

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter Twenty - No Greater Love

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The third floor room was apparently a seldom used break room for staff. It was approximately twenty by twenty feet and was furnished with chairs, tables, a couch, with a counter along one wall. There was neither a refrigerator or a microwave. There was a sink and some cupboards that may have contained glasses or cups. A teapot stood at the ready on one of the gas burners. No one was interested in refreshments.

The attention of everyone was drawn to the two windows that overlooked the bridge but Mrs. Han asked them to stay away from them. She drew the blinds and told them that they could be observed from the other side.

"We'll be here only a short time. Your people are nearby and will arrive at the bridge on the Korean side shortly. In the meantime we should wait quietly and unseen. The Chinese officials here are already taken care of and will remain out of site until we are through. It won't be long now," Mrs. Han lined them out.

Everyone, including Guy, Kim, Shin, and Kyle had questions about how the operation was going to go down. The broker assured them that all was arranged. The three people would arrive at the Korean side and one person from the Chinese side would go across and bring them back. After some discussion all conceded that it should be Jeong Sook who would go across to retrieve her father and daughters. Guy argued that he had better go with her but Mrs. Han said that was impossible. Everyone else concurred. The opportunity to lay hands on an American might be irresistible and would surely be the cause of an international incident. Both the Reverends Shin and Kim made cases of their own to accompany Jeong Sook. Mrs. Han nixed them both. Only one person could go and only Jeong Sook could confirm that the folks presented were, in fact, her relatives. So it was settled. Then it was only a matter of the wait.

The tension in the waiting room was high. There was nothing anyone could do but sit and look at each other. The broker took several calls on a cell phone and informed them that it would be soon.

From under the old Naugahyde couch on the far wall came the winning and crying of a cat. Jeong Sook went to investigate and saw the trembling form of a tiny black and white kitten. She found a length of string on the counter, put a couple of knots in the end, and used it to entice the creature to come out.

For the next twenty minutes she played with the cat, dangling the string just out of reach so it had to rise up on its hind legs and bat at it. Both the kitten and Jeong Sook became animated in their game and no one in the room could keep their eyes off them. The atmosphere was transformed. Although outside it was dusk, a warm light seemed to fill the waiting room.

It was delightful to watch and Guy was entranced. How he loved her. He felt a rush of emotion and thought he would surely spend the rest of his life with this woman. Jeong Sook was lost in the moment and for a time forgot everything.

Mrs. Han took one more call and said, "It's time."

Jeong Sook stood, picked up the kitten, and put it back under the couch.

"I'll be right back," she told Guy as they embraced. "Don't worry. It's not far," she smiled for Guy.

Despite Mrs. Han's warning, Guy and the others went to the windows and peered through the blinds to see Jeong Sook emerge from the front doors of the customs building and stroll purposely through the checkpoint towards the bridge. There was not another soul around and Guy wondered if the Chinese border guards were also watching out the windows.

The bridge deck was only two lanes wide and Jeong Sook looked over the rail at the narrow stream as it meandered through the greening riverbed. It had been drier than normal and she couldn't help comparing this body of water to the Tumen she had crossed when she had fled the land of her birth. She thought that she might be able to wade the mighty Yalu at this point.

Up ahead was North Korea and as she walked she watched the small group of figures at the checkpoint come in to focus. There looked to be five or six standing in a clump. As she got closer she could see that at least two wore uniforms and held guns. Next she recognized the slightly bent figure of her father. The others must be her daughters. It was all she could do to stop herself from sprinting the last thirty yards. She boldly walked up to the old man, threw her arms around him, and said,

"Daddy, I've come for you!"

"Jeong Sook, oh Jeong Sook, I've always prayed we'd meet again and now you've come."

She turned to the two teenagers and greeted them. They were decidedly more standoffish than their grandfather.

"I have so much to tell you but now we have to go quickly."

From their observation post the rest of the team watched the reunion. It all seemed to be going according to the plan. Mrs. Han, her job done, had disappeared unnoticed. Everyone else watched intently, prayed, and held their breath.

The old man and the two girls started across first. The girls were giving some assistance to their grandfather but he seemed to be moving forward mostly under his own power. Jeong Sook remained behind and was in some animated conversation with the border guards.

The trio had not reached the halfway point yet when a third guard appeared from the guard shack and shouted for them to stop. They stopped, turned and looked, but then continued on their way to the Chinese side. Jeong Sook shouted at them to run. From the third floor windows the guys could hear the shouting but couldn't make out the words. At that moment two vehicles roared to a stop at the checkpoint and six more guards jumped out. One of the original guards started across the bridge under orders to stop the escapees. Before he could take two steps, Jeong Sook leapt onto his back and brought him down.

