

## Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Ten - Down A Thorny Path

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Sheng Ping was a bright up and coming young man. He was well educated having graduated from Beijing University with a degree in business. Ping had gone on to get his masters in Ancient Chinese History. At thirty eight he was climbing the corporate ladder and everyone said he had a bright future. The ladder he was climbing was the Ministry of State Security (MSS) the intelligence and security agency of the People's Republic of China. Business was booming and opportunities for advancement were abundant.

As a student at an elite university he had pragmatically considered his career path. His family background was politically pristine and whatever course he chose, he was confident that the sky was the limit in the new China. At first he was drawn to the world of business and finance thinking that success would be to get rich. He excelled in mathematics and was a natural with computers. Although his parents were hardline party ideologues, he himself viewed things in the most practical of ways. Party membership was a must, of course, but he had no righteous revolutionary fervor. Instead he saw things in terms of power; who had it, how to get it, and how to effectively exercise it. Everything else was just for show.

Unbeknownst to him the recruiting and vetting process by the MSS had begun in the second year of his undergraduate days. He was befriended by several classmates who were interested in

computers, politics, and current affairs. They almost naturally became pals who hung out together, studied together, and of course spent many hours in deep discussions about life, politics, and the events of the day. There was no way for him to know that one of their crew was making regular reports to a MSS handler on all their views. Apparently Ping made a favorable impression and was approached directly when he was in graduate school. They wined and dined him making several distinctively different pitches. The first was an appeal to his patriotism and carrying on the glorious legacy of his parents and grandfather. The second approach was all about his future and how high he could ascend in the organs of state security, the party, and society. Ping was not moved much by the first but the latter was right up his alley. They had their man and he almost immediately entered the service.

In the twenty years since he had joined up it had been confirmed again and again that he had made the right decision. He ascended through the ranks and excelled in every assignment he was given. Along the way he learned a lot about the service, its operations, culture, and ethics.

Most important, he learned that the leading task of the state security services was to insure that the leadership role of the Chinese Communist Party is never challenged by enemies from outside and more important, domestically. The basic dogma of Marxist-Leninism was never even mentioned. It was all about power; maintaining and expanding the power of the party to rule China and beyond and they had a huge and almost unlimited budget to insure their success. Ping also knew quite well that the way to personal power was to scramble up the hierarchy of the service and so far he was doing well.

In the early days he cut his teeth on cases dealing with cyber security, monitoring web sites, emails, and all manner of digital communications that might be perceived as a threat to the one party rule of the CCP. His function was not only to gather intelligence but also enforcement. He and his work unit had a free hand to either warn, shutdown, or detain and interrogate anyone who strayed into forbidden territory. Often they surveilled and mounted black flag operations in order to roll up entire networks. In the process he became a pretty good hacker and psychological warfare operative.

After a string of successes he was promoted and put in charge of a unit going after subversive dangerous cults like the Church of Almighty God. These deluded, most likely mentally ill, cultists were a different kettle of fish than the netizens of the cyber world. They were true believers and next to impossible to break. Extraordinary methods were required. They almost never responded to warnings or threats. They had to be physically confronted, arrested, and yes, even encouraged with special methods to cease and detest their subversive beliefs. Ping was a professional, an enlightened, and even woke guy. So then how could he condone and participate in torture to achieve his ends. Well, it didn't keep him up nights. It was clear to him that these crackpot groups and their fanatical believers were a potential danger to the CCP's rightful rule over these 3.5 billion people. Whatever was necessary and or expedient to shut them down and break them up was entirely justified. He became good at it.

His first overseas assignment was to fly to South Korea and use his organizing and propaganda skills to persuade Seoul and the general Korean public to oppose asylum for around six hundred Church of Almighty God believers who had escaped there in the face of severe extrajudicial measures taken against them by the agents of the CCP. He found it a satisfying and easy task. All he had to do was to let it be known that China would not hesitate to retaliate economically for any antagonistic ruling by the South Korean Ministry of Justice and its immigration division. It was another feather in his cap.

Next he was put on the trail of the funds moving out of The Republic of Korea, through China, and into North Korea. The tried and true strategy of cops all over the world was to cast a wide net, scoop up as many small fish as possible, and put enough pressure on each and every one until one unfortunate flipped and gave up a bigger fish. One name that consistently came up was Sunflower.

