

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Nineteen - Along the Way

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The trip from Harbin to the border town with the bridge was almost due south and Shin estimated it should take about eight hours. They would be traveling the secondary and even country roads to avoid any surveillance that was sure to be more vigilant on the main road. Guy had gone both to Google and Naver to get maps of their destination. On the Chinese side, most roads, towns, and villages were clearly shown with place names in both Chinese and English but along the Yalu River information was sparse. On the North Korean side all was a blank. At the district known as Kuandian they would stop and make contact with the guide who would lead them to the bridge. Apparently

there were two possible bridges and the actual rendezvous place would be decided based on real time monitoring of the conditions on the ground. It was hard but they had to trust the guides that had been bought and paid for.

For all appearances, the trip was a pleasant outing on a fine spring morning. They were dressed for such an occasion and had been schooled that in the event they were to be stopped and questioned by any class of authority figure they were to say they were tourists on an excursion. Kyle was the most casually outfitted in Bermuda shorts, hiking boots, and a blue hoodie that said University of Wisconsin. Guy had on jeans, a flannel shirt, a leather jacket, and sneakers. Jeong Sook also wore jeans and sneakers. Her trench coat and hat were perfect; making her look like a spy attempting to cross over at Checkpoint Charlie, or so Kyle mentioned. The three Korean guys wore slacks, open necked sports shirts, and jackets. They looked like they were going to the dog track. In the van there was a cooler with picnic supplies like tuna and veggie rice rolls and ham sandwiches. Kyle had added six sixteen ounce cans of beer, for the sake of authenticity you see.

Guy had considered whether he should leave his tablet computer behind. It was his primary device for working on the novel and he certainly didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. They had all discussed the issue of carrying their electronic devices including smartphones with cameras. The dominant opinion was that tourists without such devices would be a red flag. Shin added that if they were subjected to anything more than rudimentary searches they would already be in deep trouble. Kyle spent two hours the night before deleting a substantial library of porn from his smartphone. Guy saved all his work on the novel onto a memory stick and left it with his gear in Harbin. As long as he had internet access he could work off the cloud.

The two vehicle caravan set out from the New Light Mission shortly before six am. Shin was at the wheel of the van and the SUV driver was tasked with keeping up. Kyle took shotgun and the others sat in the spacious rear compartment. The first stop was for hot coffee to-go for everyone. Once on the road, Jeong Sook opened the cooler and began to serve either rice balls, doughnuts, or sausage sandwiches to everyone according to their particular dietary persuasions. She served the driver first making sure his rice ball was unwrapped and his coffee was in convenient reach. Next she made sure Rev. Kim, as the senior person, had what he wanted. Next the guest, sort of, Kyle got his breakfast. She served Guy and herself last. It was the Korean way.

Up front Kyle and Shin, both being rather gregarious, quickly fell into a conversation about their host country, China.

"What a great country. I could be real happy living here," Kyle proposed.

"Oh really, what is it that you think is so great," Shin asked skeptically.

"Everything I see here is great. The cities, the buildings, and the infrastructure are world class."

"You may be right," Shin was concentrating on the road.

"And the people; everyone seems friendly, prosperous, and on the move. I feel their energy."

"You be right, but maybe you don't yet have the full story. There are a lot of problems here and most of

them are deliberately buried." Shin had to pay attention to the road but he felt strongly about the topic and couldn't just let it go.

"Problems, what problems?"

"Well for one, it's a one party system where the communist party holds all the power and jealousy guards it against any perceived encroachment by anybody else. And it's a brutal system. When students and workers demonstrated in Tiananmen Square in 1989 calling for democratic reform, the Party sent in the People's Liberation Army to crush them. They liberated ten thousand lives, piled the bodies up in the square, and burned them." Shin tended to get fired up when he talked about the CCP.

"Yeah ok, I heard about that but all in all their system seems to be working for them."

"You right, it's working for the Party. Tiananmen Square is only one example of their bloody suppression of any person or group that disagrees with them. Nowadays the targets of the CCP are the religious believers. The suppression is widespread and is just as brutal as the crackdowns in the past."

Kyle was starting to think he was out of his league but pressed on, "ok ok, this isn't the west and they have a completely different culture, history, and belief system. We just have to let them work it out themselves," it sounded reasonable to Kyle.

Shin was having none of that, "right they are not America, England or the western democratic world but that's no excuse. The basic universal human rights like freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly are completely stomped on in the CCP's lust for staying in power."

"Well, as an American I got to admit that there are more than a few things for us to be ashamed of. Just last week I was reading about the Trail of Tears. You know about that travesty? Then there is the treatment of the Native Americans in general, the Japanese internment issue, and the whole slavery thing."

