

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Nine - In the Refuge

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October 14, 2020



In mid March the Sunflower took refuge in the old tumbled down temple that he had found and had been refurbishing for more than thirty years. It was in Shaanxi province 300 miles or so from Beijing. The Tayun mountains had been a Taoist holy ground for more than a thousand years and were dotted with monasteries, temples, and hermitages. Although there were much higher peaks in China, the remoteness and rugged topography of these mountains made them natural fortresses. Over the many years since the Kuíhuā Temple had first been occupied by Taoist monks, many others, including Buddhist, shamans, those escaping the wrath of the Manchu forces due to their participation in the Taiping rebellion, and devotees of the righteous fists known as the Boxers had sought refuge there. Most recently students running away from the bloody chaos of Mao's Cultural Revolution had set up camp in the ruins.

Sunflower had stumbled across it while on an expedition to commune with the natural world. The large stand of sunflowers growing in the warm October sunshine along the southern wall of what surely was an old temple caught his attention and drew him to explore. Later he learned that everyone referred to it as the Sunflower, Kuíhuā Temple. It so enchanted him that he spent the next six months researching the background of the site not only in the neighborhood but also in a well known university library in Beijing. He had taken Sunflower as his totem and nickname when he had been at the commune in America. It was an omen.

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Once he had put his hands on some disposable income he had begun to make it habitable. It was no easy task even with a pocket full of money. It was not accessible by any class of motor vehicle. The last five hundred feet could be traversed only by a donkey and on foot. Nevertheless he proceeded using materials from the far off big cities, local laborers, and craftsmen who lived in the villages nearby.

The project went on for years but little by little his dream began to take shape. First he rebuilt the walls and roof to keep out the snow and rain. Next was a water system utilizing nearby streams, pumps to

deliver water to a boiler, on to the sub-floor heating system, the kitchen, and bathrooms with showers and tubs for soaking. A diesel generator was required as well as regular deliveries of fuel in jerry cans on the backs of donkeys. He also had double paned picture windows installed in the bathroom, master bedroom, and the front sitting room. The view of the nearby peaks and gorges was fantastic.

Over the years he also populated the retreat with women that he either liked to be around or at least could tolerate. The eldest and longest resident was Qu xi. Originally they were lovers and as their amore for each other cooled they became friends and conspirators. Often Sunflower mused that a good friend was better than a lover.

Eventually, Qu xi became the de facto manager of the buildings, grounds, and other women. She was good at it and Sunflower trusted her competence. Of course, as in all things, he trusted but verified. He provided her with a generous budget to run things and she faithfully reported all the expenditures and filled him in on anticipated outlays in their conversations as they sat together in the front room, gazing out the windows at nature's changing panorama.

The most complex issues always concerned the management of the other women in the house. It has been said that three women living under one roof was a recipe for chaos. With the master of the house backing her play, Qu xi was in firm control of the household.

The size of the household was always in flux with the younger women periodically coming and going. Beyond his middle years, the Sunflower's vital juices continued to flow and he continued to encourage them through both his practice and by enjoying frequent romps with one or more of the young ladies that he brought into the refuge. It was an age old Chinese custom practiced by the powerful and well to do since time immemorial.

All in all, Sunflower was quite content with the results of his efforts. He had his refuge from the cares and pitfalls of his active life in the cities. He practiced his qigong meditation when looking for inner peace, fasted sometimes, ate when he was hungry, and made love to a bevy of women, young, old, and in between. He thought he was living the life of a small emperor of old.

The key, he knew, was the security of anonymity. No one in the city knew where he disappeared to and he took measures to keep it that way. He always drove himself to Shaanxi province in an SUV that he kept hidden for just that purpose. He took varied routes that often meandered along roads off the beaten path that were much less likely to have surveillance cameras. He parked the vehicle a ways from his retreat and walked up a path wearing typical mountain hiking attire shouldering a pack with the bare essentials. All contact with the locals was managed carefully through his trusted steward Qu xi.

"I've prepared the accounting as usual for you to see. Would you care to look at it now?" Qu xi was holding the ledger book that she always laboriously prepared and had ready for his review whenever he came to them.

"Oh, just leave it on my table and I'll have a look at it in a little while. Now I'll just rest my mind and enjoy this moment. Sit with me for a while and let's talk."

She did of course. They shared a carafe of spiced wine and discussed the general affairs of the refuge, some of the details of Jasmin's departure, as well as touching on philosophy, the rising cost of vegetables, and a stranger in the neighborhood.

"A stranger, who was it?" Sunflower's ears had perked up when a stranger was mentioned.

"Well, I really don't know. He knocked on the door and when I answered he asked to see the master of the house. I thought he might be a beggar but he didn't look disheveled."

