

Mental Distortions

By Jean Grandbois

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Author's note

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental. Some well-known people, such as Tibet's Dalai Lama and missing Panchen Lama, make cameo appearances in these pages, but this is a work of fiction and the usual rules apply: none of these events ever happened.

Written in Montreal, Canada, 2000-2001.

For my wife, forever beautiful.

"According to Buddhist belief, every sentient being has a mind whose fundamental nature is essentially pure and unpolluted by mental distortions. We refer to that nature as the seed of enlightenment."

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama, from "Human Rights on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century", Paris, 1999

Chapter 1

The cool breeze rustled through the tall grass, stranding him in an ocean of thin, swaying blades. There were no warm breezes this high on the Tibetan plateau, the wind always seemed to originate from the Himalayan range on the horizon. His eyes feasted on the idyllic postcard backdrop. He was alone, or at least he thought he was alone, admiring one of nature's gifts prepared just for him. He had dressed warmly for the climate, but that midmorning breeze still chilled him to the bone. He did not think much of it then, but he would remember it all too clearly later. Even in a relaxed setting, some inner survival mechanism never sleeps. The instinct that tells you someone is watching, or that makes you decide to shoulder check before switching into the same freeway lane you drive in every day. That morning, the survival instinct inside his body chilled him despite the warm clothing. He ignored the instinct this time, for nothing happened in postcard settings, after all.

He clapped his hands together to beat off the chill, stood up, and headed back for his campsite. A one-night stand in a lean-to might not have qualified as a campsite, but it was his home for the day nonetheless. Logically he knew that camping out there alone was dangerously foolish. No white man could wander off into the Tibetan landscape unescorted. He supposed that he might find himself pleading with a Chinese prison guard for a call to the Canadian consulate. But he had paid dearly to wander through these isolated plains. He had paid not only with money, but also with his job, and with a very interesting, and now very confused, lady back home. Of course, she would not be the first one he had left in a confused state during his impulsively shallow adulthood.

Some may say he had it all. John Pearson was a successful stockbroker in a booming economy. His attractive 36-year-old body naturally attracted equally beautiful women. He maintained the adventure level of a twenty year old, with backcountry trips, canoe trips through rapids, heli-skiing, even parachuting. Perhaps all these outdoor activities had caused his thirst for life beyond the downtown Toronto rat race. Sure, Toronto was not New York, but it certainly was not a Tibetan landscape either. So what made a man like him throw it all out and run off to the Himalayas? He truly hoped to find an answer to that question during his solitary journey. He did not plan on becoming a Buddhist monk, but he could use a little of that inner peace, thank you very much. He'll take that with a side of contentment, and make it to go please. You can take the guy out of the city, ...

He had to admit that fate had played a role in this little excursion as well. At a time when he felt a need to do something irrational, all the right political stars were in alignment to allow a crazy Canuck to wander into Tibet with just a backpack. Tibet had recently experienced unrest worse than had been seen since the 1959 uprisings, and subsequent Chinese crackdowns. The various Free Tibet organizations all over the world had a field day with the Chinese military response to the protests in Lhasa. The Chinese government then hatched a great plan to ease the situation. They opened up Tibet to foreign tourists, making way for new public relations with the rest of the world. While some powers in Tibet resented the foreign intrusion, others recognized the economic benefits of tourism to this impoverished land. China brilliantly improved its oppressor image in the world's eye, while dividing the Tibetan leaders into two factions.

One of the major new concessions to tourists was the back country, free roaming hiking. Previously, foreign visitors were only allowed into Tibet through tightly controlled tours. With the new Chinese resolutions, a foreign visitor could apply for a back packing permit. After some background check, the permit was usually approved. However, the government insisted on visitors never traveling alone, a Chinese guide always had to accompany them. The Chinese justified this regulation using the safety of tourists as their prime concern. Most people could see through this thin veil and understand that an unescorted foreigner might run into things that were better left unseen by the outside world.

