

## Between Heaven and Earth: Book Three - Destiny and Fate - Chapter One - Stuck in the Middle

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For the past thirty years the People's Republic of China had been on a dramatic ascent in terms of economic power, national prestige, and cultural influence. China had once prided itself on being the 'Middle Kingdom.' All the neighboring nations and people recognized this and paid tribute in the form of goods, horses, and women to the Dragon Throne in Beijing. All that changed when the Europeans arrived on the scene with new technology, political ideologies, and religions. China experienced a series of humiliating setbacks that led to the events culminating in the rise of the Chinese Communist Party as the sole arbitrator of morality, lifestyle, and wellbeing for close to, even after causing the death of more than a hundred million in their rise to power, a billion and a half souls. Under the one party system, with the Chinese Communist Party firmly at the helm, the nation was on track to revive the past glories of the 'Middle Kingdom.' Many observers were predicting that the 21st century was destined to be the Chinese century.

Those at the core of the new China were now reaping the material benefits of the bloody chaotic years of the revolution. To get rich had become the new revolutionary virtue and it seemed as if the people had concluded a Faustian Bargain with the CCP; you let us get rich and we will give you all the power you want to control our speech, morality, and life. Evidently it was a good deal for the masses relatively close to the center and willing to go along with the CCP. How can you blame them?

The marvelous gleaming glass towers of Beijing and the other coastal cities, the BMWs, the Mercedes, and the SUVs that clogged the avenues, and the general consumerism driven prosperity were surely the opiate of these masses.

Out on the fringes it was a different story. Rev. Kim Soo Beak lived and ministered to his flock out on the far reaches. The margins were occupied by those who wouldn't or couldn't go along with the dictates of the CCP.

Among the marginalized were various religious believers such as Falun Gong, the Muslims in the western hinterlands, various Buddhist and Taoist sects, the Christian House Church movement, and just about any group that presented an alternative view of reality than the CCP. Any such group and their members were isolated, harassed, and prosecuted by the CCP for a host of reasons and for no discernible reason at all.

The most interesting phenomenon to Rev. Kim was the surprisingly rapid growth of the Protestant House Church movement. Of course the constitution of the People's Republic guaranteed freedom of religion but in practice it meant folks were free to believe and practice whatever they wanted as long as it was under the strict control of the Party. There were the Patriotic Protestant Churches who submitted to the whims of the Party and whose leaders were selected by and monitored by Big Brother. The House Churches were underground outfits that met in homes, warehouses, and abandoned buildings. It was estimated that out of 1.3 billion Chinese more than 100 million were Christians and 80% of them were a part of the House Church Movement beyond the control of the Party. After the demise of Falun Gong, the CCP cracked down on this worrisome group. As of that fall alone, 250 churches and sects of every stripe had been closed and as many believers and clergy had been detained, arrested, and tortured. Kim was also hearing reports of extra judicial killings. It was serious.

For the refugees who made up Rev. Kim's congregation it was more than serious. It was a matter of life and death. If any of them happened to be caught in a round up of believers, under agreements with the little brother across the river, they would be returned to North Korea where they faced arrest, torture, or even execution. Kim had to always keep this in mind but he couldn't curtail his activities to minister to and save as many as possible by getting them out of China. It was his calling.

In the course of his activities he seldom met with other churchmen. Instead he often rubbed shoulders

with the underbelly of Chinese society. He had a network of contacts that regularly engaged in activities that were not only illegal but capital offenses. Chief among these were the so called brokers. They dealt in information, money, and human lives. There were the good, the bad, and the truly ugly but they were indispensable in getting refugees out of China and on their way to freedom. In early January Kim began surveying his contacts for information about moving money into North Korea and the possibility of ransoming relatives of folks who had already made it out.

"Sure, absolutely! All it takes is the right amount of money in the right hands, preferably US dollars."

The guy who was imparting this gem was a broker known as Sunflower, Kuīhuā in Chinese. He was ethnic Korean of a murky background and described himself as a businessman. Kim had used him successfully several times in the past to make payments to even more unsavory characters in order to move groups out of China, through Myanmar, Cambodia, and on to Thailand.

Today, Sunflower had arrived at the Starbucks in a chauffeured limousine and was dressed as a banker in a tailored navy blue suit, white shirt, and a striped tie. Kim kept his sunglasses on in the glaring light given off from the broker's highly polished oxfords. Of course, the proper image was his storefront.

"So then, who are the right hands?" Rev. Kim had to ask.

Sunflower grinned and leaned forward blowing on his coffee, "Yes, that's the million dollar question. Lucky for you, you've come to the right place. Let's take a walk. Even the table legs here have ears."

