that he communicate with the broker. Everything had been set in motion and in two days they would be at the bridge to pick up the defectors.

That night, Hyo Jin went back to the mission to spend more time with Jeong Sook and to continue their reunion.