

CHOMO-LUNGMA

The next day it was mid-morning by the time they were ready to leave. In addition to the Chinese and Tibetan drivers of the six vehicles Li had recruited a cook and cook's assistant, and four other hefty Tibetans to help with camp chores and guard duties.

They drove out of Kangding on a beautiful crisp and sunny day. After leaving the mountain-shadowed bowl in which Kangding was located the road wound steadily upwards in zig-zag fashion to the first ridge, Jedo Pass, at about 15,000 feet, before it emerged through low-lying patches of cloud in unobstructed sunshine on the far side of the pass leading to the high grasslands of Kham Province. This was the "Medo Yul" of the fierce Khamba tribesmen, meaning "Land of Flowers". This region of Tibet had a higher rainfall and warmth of sun than other places in Tibet, and forests, flowers and fruits were plentiful.

Away to the south a snow-covered mountain range, topped by the serene 25,000-foot Minya Kongka, reared majestically towards a cerulean-blue sky. In some of the depressions the bluish surface of glaciers stood out against the pure white of drifted snow. Underfoot, snow and ice lay in the shade, although the sun was warm. Huge boulders filled a river brawling its way towards Kangding. In the distance great forests of deciduous and conifer trees rose out of the colour-splashed flowering grasslands - gentians, primulas, asters

and buttercups— towards the snows of the mountains.

The packed-soil trail passed through occasional Tibetan villages, from a distance looking like medieval castles with their thick walls, flat roofs with raised parapets, and fluttering coloured prayer-flags. Their courtyards held stacks of wood and drying dung, and animals of all kinds—yaks, horses, goats, pigs, hens,—and everywhere the snarling Tibetan mastiff guard-dogs tethered with thick ropes. Deki had warned them never to get out of the vehicles, or off their horses, until certain there were no dogs loose. Rabid as well as savage dogs and wolves were found all over Tibet.

When they stopped for a break and meal at one of the villages Dave and Duke were reminded of their confrontation in Kangding as they entered a log-built inn with the same smoky wood-and-dung fire and boiling tea cauldron. This inn was different, mostly in that the far side of the room contained an annex of household idols and religious paraphernalia, and some old yellowing manuscripts wound in dirty saffron silk beneath a coloured scroll of the wall depicting Buddha in the “lotus” position.

From the floor above, reached by a short wooden ladder, there was a sound of rising and falling voices singing what sounded like a religious chant. When Dave asked Deki about it she said it was some relatives of the innkeeper, and when she spoke with him about it he invited them to go and see. They climbed the wooden ladder to the next floor, and found several elderly men and women chanting an incantation, translated by Deki as Om Mani Padme Hum, meaning “The jewel in the heart of the lotus,” a popular Tibetan prayer formula. They had sung themselves into a trance with the incantation and their bodies moved rhythmically sideways, like pendulums, to the rhythm of their chant. The room was lit only by thin shafts of light, filtering through the smoke eddying upwards from usual central fire, highlighting the wrinkled faces lost in their spirit-world.

They had a quick meal downstairs and when they had eaten they once again drove across the green billiard-table-like plain towards the distant encircling mountains. By early afternoon the road turned upwards steeply into the clouds covering the range of mountains,

the vehicles labouring in low gears at the high altitude as they turned and twisted their way up and over the mountain pass.

At Derge the main east-west highway went straight on to Lhasa, capital of Tibet, and their vehicles left this to turn northwards to Jyekundo. Here the road was unpaved grit, only cleared scabble on the grasslands, and they were unable to maintain their previous speed. They drove on through woodland glades, with the sun slanting through branches and lying in a yellow tracery of intoxicating beauty on the carpets of multi-coloured flowers. From glades, to grasslands, to tilting and zig-zag up-and-down gradients, they penetrated deeply into what appeared to be the endless fascinating country, only rarely occupied by the occasional black tents of nomads.

When they reached their destination for the day it was dusk and growing dark. There was no decent accommodation available in the small village, Dzuma, and they decided to camp outside on an open space beside a fast-flowing, ice-green, river. While the Tibetans put up the tents the cook and his assistant made tea—both western and Tibetan yak-butter tea—on the gas-pressure stove. Two of the Tibetans fetched wood and yak-dung chips and built a roaring fire. When everyone had bowls of their preferred hot tea, and sat around the fire drinking, the cooks prepared the evening meal.

“One of the realities you better get used to in Tibet is the equality of men and women peeing,” Deki announced, getting to her feet. “There are lots of trees in Tibet, but usually not where you need them. Most of the country is open; there are no toilets or convenient bushes. The so-called public toilets are usually just open holes in the ground near the villages, no walls and no paper, and revoltingly odorous. You will find women and men doing the necessary where they are. The women are discreetly hidden by the folds in their gowns—and the men don’t seem to mind whether they’re hidden or not. You’ll even find both men and women carrying on their conversation unconcernedly as they mutually pee or defecate. It’s called culture shock in the West. Van, shall we discreetly suit the action to the words while the men grapple with this declaration of freedom?”

When the women returned Van handed Duke a package, saying,

"I bought this for you in Hong Kong, after I heard you play that night in the Godown. It will give you something constructive to do instead of thinking up mischief."

When Duke untied the package it revealed a gleaming mouth-organ, with sliding modulator. He held up his face to give Van a kiss of thanks, and then put the mouth-organ to his lips, blowing gently as he sought a basic scale.

"It's years since I played one of these things," he said, looking at it, "and even then it was only 'Home on the Range' I mastered."

Once he was confident of the C-scale he moved into the others, testing the modulator for grace notes. He did a child's version of "Chopsticks", and then tried "Home on the Range". When that came smoothly he began cupping his hands around the instrument, opening and closing them for a "wah-wah" effect. Within an hour he was trying out some well-known tunes.

As the night darkened around them the others were content to sit silently in the vast amphitheatre of snow-covered mountains, a small flickering speck in the awe-inspiring immensity, listening to the music. Above them slowly emerged the perfect white circle of the moon to bathe the scene in silvered beauty, surrounded by clusters of stars so bright and clear they were like suspended chandeliers.

The hot tea; the fragrant and pungent odours of burning wood and dung mixed with cooking food; the splashing sounds of running river and moaning wind; the distant rising and falling of chanting, clashing cymbals and wailing trumpets, from the village monastery; the rise and fall of Duke's music; all combined to create a magical and memorable moment.

As they had travelled throughout the day they had noticed the effects of the 15-20,000-foot altitudes on them in the intense blue of the sky, the sharper yellows and greens of the sunshine on the trees, the crystal-like clarity of the river spray. Now, with the sounds of the vehicle-engines silenced, it was the bell-like resonance of night sounds of animals and people which drifted pleurably across the perceptions. The diminishing of the body's oxygen served to sharpen the senses, widening the eyes, flaring the nostrils, deepening and

lengthening the breathing, as they savoured the unique sensuousness.

“Who needs TV?” Duke said languidly as they ate a meal of Tibetan “mo-mos” —spiced meat and chopped vegetables in a thin flour covering, taken with bowls of a thin fragrant meat soup—as they were lying back against the wheels of one of the vehicles. “Look at that view”.

““Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile””, Dave quoted.