The muzzle flashes were visible a half second before they heard the reports and the figure of Jeong Sook slumped to the ground. The three rounds from the rifle that struck her torso were all through and through and given immediate medical attention she might have survived them. But the pistol round exploded as it tore through and did immense damage causing her to quickly bleed out as she lay on the ground.

In the final moment it was all bitter sweet. Bitter because of all the things that were ending; her new life of freedom, a life with her daughters, and with her father. Most of all, she thought of her love for Guy and the life they might have had. Sweet for each and every one of these things, the sweetness of how much meaning they had brought to her life. And she knew the essence of being was this limitation and she opened her arms and embraced it.

The violent turn of events sent waves of shock through the witnesses at the third floor windows. Guy recovered first and jump towards the door yelling,

"No, no Jeong Sook!"

Before he could get the door open both Kim and Shin were on him, tackling him, and sitting on him.

"No you can't go. There is nothing we can do now. She is gone. We have to save the living," Kim said.

"No, no, no," was all Guy could say.

Back at the windows they could see the far side of the bridge swarming with uniformed figures waving rifles. Guy tried to see Jeong Sook but all he could see was the mob of uniforms surrounding a prone figure on the ground. His tears further obscured his vision. The three escapees had arrived at the Chinese checkpoint and both Kim and Shin rushed down to collect them and hurry them into the lobby.

At that moment a black official looking SUV pulled up in front of the customs building. The rear doors flew open and out stepped Lt. Col. Ping. He was dressed in a dapper double breasted suit and his two comrades were in uniforms with the red shoulder tabs of the Ministry of State Security. They both had holstered sidearms. The three strode rapidly towards the steps leading to the front doors and the small lobby where Kim and Shin were sheltering the newly freed defectors.

Kyle and Guy were still on the third floor and watched as the disaster went from bad to worse. Surely they were trapped by the arrival of this SUV. Then the most stunning thing happened. From around the right side of the building an intent young man appeared. He stepped directly towards Ping and as he walked he raised his arm with a service pistol. Kyle had a flashback of sorts. The young man was dressed in what looked to be a thrift store suit. His hair was unkempt, he had a three day growth of beard, and a scraggly mustache. His eyes were shining with the certainty of a zealot. It was Ahn Jung-geun assassinating the Governor General Ito. But how could that be?

Of course Ping knew who his assailant was immediately. It was none other than Jing Sung, his disgraced protege. At such close range there was nothing that Ping and his boys could do to deter the determined assassin. Jing Sung fired two rounds into his former boss at less than three feet away and as the other guys fumbled with the snaps on their holsters, dispatched them both with two rounds each. Then he turned and sprinted back around the building. Kyle watched the entire thirty second incident and realized that he had seen the shooter before. He was surely that ardent young man with the Church of Almighty God lady whom he had talked with the day before in Harbin.

Before the echoes of the gunshots had faded away, three more vehicles pulled up and disgorged a squad of armed officers. Half of them took off after the gunman and the others began to render aid to the wounded and set up a crime scene.

"Ping should have waited for back up," one of the officers observed.

Whatever just happened wasn't clear to Kim but he knew it was their chance. In the confusion he quickly ushered his seven charges out the rear door of the building and into the waiting van and Shin's SUV. In the nick of time they were away. Within minutes of their departure more reinforcements had arrived and the Chinese border police, who had been busy elsewhere, reappeared, the building was surrounded, and the whole border crossing was shut down. Whether it was luck, fast thinking, or the hand of Divine Province, they were able to escape the wide flung dragnet and make it back to Harbin by dawn.

The resulting international incident went all the way to the top of at least three governments; China, South Korea, and North Korea. As a former high government official under a death sentence, Jeong Sook's father was quickly and quietly given political asylum by South Korea. His granddaughters went along for the ride. Guy, Kyle, Shin, and Kim, with the assistance of both the South Korean and American embassies, slipped out of China, were debriefed in a third country, and finally made it back to Seoul.

The Reverends Kim and Shin were, certainly, no longer welcome in China and started new careers in Korea as outspoken human rights activists. They were all devastated by the death of Jeong Sook. It was hardest on Guy but he continued to work on his novel telling her story. It became his therapy and over time he began to recover.

He spent quite a bit of time with Rev. Kim talking it over, and trying to sort it out.

"I just can't figure out why it had to happen," Guy said again.

"We'll probably never know. She had her own destiny and her own fate. She accepted them both with a great heart and courage. I believe something surprising has to come from that," Kim explained.

"You may be right but at such a great cost. She really trusted you and admired you," Guy told the clergyman.

"Yes, I know that. More, she really loved you. She willingly gave up a lot. Most of all she loved her family and even all of Korea more than her own life. Something important will come from her sacrifice."

Over time he began to think of her not as the lost love of his life but as the hero of his story. Surely there was no greater love.

THE END