Now Sunflower's alarm bells were clanging. This was worrying.

"This is important. Think carefully, have you ever seen him before?"

"No, of course not. He was surely a stranger." Qu xi was so distressed by the master's reaction that she was fighting back tears.

"Tell me what he looked like," Sunflower now ordered.

"Well as I recall he was young, maybe mid-thirties. He was a little tall with a full head of black hair. His complexion was a little dark like he came from somewhere in the south. He spoke politely with a Beijing accent. That's why I didn't think he was a beggar." Her face had turned red with the effort of remembering and telling everything accurately.

"How was he dressed? Sunflower enquired.

"He was dressed like a mountain climber with a cap and heavy leather mountain shoes. Funny thing was, he was carrying a city bag like he was going to his office."

Sunflower smelled CCP or some other class of nose official.

"I told him nothing but the master was not in and there was no telling when he would return."

"Anything else?"

"He said not to worry, it wasn't important. He would stop by again."

When a guy says don't worry was when Sunflower began to worry. He had already ordered a video camera system to beef up security and made a note to himself to get a hold of the vender to have it installed as soon as humanly possible. If the guy came around again he wanted to see his face.

The next time the guy showed up at the door, the master was in residence.

"He's here again. What should I do?" a slightly flustered Qu xi asked.

Sunflower was in the bedroom getting ready for a long soak in the hot tub. He quickly donned a gray padded monk's attire and slipped into the alcove where the video system monitors had been installed. Two cameras had been pointed at the entrance way and he was able to observe the unwanted visitor. Sunflower punched a button capturing a couple stills of the guy's face and called Qu xi to show him into the front sitting room.

After waiting the appropriate amount of time, Sunflower entered the room to see his guest sitting comfortably at a low table on an embroidered mat and taking in the view from the window. He rose, bowed, and greeted the host politely.

"So sorry to disturb you but since we are practically neighbors I thought it only correct behavior to drop by and introduce myself."

"Yes, no trouble at all. I'm so pleased to meet you," Sunflower said, extending his hand in the western style.

The guest took his hand and squeezed it a little more than was necessary. He then proffered a white business card in lieu of being so impolite as to mention his own name. Sunflower took the card and intently examined it in the Asian style. On one side was the name Yuman Yee in Chinese characters and his lofty position as Chairman of the People's Combined Committee of Yuang County, the political designation where these mountains and gorges lay. On the reverse side was simply the name Bob Yee in English with a cell phone number.

"Please be seated and let's become acquainted since we are indeed neighbors," Sunflower implored the guest with a calmness he surely wasn't feeling.

"Allow me to have fruit and tea brought in, or maybe a glass of something stronger?" It was required when entertaining someone of a particular position.

"Please don't trouble your household since I have come unexpectedly," the guest countered.

Qu xi had of course already anticipated and prepared three kinds of fruit, bottles of beer, Chinese liquor, and three kinds of whiskey with all the setups. She and two younger ladies bustled around serving the master and his guest as they gazed out the window.

"Such a magnificent view this is. What a fortunate man you are," said the petty official as he toasted his host with a crystal glass of twelve year old Scotch whiskey.

They talked for several hours in the most polite language that could be mustered. They touched on all the most correct topics including nature, poetry, and art. When the discussion turned to patriotism, duty, and current affairs Yee let it be known his pedigree was as a descendent of the revolutionary elite. His grandfather had been on the Long March with the venerable Chairman Mao. In addition he himself was a third generation Party member.

Sunflower was now on shaky ground and refused to lie about his background so only became oblique, briefly mentioning the Boxers.

"You may be interested to know that my own father took refuge at this very spot back during the upheavals in 1967," Yee said with a wink.

Ah yes, I've read some about those days," Sunflower remained just polite.

Before long the conversation took a turn in a more worrisome direction.

"You may know that many records were lost in those days of chaos. Especially out here in the countryside. We are now trying to recreate the property records of many estates such as this. We are sure that this property has been in your family's hands for many generations but we have not yet been able to verify that."

The sudden use of the plural pronoun 'we' confirmed that this was CCP business.

"Also, there are no records of taxes being paid on this lovely property. Now we are sure that it must be an oversight and can quickly be cleared up."

Was this guy looking for a bribe? Sunflower hoped so. If so it would be easy. It would only be a matter of negotiating how much. The other possibility was that there was a much more sinister plot afoot. How to know? It would be a catastrophe if it was a trap to fall into. The only thing to do was to string this guy along, get the photos of his face into the hands of some security experts and find out who he really was.

As the sun set behind the peaks both men thought, what a pleasant afternoon.