“Within a hundred miles radius of this spot,” Deki said dryly, “the local people fought the Chinese so-called Liberation Army—sorry Li!—for several years. If they hadn’t run out of ammunition they would have defeated them. There were no roads here, and the Chinese soldiers were no match on foot for the local Khambas. It was from this region that sixteen tribal leaders led the revolt that had the Chinese army in a panic.”

“Difficult to imagine,” Dave said thoughtfully. “We drove a whole day over—what?—two-three hundred miles. And we saw very few people, and a handful of small towns or villages. The people we saw were Tibetans, with hardly a Chinese anywhere. Yet this is marked as Chinese on the maps. How many Tibetans live in this region, Fleur—I mean, Deki?”

“They’ve never been counted,” she replied. “That was one of the causes of the revolt, when the Chinese tried to count the Khambas and their herds of animals, and take away their guns. A rough guess is three-to-five million, but it could be more. There are about seventy tribes in the regions of Kham and Amdo, to the north and south of where we are now, who are very much a law to themselves. They recognize the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, but not the nobles, monks and officials in Lhasa—and certainly not the Chinese. This is their land, and whatever the Chinese authorities put on their maps, they have no intention of handing it over. Sorry again, Li.”

Li just shrugged noncommittally. It wasn’t his problem. The sooner they finished the job they had come to do and get back to civilization the better he’d be pleased. He was a city-dweller and this was an alien environment for him.

The next day they again drove over roughly defined trails of scabble on grasslands and mountain-sides. Occasional gusts of snow and sleet and hail blurred their windows, and turned the trails into treacherous mud and slush for the vehicles.

“Does anybody know when we get to the marshlands?” Van asked at one point as they slithered on the treacherous surface. “How would we know?”

None of the Chinese drivers had travelled this way before, and the Tibetans with them had come from further south. The thought of the possible danger of bottomless quagmires caused the drivers to slow down even more, and they peered anxiously out of the blurred sweep of the window-wipers as they smeared the icy sleet and snow-flakes on the freezing glass.

In the afternoon the road began rising steeply again and the snow-flakes thickened into an enveloping curtain. The vehicles laboured noisily in low gears, and the tires slipped in the snow-drifts. The driver in the passenger car said something to Li and Li interpreted to the others: “He says they’ll have to put on the chains soon if this doesn’t ease off.”

They had been climbing a series of sharp Z-bends up a sheer mountain slope and emerged on to an open level stretch in a long, boulder-strewn valley, snow – and ice-covered like some ghostly cemetery. The outlet of the valley was hidden in the snow and what appeared to be low-lying cloud. By the time the drivers, with the help of the Tibetans, had the vehicles jacked up and the chains on the tires, everybody was freezing from standing around in the chilling wind. In the icy atmosphere and rising wind the idling vehicles cooled rapidly and everybody stamped around swinging arms trying to keep warm.

“Here,” said Deki, taking a small tin from inside the pouch of her gown made by her girdle. “Rub some of this face-cream on your faces. When this is finished we use yak-butter. It smells foul but it will keep your skin from splitting by the icy atmosphere. Also, wear dark glasses now, or you will get snow-blindness from all the whiteness. It’s worse when the sun shines on the snow but this can still be dangerous. At this height and cold your breath will freeze on

your face, and your skin can split like a tomato, so check on your nose and ears that they still have feeling—there's a real danger of frost-bite. Wear your gloves at all times. If you need to pee I suggest you save it until you get to a lower and safer altitude; the urine is ice by the time it hits the ground."

With the chains on the vehicles had better purchase on the roads, but the boulder-strewn surface gradually gave way to exposed stretches of ice where even the tyre-chains had no grip. Finally, the leading car slid to a halt and could not move. The driver got out, and was joined by the other drivers. After a short discussion they tramped ahead, slipping on the ice and cursing the conditions, finally disappearing into the snow and cloud. When they returned their expressions were gloomy; it was even worse further on; they were on a glacial ice-field. Everybody would have to walk, and one vehicle with good road-grip would have to tow another, while a third pushed the middle vehicle from behind.

The convoy moved forward slowly, until the far side of the ice-field was reached, and then the two push-and-pull vehicles went back for the others, one at a time. By the time the convoy could drive on everyone was paralyzed with cold and trembling from exhaustion.

Fortunately, they had reached the top of the pass and they were soon descending out of the clouds and falling snow. The drivers removed the chains and shortly afterwards as they continued to descend they reached an open space without snow in a sheltered valley where there was a running stream, and they decided to call it a day and camp there overnight. Although they were out of the snow and ice they were still freezing cold in their sleeping-bags around a blazing fire the Tibetans kept going all night.

Next morning, the weather had improved and once again there was a cloudless blue sky and sunshine, and they were able to make good speed. There was no defined road, only stretches of what had been once an ancient caravan trail. Occasionally this became open grassland, on which could be seen innumerable scampering hares and marmots, and sometimes foxes and lynxes and even wolves. They passed herds of wild antelopes, graceful long-horned creatures

rendered pale and insubstantial in the shimmering heat waves; and smaller herds of black and dangerous-looking wild yaks. Every so often there were nomad encampments of black yak-hair tents, the men and women and children in heavy yak-skin robes silently gazing at the strange visitors from another world, and surrounded by grazing domestic yaks and sheep and goats. Away to the north a faint blue-black smudge on the horizon indicated the Kunlun mountain range.

"Somewhere on the other side of that range is our target," Li said. "My information was to approach it from the south as we have been doing, keeping the Amni Machin and Altyn Tagh ranges on our right, or east. That pass we came over yesterday was an arm of the Amni Machin by my reckoning. The Kunlun range runs almost due east-and-west, and the Amni Machin almost due north-and-south, so there is a twisted formation of mountains and valleys where they meet, giving rise to the Yalong, Hwang Ho and Drachu rivers among others. There is no road for vehicles through these, so today may be our last day to drive. We need to find a place to supply us with about twenty or more mule or yak animals for our onward journey."

"What about the traditional hospitality of the headman's wives and daughters?" Dave asked with mock innocence, then ducked as Deki threw a punch at him.

"Now that you've had your fun," Li said ironically, "let me remind you that from the time we stop driving you either walk, or ride on a wooden Tibetan saddle. By my reckoning we're getting close to Chomo-lungma, and I was told that there's no drive-able road beyond that. There is a large monastery there, and we can arrange with the monks to leave our transport and drivers until—hopefully!—we return. If we don't return in a month I will instruct the drivers before we leave to take the vehicles back to Kangding. In Chomo-lungma, and on the other side of the Kunlun-Amni Machin ranges, we hit the worst of the hostile Tibetan tribes, the Goloks. To make matters more difficult, General Ma's Chinese Muslims have bought their cooperation by paying them good prices for regular supplies of fresh meat, so they are not likely to be cooperative with us."

"The Goloks were notorious during the Tibetan revolt," Deki explained. "On one occasion the Chinese army sent in a huge force to attack and disarm them. The Goloks not only defeated them, the ones they didn't slaughter they returned to China with their noses cut off—eight hundred of them, I heard."

"Well, well," Duke said softly. "And we have to go through them to get to the Promised Land. You got any ideas, Joshua?" he addressed the thoughtful Dave.

"Where's your faith?" Dave asked him jokingly. "You're the one who plays and sings 'Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho', as I recall."

"Right," Li said briskly. "Let's see if we can reach Chomo-lungma before sunset. We'll get what onward information we can there."