Kim agreed and they spent a few minutes at the counter where one of the kids part-timing transferred their coffees into take-out cups. At the front door, Sunflower made a quick phone call and within a few minutes the limo pulled up. The driver jumped out and held the rear door open and they got in.

The driver raised the plexiglass divider and slowly pulled out into traffic.

"He swept the car already and we can be secure in our little talk. Can't be too careful." He had switched to English which he spoke almost like a native.

"I've had a few people that asked if I could help them get relatives out of the north. I didn't know what to tell them except that I would ask around."

"You did right by coming to me. The worst thing you could do was to put the word out that you were looking for a 'tone-joo.' It's a dangerous business and you best not trust anybody."

"A what?" Kim had never heard the word before.

"Tone-joo, it comes from the Korean words for money and master. It's what we call a specialist in the art of smuggling hard currency into that worker's paradise."

"Oh, I get it, money master is a money broker. Is it a common thing?"

"Sure, why not. The reality is that today everything in the north is for sale. It all began with the 'jangmadang', the market economy, that has grown up in the past twenty years. Much of the underground economy is financed by money coming from refugees in South Korea and is moved into the north by the brokers."

"So I ought to be able to locate one of these money masters and move some money into the north."

"Not so fast. It's a dirty, dangerous, and expensive business. It attracts the most desperate and many times the most unscrupulous characters in the neighborhood. More than likely, the first person you try to make a deal with is going to sell you to the cops for a sure, tidy profit. On a par with the skin trade, these guys are a hundred times more devious. You gonna need my help."

Kim had been sure that this meeting would come down to that. He already knew not to trust anybody and that included present company. So far the information had been free and that was a start.

"I knew you would be willing to help out. What can you do for us?" Kim's strategy was to keep this guy on the line without exposing too much.

"Well as my American friends would say, 'the devil is in the details.' I'd need to know who and where the poor souls are that you want to save and how much you've got to spend. Then I'll find the right person for the job."

"Let me sit down with my people one more time and I'll get back to you." Kim figured this meeting was

over. It would be time to talk turkey later.

As for Sunflower, he had caught the scent of another payday and would keep this ball rolling. The limo dropped Kim back near Starbucks and the conspirators parted with assurances that they would get together again soon.

The next order of business for Kim was the folks over at the Church of Almighty God. There was a tale of woe and Nick Shin had asked his boss why he was getting involved with them. Nothing good could come out of it was the opinion of the younger man. Kim was more broadminded in his outlook and figured any enemy of the CCP was potentially a friend.

The Church of Almighty God could accurately be described as an offshoot of the House Church Movement. As with Christianity all over the world, the House Church Movement in China was made up of protestant sects that spanned the theological spectrum from the ultra orthodox to the wildly charismatic who emphasized worshiping through dancing, singing, and shouting. One such group was known as 'the shouters.' As one might imagine, due to their enthusiastic worship style, often late into the night, they were a pain in the ass to their neighbors wherever they set up camp. The complaints against them accumulated with local officials and they became early targets in the CCP crack down on religious groups.

In the throes of persecution, as often is the case, an amazing phenomenon occurred and began to spread. A particularly devoted sister began to receive messages in the depth of her prayer. It was a new message based mostly on the gospel but there was a twist. The message was that the time had come and God and Jesus wanted to manifest on the earth once again. As amazing as it seemed at first, this sister had been chosen to embody Almighty God this time. Of course this was viewed as heresy by many believers but enough accepted this new providence that it was said that the Church of Almighty God was the fastest growing denomination in China. It was wonderful and terrible news for these new believers. Wonderful because they were at the center of God's new work but terrible because it placed them squarely in the cross hairs of the CCP.

Only three nights ago Rev. Kim and Nick Shin had sat in a small furnished room in one of those old dilapidated 1970s Soviet-style block buildings and listened to a moon faced twenty two year old believer recount her encounter with the CCP. Neither Kim or Shin were strangers to stories of brutality inflicted on innocents by the organs of state in North Korea, but this lassie's tearful story brought it home again.

She told them that she had been followed, confronted, warned, and then detained all because of her faith and her stubborn refusal to give it up. In detention she was stripped naked and chained to a pipe in a cold basement. She could neither stand up straight or sit down for eight days. She prayed, cried, and was sexually abused several times during her time of agony. Finally, she was released for no known reason and was registered as a social deviant. She was hounded by officials day and night and moved every four or five days as she tried to get away from her tormentors. Both Shin and Kim were deeply impacted by her and the other's similar testimonies. Kim wondered how he could help and the hot blooded Shin considered if it was possible to bring down the CCP.