In the course of an intense enquiry that stretched out over six months, Ping was unable to turn up much information at all about this Sunflower. What was he, a ghost? More likely he or she, was that even possible, was a real big and canny fish. It wasn't easy to fly under the CCP radar for any length of time. Under the watchful eye of the Party and supervised by the organs of state security, right down to the neighborhood and block organizations, today's China was the most tightly surveilled nation on earth with the possible exception of Kim's North Korea. No footprint told Ping that this guy was a big fish with a big invisible footprint. His ego told him that he had found a worthy adversary.

Ping was currently working undercover as Yuman Yee (Bob) in a far off province looking into the curious case of the Sunflower Temple and the mysterious goings on there. He had stumbled on it accidentally when doing a massive data search for the English word sunflower. A coincidence? Maybe not. Ping didn't believe in coincidences. He made up his mind to go out there and have a look for himself. In preparation he did an extensive search on the location and its history. In addition, he tried to find out the identity of the guy who was rumored to be living there like a taoist mountain spirit of old. Surprise, surprise, there was nothing in any database concerning this guy. The pieces were starting to come together. His gut told him he had his Sunflower.

Their impromptu meeting at the refuge was a watershed for both men. They each used their skills of observation and perception to size up their opposing number. It was akin to two boxers strategically circling and dancing around the ring before throwing the opening punch, a calm before the storm. They both sensed that they would meet again.

Rather than spend a sleepless night worrying and scheming, Sunflower instead instructed Qu xi to add a healthy pinch of the opium he kept for such occasions to his after dinner pipe. He drifted through the evening enjoying the fog of the narcotic and the debauchery with his two current favorites. Past midnight he summoned Qu xi again. They split another bowl and fell asleep in each other's arms. He was up at five o'clock, performed his morning rituals, and was on the road headed for Beijing by seven.

On the long drive to town, he had plenty of time to think. He often did his best thinking behind the wheel on the open road. It was a troubling development to have this guy unexpectedly show up at his door but before taking any action he had to find out who he was and assess the threat level. The key was to get the information in a way that would not leave a paper or digital trail that could lead back to him and exacerbate the situation.

Sunflower was a big believer in outsourcing. Outside of his driver and bodyguard he kept very few people on his staff. People were always the weakest link in any outfit. For intelligence gathering he usually relied on the Ball Agency. They were a firm that he had first used in his Hong Kong days. They currently specialized in personal and asset protection. Their backroom business was information; information not easily obtainable through normal channels. They were usually reliable in digging up the identities of folks who for one reason or another were flying off the radar. He had been assured that any investigation undertaken on his behalf was completely confidential and could never be traced back to him. He wanted to believe them but he knew he was exposing himself and might be headed down a thorny path.

After meeting with Fred Ball, one of the founding brothers of the group that bore their name and was Sunflower's contact, he went to ground for the next three days. He trusted Fred, who was a devout

Mormon, to come up with the required information and to do it in a timely manner. After all, it was a time sensitive matter as Sunflower had let the sexagenarian know.

He camped out in a series of semi-safe houses moving each day. One was a luxury boutique hotel that was owned by a brotherhood connection that let him stay a night without the required registration. Then he moved to the apartment of a widow who had once been a lover. She was more than happy to cook for him and sleep with him no questions asked. On the third day he paid a visit to the mission church of Rev. Kim in Harbin. Kim was the perfect host and invited Sunflower and his driver to spend the night in a guest room citing the long drive back to Beijing.

Over a private dinner, Kim and Sunflower talked again about his desire to move funds into North Korea and to rescue the relatives of his church members. Sunflower was more than distracted by his own troubles but didn't let on to the reverend.

"Sure, I'm willing to help out but as I mentioned before, I'll need some more details before we can get started. Why don't we get together next week in the capital and firm this thing up?" By next week Sunflower figured he would be back to business as usual or on the run.

"Ah yes, coincidentally, I plan to go down to Beijing on Tuesday next week to pick up an old friend at the airport. She is flying in from Seoul."

"Call me and I'll arrange for your accommodations. It's the least I can do."

The next day, on the way back, he got a secure communication from Ball.

"Stop by when you have a chance. We can talk over old times," the message read.

Sunflower instructed his driver to go as swift as the wind directly to the security firm's downtown office. The verdict was in. It was time to fish or cut bait.