Chomo-lungma was situated at the northern end of an undulating grass-and-scrub plateau, in the shadow of the towering snow-covered Kunlun mountains. It was a small township of typical reddish-brown, mud-built, flat-topped houses inside walled courtyards, with irregular narrow streets separating them. Outside the town, horses, yaks and mules nibbled on the sparse grass. Beside the town, and rising high above it on the mountain, were the terraced and whitened buildings of the monastery, with religious banners and fluttering prayer-flags providing flashes of brilliant colour in the setting late-afternoon sunshine.

As the vehicle convoy neared the town, a rising dust-cloud came towards them and several galloping riders swirled up in a confused mass, their horses rearing to a slithering halt beside the stopped convoy. Their leader was a giant of a man in a huge yak-skin gown and fur hat, riding a white horse that was larger than any they had seen since arriving in Tibet. He lifted his hand in greeting and said something in Tibetan.

Deki replied, and after a short conversation, she interpreted for the others: "He says he is the headman of Chomo-lungma and also chieftain of the Goloks. His name is Bundi. He welcomes us, and asks what brings us here. I told him we are on our way to the Koko Nor region to study Chang Tang wildlife. He says it is not possible to drive beyond Chomo-lungma, but he will be happy to arrange the animals we need for our journey. If we follow him to the town he

will show us where we can stay. They have no large inns or houses, but the monastery may have."

More and more riders were now arriving in a constant stream and the riders bunched together talking animatedly with Deki and each other. The horses caught the excitement of the new arrivals and pulled restlessly at the bridles, and the speed of the party increased perceptibly. Some of the more high-spirited horses had to be brought round in a wide circle and back to join the main group, so restive were they to get away and gallop over the flat plain. The riders were not averse to this restlessness, and used it to exhibit their skills as horsemen with a nonchalant and apparently effortless control.

On the open ground around the town was a large encampment of nomads scattered over a wide area. The distinctive black yak-hair tents were pitched every fifty yards or so, with a forest of rough wooden frames interspersed among them.

On these were hung the steaming carcasses of freshly slaughtered yaks. Thousands of crows were perched on the cross-pieces, picking at the carcasses, while overhead huge vultures circled on a slow wing-beat. Everywhere scavenging dogs tried to snatch at entrails, while one or two more audacious than the others tried to drag away the huge yaks' heads that were lying scattered on the ground. Nomads, stripped to the waist, were covered in blood, steaming in the cool of the afternoon, looking like creatures from hell as they carried large sides of meat into the monastery; and crowds of porters, men and women, were lined up with baskets to help carry the smaller cuts of meat into the monastery.

A collection of filthy, square-built mud houses, looking like a neglected archaeological site, appeared to be the town, and the convoy and cavorting escort finally reined to a halt on the outskirts of Chomo-lungma, beside a large, solidly built house of the usual fortress-like, multi-coloured Tibetan design. Servants were running all over the place, leading in horses or driving off the pressing, curious onlookers.

This was Bundi's house and, dismounting from his restive horse with easy nonchalance, he came up to Deki and invited the party to enter and take tea with him and his family. His wife was a well-built

and bright-eyed woman, surrounded by several children who gazed silently at the foreigners. She bustled around fetching bowls and ladling the ever-present hot yak-butter tea into them for the guests from another world.

Deki asked Bundi about the nomads and the extensive butchery going on outside the small town. Bundi said that it was the monastery that had ordered the slaying of the animals to supply the monks with meat for food, and also to stock against future profitable trade. But the main reason for the large number of nomads slaughtering such a large number of beasts was the demand from the Chinese army and their installations on the other side of the Kunlun mountains. To meet their demands three hundred yaks were being slaughtered every day, and the butchering had already gone on for several days. He was about to take a caravan of fresh meat to the Chinese military the next day, and if she liked she and her friends could travel with them. She turned down his offer of finding rooms in the town, knowing that there would be generations of cockroaches and bed-bugs, not to mention rats with all that meat and offal around.

When they had drunk a bowl or two of tea to meet the requirements of hospitality they excused themselves to the headman, thanked him and his wife, and went off to find a suitable camping spot for their vehicles. Leaving the Tibetans to set up tents and prepare the evening meal they went with Li to see the abbot of the monastery regarding permission to leave their vehicles and drivers in the monastery spaces in their absence.

As they passed the nomad's encampment Van took out her camera to photo-graph a maroon-clad monk carrying a yak's head in one hand and a large lump of meat in the other. The monk looked up and saw her pointing the camera at him and he quickly dropped the yak's head and meat and guiltily ran into a nearby nomad's tent to hide.

About 2-300 yards beyond the nomads' tents the path turned to the right below a slight overhang of rock, on which were a pile of prayer-formula mani stones and prayer-flags, and then it rose sharply to enter the main "street" between the monastery and town.

The “street” was just a wide irregular avenue between the houses, about forty feet from side to side; the northern end facing them terminating in the entrance to the monastery.

The houses on either side of the street were all one-storied and flat-roofed, and they were built in a continuous block from the top of the street to the bottom. The doorways led straight off the street and nearly all of them had two or three steps down into the rooms.

Through a curved-roof gateway to the left of the monastery could be seen the market-place of the town. Here the “street” was only an alleyway some ten feet wide, with small busy stalls and shops lining each side for over a hundred yards or so. There was a surprising variety of goods for such a remote place: coloured silks, carpets, saddlery, religious paraphernalia, exquisitely worked silver ornaments from the famous workshops of Derge, flour, sugar, matches, household utensils—and, of course, butchers’ shops with freshly slaughtered meat. At the end of the narrow street there was another gate leading into the monastery, larger than the town itself.

Dave used the occasion of the meeting with the abbot of the monastery to ask Deki to interpret some questions he had from his reading about Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices in general, and about Tariq Azir’s tantric experience in particular, and the abbot was fluent in his explanations. In the “religious laws” of Buddhism it was declared that there was a distinction between “ordained monks” seen everywhere, subject to domestic discipline, and “tantric monks” not distinguished by clothing and subject to the mystical demands of the spirit-world. The tantras, which distinguished the “tantric monk” from the “ordained monk”, historically in India and Tibet had provided limitless material for esoteric and “magical” practices of all kinds; so that the tantric monk who could produce rain, or heal diseases of people or animals, or provide miracle charms to prevent wounds or even death in battle, was more revered than the ordained monk who simply chanted Buddhist texts in the monastery.

The tantras were difficult to learn, as they had to be communicated by a proven initiate to a trusted acolyte. They had been derived from the early buddhas and their divine attendants, contacted only in stylized and symbolic names and designs, as

coherent expressions in an esoteric pattern or mystic circle, known as the mandala. Although the meaning of the mandala was “circles”, and usually composed of squares and triangles, its ultimate purpose is to lead the mind away from complexity to single-minded absorption in the Absolute. This mystical pattern symbolizing initiation into the spirit world in Tibet was usually drawn on the ground, or board, with coloured flour, or printed on cloth or paper, for the purposes of the initiator rite—although it could often be assembled as a wooden, or even golden, structure, and even as a complete initiatory temple—served as a means of “ultimate enlightenment” to the initiate. Deki said that the psychoanalyst Carl Jung saw the mandala as “a representation of the unconscious self”.