"The important thing is you and everyone can read about them. In China no one can read about or talk about Tiananmen Square, the Great Leap Forward that killed more than a hundred million people, or the other monstrous incidents in the communist party's rise to power. Nobody has ever been held to account and so the Party never changes. This enables them to persecute religious believers today. Have you ever heard of the Church of Almighty God?"

In fact Kyle had, just the day before. He told Shin about his encounter and asked what was the point.

"They are said to be the fastest growing church in China today and are a threat to the Party's hold on the minds and hearts of the people. It's no surprise that they are now number one on the CCP's hit list. I've met with them close to a dozen times and have heard horrific tales of harassment, arrest, and torture in order to break their faith. Not second hand reports but directly from the mouths of those who suffered at the CCP's bloody hands. The worst are the cases of extrajudicial killings."

Kyle was uncharacteristically silent. He reached back into the cooler, found a beer, and opened it. He couldn't help thinking about the young people he had met yesterday in a different light.

In the back, Guy tried to work on the novel but he was listening to the conversation with one ear. He knew Kyle to be compassionate and once he had all the facts he would open his eyes. Jeong Sook and Kim were deep in conversation in the Korean language and Guy didn't try to follow.

"So, how are you feeling Jeong Sook? It has all come down to today. Are you excited?" Rev. Kim enquired.

"Yes it has all come down to today. I'm not sure what to think. I guess I'm excited but I'm scared too. I want to be optimistic but I just don't know how it will turn out. I really want to see my family again."

"Any regrets?"

"No, not at all. I was called to do this. I can't imagine going back to how I was living before," she answered confidently, "but I have no idea what the future holds."

"I've always thought that it was both a blessing and a curse to have had a calling such as you've had. A blessing because it tends to impart a great deal of meaning to life. It can also, at the same time, be a curse since it involves shouldering a heavy burden," Kim told her.

"Yes you are absolutely right. Although I have no regrets I sometimes watch other women my own age who seem to be living so well; maybe even happily. Why couldn't Guy and I live normal lives and live

happily ever after? He's a good man and deserves a happy life. Then I remember when I was searching for the meaning in my life and living on the edge of despair."

"Jeong Sook, there is no doubt in my mind that you are a special person. You've come so far and now you've voluntarily taken up this cross. It's only natural to want to be happy and struggle under the burden. I can't help recalling Our Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed, 'Father in Heaven, if possible, let this cup pass from me.' Not once but three times. We always think of Jesus as God but he also wanted to have a family and live happily ever after. He said, 'Your will not mine be done.' He accepted his fate and changed the world."

Now it was Jong Sook's turn to fall silent. She stared out the window and thought about Jesus. She had accepted Jesus as her Lord as she had been taught but he had always been almost a mythical hero. For the first time she knew he had agonized over his fate. The tears rolled down her cheeks and, in imitation, she embraced her fate, whatever it would bring, gladly and with her whole heart.

They made a couple restroom stops but ate lunch in the van served again by Jeong Sook. By 4pm they had arrived at the town where they would pick up the guide. Shin located the designated cafe and parked on the street out front. They all dismounted and entered the shop, ordered beverages, and located the restrooms. Kim pulled out a phone and fired off a text. Within minutes he got a reply. He told the others to wait and he left on foot to make the contact. While browsing in the snack section of a convenience store across the street he was approached by a middle-aged woman.

While reaching for a bag of shrimp chips she said under her breath in Korean, "bless me father for I have sinned."

To which Kim replied, "go and sin no more."

"I was sure it was you but we can't be too careful. My name is Han and I'm here to take you to the meeting place. Are you ready to go?"

They crossed the street together and Kim introduced everyone to Mrs. Han. Jeong Sook looked at her and tried to tell if she was one of the brokers she had encountered before. Probably not but it didn't really matter. They had no choice, their lives were in her hands.

The ride to the bridge took less than twenty minutes. Both vehicles were parked in a lot behind a building that turned out to be a combination customs and guard house for the Chinese border police. Mrs. Han led them to a back door and up the stairs to a third floor office.

From the front windows Jeong Sook got her first look at the bridge. It was a two lane concrete structure that spanned the Yalu river, about a hundred fifty yards across. On the opposite bank were four government style buildings and she could see three border guards checking the paperwork of a truck driver. Two more trucks were in line. The center building was more grandiose than the others and on the top floor was a huge smiling portrait of the Eternal Leader, Kim Il Sung. She was looking down into the belly of the beast.