The ultimate initiation of a Tibetan adept, or sorcerer, was when the aspirant was able to invoke a spirit-deity to occupy a dead body during the bardo, or purgatory, celebrations, and then enter into a physical and/or sexual contest with the reactivated corpse in what was called the ro-lang, or “corpse-raising”, ritual. If the student initiate had properly learned the lessons of his master—“the right truth”—then he would be able to overcome the reactivated corpse and no one would ever know that the incident had taken place, except in the demonstrations of the initiate’s increased supernatural powers. But, if he was unprepared, his grotesquely mutilated body would be found later beside that of the deactivated corpse. The final “truth”, in the mystical conjunction of all these “other-world” forces generated, was a mystery known only to master and student, and the cost commitment and consequent physiological and psychological trauma to the initiate was enormous. It was accepted that most of those most deeply committed to the practices ended their lives prematurely, physically and mentally destroyed.

However, the two-fold enlightenment obtained through a combination of knowledge of selected spirit-powers, and commitment to them through meditation and trances, was considered worthwhile because of the phenomenal corollary of subsequent ability to harness and perform supernatural powers and the immense prestige, awe and influence which they generated. The mystic powers were passed on to believers by laying hands on their

heads; consecrating thankas representing deities; or “empowering” statues or god-boxes, in which were placed mantras, or relics, or charms, similarly blessed; or naming children, delineating auspicious days for weddings, or trading, or travel, and so on. The abbot said that there was a well-known local hermit chod-gyad, or oracle, living in a cave on the nearby mountain who was a practicing tantric adept, and they should visit him.

On their way out of the monastery they went to the cave, which was only a short distance away. When they stooped to enter the cave they found an emaciated old man of medium height in the gloomy darkness, who motioned them to be seated opposite him on a raised mound of earth. The cave was only about twelve feet square, lit by small spluttering butter-lamps arranged before a makeshift shrine, and the air was heavy with the sickly-sweet smell of incense. The object of worship was Yama, the Lord of Death.

On the walls of the cave were hung silk-framed thankas, or religious scrolls, and all around were prayer-flags with esoteric mantras. The thankas were different from any others they had seen in their travels. They depicted, in white on a black background, diagrams of the process of making contact with the spirit world. The last one was the most frightening, where the initiate was shown with a hollow reed protruding from the top of his head. When Deki asked about it the hermit said that it was to allow the “soul” to return to the body after it had been sent away on its astral journey. By certain meditative techniques the initiate like himself was able to enlarge the fontanelle in the skull, and the acolyte attending the initiate would insert the hollow reed at that moment to allow the “soul” to depart, and later to re-enter.

The initial contact with the spirit world involved an act of surrender to a selected “guardian deity”. This was accomplished by cultivating a quiet attitude of mind then, with the help of breathing exercises, meditation processes, invocatory tantric mantras, and vocal and lung techniques, a state of trance-possession was reached. The object of the exercise was pre-determined and, according to the prepared intention, the relevant “guardian deity” was approached and invited to enter the initiate. When this “possession” took place

the initiate was not conscious of the act - or was only subliminally aware, in the sense that he experienced a state of "ecstasy" but knew nothing of the attendant circumstances - but could be addressed by, and respond to in a limited manner, the attendant acolyte or supplicant.

The five-fold initiatory process of possession was always the same, whatever the mediated supplicatory requirement: interest, attraction, fascination, obsession, and finally, possession. The more willing the submission to the widening sphere of obedience, or commitment, demanded by the rising spirit hierarchy in return for the measure of supernatural power, the greater the knowledge and power communicated by them through their willing medium.

There were three stages in the possession process: one, when the initiate could invoke the spirit-being, and by willed exercise of the earlier acquired techniques permit the possession of his being for the declared purpose; two, when the willed control of the technique ceased to be firm and, despite a reluctance to be possessed for whatever reason, the spirit-being took increasing control of the individual; three, when the initiate, now afraid of the consequences, was wholly controlled by the spirit-being and eventually destroyed — mentally, physically, spiritually.

He said there existed a hierarchy of spirit-powers under the Tibetan form of chod-kyi-gyal-po, or "King of the Underworld" — to whom were delegated malevolent powers commensurate with the fulfilment of his purposes of frustrating the benevolent spirit-powers. These ranks of malevolent beings were regularly contacted by the Tibetan cho-gyad adepts, whose personal powers were determined by the number, rank and powers of the "guardian deities" contacted.

Dave and the others were confused as they walked back to their camping spot, each of them grappling with the meaning of what they had learned, and comparing that with what they had learned from their personal experiences in the past. Here in Tibet were powers beyond anything they had ever learned or even knew about in the West.

Dave quoted from Doctor Faustus:

“O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence . . .
A sound magician is a demi-god.’

“The term ‘occult’, I believe,” he said musingly, “is derived from a root meaning ‘to hide’, and means ‘kept secret, esoteric, mysterious, beyond the range of ordinary knowledge, involving the supernatural’. It involves a literal acceptance of the myth of ancient ‘grails’, incubi and succubae, or supernatural beings who handed down an oral tradition to a select group of devotees who were prepared to commit themselves to total abandonment to the spirit-powers’ principles and practices. It makes you wonder what other things are being kept from us by our rational, secular educational processes, doesn’t it?”

As they discussed the implications of what they had just seen and heard Deki was able to bridge some of the gaps from her knowledge of both eastern and western religions, but she said that most of what she knew had come from her discussions with her brother, Tariq, who had delved deeply into tantric and yoga and meditative practices.

“Well, I only hope he hasn’t mastered them enough to recruit them against us,” Duke said sardonically. “We have a big enough job dealing with known nuclear power without having to deal with unknown spirit-power as well.”

That night, after they had eaten, Li said that he was going to radio to Beijing to report and also find out from his radio-satellite down-link if there had been any important developments since they had left Kangding.

He was gone some time and when he returned he said, “Things are moving fast. Naka, the new leader of the Janus Club, has been to Hong Kong to meet with Lee Chung-ren, and they may have decided to replace Tariq with General Ma and accelerate their plans. Here is Beijing’s faxed report. They had an agent—waiter in the Peninsula Hotel put a bug in the cake-stand and recorded everything they said.”

"My oh my oh my," said Duke, as Li finished reading and paraphrasing the faxed transcript. "To think we may have come all this way for nothing."

"What I'm thinking is what Adlai Stevenson said when campaigning for the presidency," Van laughed: "'Power corrupts, but lack of power corrupts absolutely.'"

Deki was looking thoughtfully at Dave: the possible meeting with Tariq had been of more importance to him than the nuclear explosion, so what would he make of this new development? Seeing Deki looking at him questioningly Dave smiled and responded, "I was thinking of Oscar Wilde's statement: 'Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world and people die of it just as they die of any other disease.' Seriously, it's a fascinating situation, isn't it: Ma, the symbol of raw military power, and Tariq the symbol of refined spiritual power, confronting each other for world domination? In the Revelation the Apostle John describes the final struggle for world domination between the political Beast and the religious False Prophet—and then the Red Dragon, Satan himself steps in and takes over sole power. I wish I could be there when Ma and Tariq clash."

Li's sudden laughter took them all by surprise as he seldom indulged in bursts of merriment like the others. He smiled apologetically and said in explanation, "The word for 'crisis' in Chinese is composed of two characters: one represents "danger", and the other represents "opportunity". I think we should be more concerned with the possibility of opportunity than the complications of danger."

Duke grinned at him and said: "Confucius he say, 'Distant fire does not need nearby cold water.' Is that it?"

"A paradox, but true misquote," Li agreed with a smile.

"Gee, you guys can joke all you want, but I would give anything to have a computer and a radio-fax-modem right now," Van said, looking meaningfully at Li.

"If—or when—we resolve this situation I promise you can use mine to send your story," Li said. "But I have no computer."

"I have a computer," Van said. "But I'm saving the batteries for the big story."

“What’s that?” Duke asked interestedly. “an interview with General Ma?”

“No,” Van said, smiling sweetly, looking across at Dave. “Dave’s meeting with Tariq.”

“That,” Duke said emphatically, “will surpass Gary Cooper and High Noon”.

KUNLUN

They were up before dawn the next day, glad of the bowls of hot yak-butter tea handed to them by the smiling Tibetans. Fires blazed all around their camping area, where the caravan of mules and yaks had been assembled by Bundi to take the supplies of freshly butchered meat to the Chinese nuclear facilities on the other side of the Kunlun range. The muleteers who were loading and saddling the animals returned quickly to the fires to thaw out their frozen hands. From now on there was no expectation of engine-warmed vehicles, only the grim adjustment to uncomfortable wood saddles and exposure to the cruelly penetrating cold of the perpetual Siberian winds.

Ahead and above them, as the long caravan got under way, were the towering Kunlun mountain peaks where, first, the rose colour, then yellow, of the rising sun crept slowly and tantalizingly downwards with the promise of heat for shiveringly cold bodies. They had passed through one gloomy valley and were well up a second before the sun finally touched and caressed the dirtied yak-skins, reds and browns and greens of clothing, the dull blue of rifles, and the silver and copper of god-boxes, glinting on the movements of the gaily saddled horses and pacing mules of the Tibetans as they passed and re-passed each other keeping the animals in line and moving. The "foreigners" found the

wood saddles agonisingly painful and chose instead to walk until that, too, became too painful to breathe.

The caravan of almost two hundred animals and riders had entered the first long gloomy valley, and were well up the second, before the sun finally rose above the mountain peaks and enveloped them with its tepid but welcome warmth.

Bundi, the headman of the village and chieftain of the Goloks, was the leader of the caravan. Like the nomads of the region his Mongolian features were almost as dark as Duke's through exposure to the sun and winds, and constant applications of the protective yak-butter to counter splitting of the skin. His black hair was worn in a long braided pigtail, either loosely down his back or wound under his fur hat. He was generally taciturn, rarely smiling or speaking around the foreigners except for Deki. She had learned that he had lost most of his immediate family to the Chinese occupation army following on the Golok revolt against them. The wife and children they had seen in his home were part of his extended family, polygamy as well as polyandry being customary in Tibet. He was constantly on the move in the caravan, checking that all was well with animals, loads and muleteers, or riding ahead to scout the conditions of the trail.

There had been a fresh fall of snow in the night and the trail, as well as the rising foothills of the Kunlun mountain range, lay under a blanket which, veiled in the early morning mist and thinning clouds, had an arctic aura. The stands of dark-green pine and fir, and occasional thickets of lighter-green tamarisk, willow and alder, of the grasslands gave way to icicled boulders and glacial ice-fields, across which the animals slithered awkwardly and had to be manhandled by the burly Tibetans who cut notches in the ice with the swords carried in scabbards hanging from their waist girdles, making foot-holds for the slipping animals. On occasions they had to strip the saddles and blankets from the animals and spread them on the ice to provide adequate footholds.

By mid-day they were approaching the top of the pass, and gusts of freezing wind swept off the peaks and tore at the clothing and bodies of the riders, often making the horses stumble. Dave and

Duke, Van and Li, had long passed beyond discomfort and even pain into an encompassing numbness greater than anything they had ever known. Even Deki, who had finally settled into the rhythms and conditions of travel in Tibet, huddled in the saddle, her mind locked into a stoic acceptance of temporary suffering until she was fully acclimatized, fortified by memory flash-backs of other pain-filled journeys in her family past.

The giant Bundi rode up alongside her, his eyes hidden behind dark goggles he had picked up somewhere, the hair showing beneath his fur hat frosted with droplets of ice. "Ku-su day-bo a-ray? ("Is your honourable body at peace", the Tibetan polite equivalent of "Are you alright?").

"Day-bo-ray ("At peace"), she replied. "Do-tsi na-gi-ray (A little painful)".

"Cho-tso nyi-sum gi jay-may nga-tso lheb-gi-ray ("We will arrive after two or three hours)", he said, nodding his head to the top of the pass between the snow-capped peaks. "La di ga-li-ka-bo-ray ("The pass is very difficult"). Nday gi jay-ma dro-sa yak-bo-ray ("After that the trail is good"). Cho-gi ro-bah-tso na-gi-ray ("Your friends are hurting"). He nodded to where the others were riding ahead of them.

"Ku-tso druk-gi-yin ("They will improve soon"), she said.

Bundi laughed and kicked his restive white horse into a gallop up the trail.

Soon afterwards Deki saw what Bundi had meant. They emerged from the comparative shelter of the mountain shoulder on to a long sloping ridge leading to the pass. The blizzard was now a mixture of billowing clouds and heavy snow, with the wind driving both in sustained fury across the exposed expanse. The Tibetan muleteers who were not riding took shelter behind the pack-animals as the icy wind buffeted them, and the riders had to lean forward along the horses' necks seeking to avoid it.

Ahead, the leading animals of the caravan slowed to a stop and milled around as they could not find a steady foothold in the snow-drifts. Bundi shouted to the muleteers to drive the yaks forward to the front, and the huge lumbering animals

gathered at the head of the caravan.

“What’s happening?” Dave, riding up beside her, yelled to Deki above the steady howl of the wind.

“The snow is covering the trail,” she shouted, “and it becomes too dangerous for the pack-mules and horses. We might step off the trail into a quagmire or drop into a crevice and disappear. So they are sending the yaks ahead. They have an instinct for safe ground underneath, and are strong enough to break a trail through the drifts that the other animals can follow.”

But they were still a hundred yards short of the pass when even the yaks halted and would go no further. Bundi drove up beside the leading yak on his great horse and tried to beat—and even lift!—the yak forward, but it refused.

After a shouted discussion with the muleteers one of them fetched Bundi a rope, which he attached to the man and the other end to himself. The muleteer on the rope grasped a long stick someone handed to him, and he moved on to the unbeaten snow ahead of the first yak leading to the summit. Leaning forward, he spread-eagled his body on the softly yielding snow and drove the stick through the pristine snow until it hit solid ground beneath. Then he eased himself forward in his extended position, and repeated the procedure length by length.

Bundi followed him, the rope attached to his waist to catch the man if the snow gave way under him, driving the yak into the shallow depression left by the muleteer ahead. It was exhausting work, and after several yards another man replaced the first; until eventually the marked trail reached the top of the pass.

The far side of the pass was still dangerous and difficult, but slowly the caravan made its way off the exposed pass on to a sheltering ridge; and then a long valley down which the sound of the blizzard howled, but its force was blunted on the caravan by the mountains towering above them.

It was late afternoon when Bundi finally called a halt at an open boulder-strewn forested area, beside a tumbling stream with ice-covered sides. The animals were quickly unloaded and staked out in long lines, their loads stacked in low walls to act as

wind-breaks, and roaring fires built from the plentiful wood.

"Li, why would China want to conquer this country?" Duke asked when they were sufficiently thawed out with steaming bowls of butter tea for conversation. "Only Tibetans would want to live here."

"Gold, silver, oil, uranium," Li said laconically. "Also, someone has said it's the 'saddle of Asia': Russia to the north; India, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the west; China to the east; and Burma and Indochina to the south. That's one of the reasons General Ma is such a serious threat. His ambitions are not only directed towards China but these other regions. Chairman Mao is reported to have said, 'The way to Paris lies through Lhasa and Calcutta'".

"Man, this is an unforgettable experience," Duke said, shaking his head. "I've passed through more unknown experiences this past week than I have in the rest of my life. Van, I can't see why you ever wanted to come back to it."

"For the past few hours I've been wondering why I ever considered it," she said dryly. "It's back to nature with a vengeance this is Tennyson's' nature red in tooth and claw with ravine, shrieked against his creed!"

"Was it Kipling who said?" Dave quoted:

""Till a Voice, as bad as Conscience, rang interminable
changes
On an everlasting Whisper day and night repeated—so:
Something hidden. Go and find it.
Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost and waiting for you.
Go.""

"But these Tibetans aren't starry-eyed explorers like us," Duke said. "They take these conditions in their stride like a New York mailman making deliveries. Deki, you're not saying anything?"

"What's there to say?" she asked. "This is my country. I love it. Would I want to live here? No, not now: I've seen too many other places. But I know I will never forget it—if we survive." She didn't

laugh when she said it, and Dave looked quickly at her.

They were silent for a time, until Van spoke. "This meat the caravan is delivering: it seems like it's one huge order spread over several weeks' delivery by several of these caravan trips. Right? I know the Tibetans like every kind of meat from raw to three-year-old jerky, but it must be quite a problem for the Chinese buyers finding storage room for all this. And why not order from nearer where they are instead of this long trip?"

"I don't know about the storage," Deki answered her, "but the one, or few, butcherings might be because of the nomads' grazing in the Chang Tang. Over the centuries they have worked out a system of ecology in which each clan has certain grazing pastures for their flocks in recognized locations—seven goats or six sheep are equal to one yak in this calculation. Every few years a rough census is taken among them, and those with increased herds get more pastures while those with fewer herds get less. So it would take some time to arrange with the nomads for a mass buying, butchering and delivery system on a regular basis. I guess you'll find that they'll probably pitch their tents at the delivery point and hang about for several days while the buyer makes storage arrangements. The Tibetans won't mind waiting."

"Deki, has your friend Bundi said anything about when we get to wherever-we're-going?" Dave asked her.

Deki shook her head. "No. I asked him, and all he said was 'two-three days'.—which to Tibetans could mean anything up to a week or more. Also, they don't go right back home. They go on to a salt lake and gather salt-bricks to bring back with them as extra trading material."

"Can you try to find out from Bundi how the buying and delivery is arranged," Dave said, and Duke looked across the fire at him suddenly. "Does the buyer come out of the camp, or does Bundi go into the facility? Anything you can get will be useful. For example, if Bundi goes inside does he get a pass of some kind? And when the delivery is made, does he go in alone with several animal loads, or do others go in with him?"

Deki looked from Dave to the smiling Duke, and nodded her

head slowly. "I get it," she said. "If the wall's too high Duke will go in the front door."

"Wouldn't you?" Duke said cheerfully. Van looked at him sombrely, saying nothing for once.

The next day they again travelled from just after dawn to just before dusk, their major problem not snow but ice. They had spent a good part of the day climbing through another sloping valley to yet another pass, but without the blizzard or other hazards of the previous day.

There was a flurry of excitement about mid-morning. The caravan had been plodding along a grassland basin where a few nomads were grazing their herds of yaks. For no apparent reason the animals bunched restlessly, then scattered, and it was revealed that a small pack of five wolves were amongst them. However, after the first panic the yaks faced the wolves, heads down with horns pointed at the circling wolves, and eventually the wolves—who, Bundi said with a shrug, were probably looking for smaller calves—slunk away.

Whether it was the presence of the wolves, or the yaks or caravan, almost immediately a Tibetan brown bear emerged from a shallow gully. The brown bear was the most ferocious animal in Tibet, this one over six feet in height, with black legs, white collar, and red angry eyes. It rushed out of the gully at the caravan, head swinging from side to side, mouth open and snarling, creating panic among the unprepared men and animals.

It had wounded two men and a mule before Bundi raced up on his horse. Hitting the ground running, the giant Tibetan made straight for the bear, pulling the short sword from the scabbard attached to his girdle. It was the sword he used daily for cutting meat, or splitting wood, and his nightly occupation sitting beside the camp-fire was either sharpening the sword or oiling his rifle.

The bear had heard or seen Bundi coming and swung round to face him, a bloody saliva dripping from his open jaws, and a savage growl rumbling deep in his throat. Bundi slowed as he neared the bear, and went into a crouch, circling the bear and drawing it away from the wounded men and animal. He held the sword in the

classic sword-fighter's crouch, moving it backwards and forwards in a short arc, its razor-point angled slightly upward.

When the bear made its move Bundi was ready. As the bear rushed him he stepped forward right into its path, and, as it slashed its paw at him he stepped forward inside, his chest to the bear's chest, and used his impetus to bury the sword right up to its hilt in the bear's heart. With a huge heave, which lifted the bear right off its feet, he ripped the bear open. It gave a scream and staggered backward, dragging the Tibetan with it. Bundi's lips were drawn back in a snarl as vicious as the bear's, and with another savage lunge he twisted the sword and opened the bear from chin to crotch.

The other Tibetans crowded around to congratulate him and to skin the bear. They handed its heart to Bundi, and he put it to his lips and drank some of the blood. Deki explained that it was a Tibetan belief and custom; that he was honouring and partaking of the bear's courage. They would all share rich bear steaks that night!

After about three hours' steady climb they came to a huge ice-field which completely blocked their path, filling the whole of the valley ahead. They made several attempts to get the riding horses on to it, to see if they could get an unloaded animal over, but they fell down immediately and had to be dragged off by their tails. Again they had to cut steps in the smooth surface of the ice with the swords to give some sort of footing. There was not a bush in sight to provide some covering of branches for the solid ice, and they again stripped the saddles and blankets from the animals to spread on the glacia surface. Even then, as the Tibetans led the horses over like cats on a broken glass-topped wall, men and horses went down with a crash and had to be helped back on to their feet by the others.

And all the time the perpetual wind blew, and the snow drove into their faces, and their eyes ached because they could not wear protective goggles or spectacles because of the ice forming on them from their heaving breaths. As they bent heads and shoulders into the wind and driving snow it was difficult even to see the outline of the rider ahead. They headed into this icy wilderness for hours, it seemed, although they had lost all sense of time and direction.

Even when the trail began to drop sharply, dangers reared up at

every turn. At one point Bundi shot over the edge of the narrow trail as his horse slipped, and in its struggles it knocked against another horse and it, too, went over. Fortunately, Bundi had stopped against an outcrop of some kind and the other horse and rider rolled against the same obstacle, and they were able to be pulled upward by the muleteers.

On the other side of the narrowing valley they had just settled into a somnolent plod in the relative warmth of the sun when they reached what appeared to be an insuperable obstacle. The trail ended abruptly above a deep and wide chasm, through which poured a raging, foam-tossing river. The only means of crossing was a fragile construction of fibre ropes, across which were laid narrow slots of wood, with only fibre-rope hand-holds for support.

Only the foreigners seemed disturbed by the apparent obstacle as the Tibetans unconcernedly went about the task of unloading the animals and preparing themselves with leather head-and-shoulder-bands to carry over the loads.

"Are they going to walk over that?" Duke asked Deki unbelievably, as Van rapidly un-slung her camera to take photographs.

"Yes," Deki said. "How are we going to get them over to the other side if we don't?"

"Are we going to have to walk over as well?" Duke the imperturbable was incredulous.

"Unless you can leap over it in a single bound like Superman among your other skills," Deki laughed. "If a horse and yak can do it, so can you," she assured him with a mischievous smile.

"I don't believe it," Duke shook his head.

Deki nodded to Van, busily snapping the scene from every angle. "The camera doesn't lie," she said.

They watched in astonishment as the Tibetans, each carrying a sixty—or eighty—pound load on their shoulders, stepped on to the swaying rope bridge at about ten-yard intervals, the wooden slats moving and tilting beneath their feet, making them grab precariously to the single rope on each side for support to maintain their balance.

When the men and women carrying loads had completed the transfer they began to lead the animals over. Each animal was reluctant to step on to the fragile structure, and had to be coaxed, and there were occasional heart-stopping moments when they stumbled on the moving wooden slats, making the whole flimsy bridge swing wildly. One particularly nervous yak could not be controlled, and in its panic its legs slipped through the boards and it became suspended above the roaring river far beneath only by its body bulk on the wooden slats supporting it. Fortunately, it stopped its terrified struggles, and the Tibetan muleteers worked their way alongside it and, grasping its horns and tail, they lifted its legs back on to the wooden cross-pieces, and got it to its feet and safely on its way to the far side.

As the few remaining Tibetans watched, Bundi signalled to Deki that it was their turn to go over, and she stepped on to the wooden slats carefully. After she had travelled a few yards Bundi nodded to Van to follow, then Dave, then Duke and Li, until they were all in a long, swaying, discontinuous line.

Deki had told the others to keep their eyes on the far side, and not to look at the terrifying sight of the raging river far beneath them. But it was easier said than done, and the moving, sliding, tilting, wooden slats beneath their feet brought the roaring river into their line of sight. The combination of vertigo, the intimidating thunder of the river, and the unstable footing, stopped them time after time, and it took the encouraging approach and shouts of Bundi and other Tibetans behind them to get them to move on.

Eventually, trembling with tension, they reached the far side and solid ground.

"Are there any more so-called bridges like that ahead of us?" Dave asked Deki to ask Bundi.

The giant Tibetan gave a negative shake of his head, and a rare glimmer of a smile.

"And do they use this so-called bridge every time they come this way?" Duke asked admiringly.

Deki spoke to Bundi and interpreted his reply: "We not only come this way we also build the bridge when it is necessary every year.

That is more difficult than walking on it.”

“Blowing up the nuclear facility will be child’s play after this,” Duke said feelingly.

The gruelling day slowly passed and the exhaustion of walking was replaced with the icy numbness of riding, as the deadly cold ate its way steadily from the extremities inwards until it froze even the fears of frost-bite. Nobody spoke in that great desolation, and out of the wind the blanketing snow whispered down in a requiem of death. The foreigners lost all interest in everything and everybody and did not care whether they lived or died. They hated the relentless wind. They hated the darkening sky above them. They hated the trail which stretched endlessly before them.

Eventually they turned into a narrow valley which was awesome in its savage isolation. It stretched ahead for about a mile in every direction then was completely shut in by sheer, jagged, un-climbable, snow-covered mountains. The silence itself was terrifying after the recent sustained fierceness of the wind, the rearing mountains shutting out some of the snow and the wind. Earlier snow lay over everything, the ice-covered boulders were like massive gravestones, the huge icicles like ghostly-draped dead, and the silence was the gibbering quiet of a morgue at midnight.

It was dusk when at last the trail suddenly dipped and they entered a forest where only the snow gave enough light to pick their way forward. Their horses were stumbling every few steps, looking likely to drop dead beneath them, when they came out into a clearing and there was a cluster of empty houses. Bundi said that it was used in the summers by some nomads when grazing their animals in the region. In one of them they found an old crone with a meagre fire; and the muleteers, ignoring her muttered protests, banked up her fire into a roaring blaze. She didn’t appear grateful for the soup and meat they gave her as recompense.

The flames seemed to be of a peculiar variety of colours and Dave asked Deki about it. She looked at him curiously and asked if he had any pain in the eyes. Dave confessed they were sore, but that was to be expected, wasn’t it? Snow-blindness, Deki replied, was never felt until one looked at the fire and then the pain was excruciating. She

was right. Soon afterwards they all began to complain of the intense pain in their eyes, tears streaming between their fingers as they pressed them against their eyes. Deki tried applying compresses of yak butter and cold tea, but nothing helped. Even when they dropped off to sleep with exhaustion, the darkness was shot through with brilliant streaks of agony.

Before retiring, Bundi came to speak with Deki. "Tomorrow we reach our destination," he said to her. "We arrive about mid-day. After we have finished our business there, we will move on to the salt lake. What is your plan? I need to know if you require animals, and how many, for your return journey."

Deki looked for Dave to call him over, and then decided to leave him to rest his eyes; also, Bundi would talk more freely to her alone.

"Is this a town or monastery at your destination?" she asked him.

"It is a small place where some Tibetans live and nomads gather to load up with salt from the lake," he answered. "But we deliver the meat to a large Chinese business. We stay there a few days."

"A Chinese business?" she pretended surprise. "Here in the Chang Tang?"

He shrugged. "There are many Chinese businesses here," he said dismissively. "The Chinese Army," he added, as if that explained their presence.

"Oh, you mean a garrison," Deki said, using the Tibetan word dzong for "fort".

"No," he corrected her. "It is a place for making weapons, large weapons." He spread his hands wide to indicate huge.

"And they permit you to see them?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Again he shrugged, unimpressed. "There is nothing to be seen. They give me a printed glass-paper to enter, and for others, too, if more than one has to enter. We take the meat into a storing-place until it is filled."

Glass-paper? she thought. Oh, yes—plastic. "Do you have the glass-paper with you?"

"No," he shook his head. "They take it back when we finish. Do you wish to enter?" he asked her shrewdly.

Her heart gave a lurch. She had been asking the questions with

some of Dave's suggestions in mind, but what if—?

"Do you mean me, or my friends?" she pretended obtuseness.

"You," he said emphatically. "Not your friends. But why would you want to go inside?"

She did not try to deceive him; he was an intelligent man. "My brother is there," she said.

"Then you do not need me to help you," he said, puzzled. "Just ask to see your brother."

"I do not wish my friends to know," she said frankly.

He nodded, accepting the obvious implication. "I will arrange it," he said, and left her.

When Deki reported the conversation to Dave she did not mention the possibility of her receiving a pass through Bundi. She had spent hours every day considering possible plans to see her brother before Dave did, and now it had been unexpectedly presented to her. She had no idea of what she would say to Tariq, yet she knew she had to make the attempt—but without betraying her husband either.

When Dave reported Deki's conversation to the others he had a pleasant surprise. Without saying anything Li went to the baggage and returned with a package in his hands. Un-wrapping it, he took out a bundle of laminated identification cards with their photographs and false names.

"Before you arrived in Hong Kong one of the first things I did was check on security procedures at the Xigang nuclear facilities," Li said. "I guessed that they might be standardized throughout all the facilities, so I had these prepared. It is too big a risk just to wear them and present ourselves at the Shambhala facility and expect to be invited to enter without suspicion. Also, I have with us here the standard white coats and overalls worn in the facility, which we can wear if, or when, we get inside. These, with the official IDs, will give us some temporary advantage. My guess is that, if we can get inside somehow, these will be useful".

"Good thinking, Li," Dave said enthusiastically. "Now all we need is some means of getting inside."

"Another thing," Li continued, "we will be running into some military units there so have your stories about research ready. I

understand from my own enquiries before we left Kangding that the best explanation for our interest in this region is to study the movements of drong, or wild yaks, and the kiangs, or wild asses. With the arrival of the Chinese industries in this area these were in danger of becoming extinct through over-hunting by Chinese soldiers and hunters, and both Beijing and Lhasa wildlife authorities have imposed a ban on hunting them. I have authorization from both authorities for you to inspect the herds and movements, so there should be no trouble. But my suspicion is that General Ma will also have issued strict orders regarding security – and in this region he's the law."

"Is there any difference between the domestic yaks and these wild drong?" Dave asked curiously.

Li shrugged his shoulders negatively and looked at Deki for a response. "The domestic yak is about the size of your American buffalo or bison," she answered; "probably smaller, but bulkier with more shaggy hair. But the drongs are huge creatures, about six feet high at the shoulders and twelve feet long, weigh over a ton and have thirty-inch horns, are very suspicious and savage, especially if one is on its own. They are less dangerous in herds when they will guard the females and young before thinking of attacking. The kiangs are lovely in appearance, with coats of russet on top and white bellies and legs, with flowing black manes and tails; but they can be dangerous to approach, as they are suspicious and temperamental."

"What do we do around them if anybody is watching us?" Duke asked.

"Look intelligent, as if you know what you're doing," Dave replied.

"Just keep in mind that this area is an official wildlife reserve," Li said, "so you can count them, examine them for diseases or whatever. I brought metal staplers which you can fix to their ears as if you were classifying them for something. Hopefully, we won't have to be around long enough to create suspicion."

"Are you saying we approach these six-foot high, twelve feet long wild creatures and put a metal staple in their ears?" Duke asked incredulously.

“Fortune favours the brave” Li said gravely; “Chinese cookie philosophy”.

In the morning the pain in their eyes had eased but not gone, but the muleteers who had no protection were in much worse shape. They had only pulled strands of their long hair forward over their eyes to break up the glare of sun on snow and ice, but this was only a mild solace. Dave had gruesome memories of the Tibetan in the tent with his gangrened foot, and wondered how long it took for signs to appear

This third day out from Chomo-lungma was uneventful, as they descended steadily along the sloping sides of a ridge of mountain running down to fertile grassland, bathed in early morning sunshine which sparkled off the blue waters of a distant lake. On the grassland floor beneath them the stream they had camped beside at the top of the pass had become a wide and brawling river of clear green-tinted water, tossed into clouds of spray by huge boulders, and emanating a rolling thunder of tumbling rocks in its depths.

Ahead of them scattered encampments of nomads were interspersed with the moving smudges of herds of animals—the black of yaks, the brown of antelopes, the brown-and-black of wild asses, and the lighter colours of sheep and goats. The grasslands stretched to the misty distance, carpeted with tufts of spear grass, edelweiss and the yellow cinquefoil. It shimmered in the morning haze like a vast Impressionist painting.

A puff of dust appeared in the distance and grew larger, out of which emerged a large troop of Chinese soldiers riding shaggy Tibetan ponies. They were all wearing similar padded blue-grey high-collared jackets, and trousers tucked into fur-lined boots, with only their military insignias to distinguish ranks. They stopped at the head of the caravan to speak with Bundi, who had a smattering of Chinese, then came towards where Dave and the others were riding in a group together.

“A colonel, captain, lieutenant,” Li murmured in explanation to the others.

The Chinese were all wearing woollen balaclavas under their military caps, with only eyes and mouths showing. The colonel was

short and stocky beside the giant Bundi, who must have told him that Li was Chinese for he addressed him directly and curtly.

"He's asking Li what we're doing here," Deki interpreted quietly. "Li said to study wildlife. The colonel asked to see his authority."

Li had kept all the official documents, and he now handed them over to the colonel who took his time in studying them, comparing each document and photograph with the owner. He handed them back to Li and spoke rapidly and harshly.

"He says that it is not necessary to have official wild-life inspection here," Deki interpreted; "that he and his colleagues are responsible for security, and don't need outside observations. Li told him firmly that we are not an official government inspection group but an academic group conducting officially approved national and international research into numbers and conditions of animals on a Chinese and Tibetan wildlife reserve. He more or less told the colonel that it was none of his business what we do. Li says if there are difficulties he will go with the colonel and both of them can speak to Beijing by radio regarding the matter. The colonel is angry, but backing off. He says we must stay close to the Tibetan camp, and not go near official buildings. Li is saving the colonel's face by thanking him politely for his cooperation."

When the colonel and his troop of soldiers rode away, the caravan moved on again across the grasslands. In the distance they could see the high walls of the huge industrial complex begin to emerge from the haze, with intersecting networks of paved roads between the buildings ending abruptly in the grass and scabble of the plateau. They were built around the eastern end of the sun-sparkling blue lake, the far side of which disappeared in the distant haze, and were a brutal architectural monstrosity in an otherwise peaceful and pastoral landscape. In addition, there was a gap of about a half-mile between them and a solitary small building beside a long tarred 'plane runway.

When they reached the small building and lake they saw a mixed cluster of concrete- and mud-built houses separate from the industrial buildings, presumably comprising Tibetan quarters for servants or traders serving the Chinese officials and workers. There

were also Tibetan nomads camping in the open area beside the lake a few hundred yards away from the buildings, their herds of yaks and sheep and goats grazing around their black yak-skin tents.

With traditional hospitality they brought bowls of steaming yak-butter tea for the new arrivals, and bowls of yogurt and tsamba, the roasted barley flour which was the Tibetan's staple food eaten with everything. Bundi had the muleteers bring a side of raw yak meat, and this was cut and passed around, then sliced into bite-sized pieces with the razor-sharp daggers worn at their girdles by every Tibetan, men and women. The nomads brought yak-skin "bottles" of their own produce of beer and filled the bowls carried in the girdled robes of the Tibetans.

Dave and Duke, after an initial reluctance to eat the raw meat, had been persuaded by Deki to try it. Deki had bought a rich and spicy Sichuan sauce made of crushed walnuts, sesame oil and red chili peppers, as a remembered treat from her past in Chengdu, and Dave, Duke and Van had become instant converts. Li considered eating raw meat a barbarian custom, and either roasted it in the fire or grilled on a hot metal pan beside the blazing fire, and soon they had a rowdy arrival party going.

Chapter 10

will be available on this site on the 1st December 2010