He left his guide, Mr. Yu, behind three days ago. Fortunately for him, Chinese guides are just as human as anyone else. A few days out of Lhasa, and they were in total isolation. An offer to double his wages if he let John go on alone broke any resistance Mr. Yu might have had to the idea. The guide knew that there was virtually no chance of his crime ever being discovered in this no man's land. He could double his wages and avoid a week of marching through the wilderness. Who could resist? Yu danced the amusing dance of indignation at being bribed before he accepted. Yu then gave careful instruction of directions to avoid because of villages or monasteries. They agreed to meet in twelve days, and then Yu would escort John back to Lhasa.

With a last lingering look at the Tsangpo river, John headed back towards the campsite. Perhaps ten minutes passed before he froze mid-step. He had not been aware of his surroundings, as one is apt to be when thinking of past events. He turned to his right, where he had seen a blur of a movement out of the far

corner of his eye. The world in one's peripheral vision always seemed to consist of blurs. He stared for several seconds, which felt more like several minutes. He absently reached for his camping knife, knowing it offered laughable protection against the thieves that were rumored to roam in the countryside. Coincidentally he stared at the same postcard image as before, only this time instinct did not have to chill his body for him to feel the danger. No, his instinct knew to leave things well alone when the people upstairs in his brain were aware of potential danger.

He saw no further movement, and wondered if it could have been his imagination. Was that not always the most comforting thought? Yes, the peripheral vision was faulty, always blurry, and sometimes imagined things. But he knew he had not imagined anything, which left three possibilities. Either the sunlight reflected on the water, or an animal darted in the grass, or he was not alone. Logically, if he had company, it was to his advantage to find out now instead of at the campsite in the middle of the night with a knife against his throat. Or worse, perhaps with a knife through his throat, and the life running out of him.

Grudgingly, he began to advance towards the approximate location of the blur. David, armed with a pocketknife this time, faced Goliath. He might have smiled at the analogy if he had not been sweating with fear.

“Hello? Who's there?”

Never mind that if anyone could hear, they probably did not know a word of English. He could not stand the thought of people jumping at him unseen until the last moment, he much

preferred trying to get them to come out now. At least then he would know in which direction to run away. No movement, no response. Slowly, he continued his careful advance. He was within ten yards of the shore now, with little room left for a would-be assailant to hide. The wind continued to rustle through the grass, whispering a hushed warning for him. The swaying grass moved all around him, giving him the urge to drop the knife and run like a madman. Five yards. With a primal scream he rushed the last distance to the shore, knife held out in front of him like a spear.

The river lapped at John's feet as he struggled to regain his balance after nearly running straight into the water. He rapidly swung around to face the attacker he knew had to now be behind him. The grass continued to sway from side to side, like the arms of the biggest cheer leading squad in history. Were they mocking him or cheering for his panic induced bravery? No hordes of Chinese thieves came down on him. He made his way perhaps twenty yards along the shore, looking for footprints or any other sign of a presence. Finally he began to feel foolish walking alone in a desolate area with a pocketknife tightly clutched in his fist.

The sweat had dried off his forehead by the time he arrived at his campsite. He still felt unnerved by his experience, but he began to accept that he would not be receiving any uninvited guests that evening. Being alone could often cause paranoia.

He sat down for his evening meal of dried meat and dried fruit. No wood could be found for a fire in the area. Even if he had carried his own wood, only a fool would start a fire in this tinderbox of grasslands. Although he expected nightmares of

Chinese thieves descending upon him, he slept the dreamless sleep of the exhausted that night.

There are mornings where you wake up from a peaceful sleep and stretch out lazily. The next morning John's instinct kicked him in the head, making his eyes snap open. For no good reason he gave up the warmth of his sleeping bag and quickly stood up in panic. The Tsangpo river sparkled under the brilliant morning sun. When his eyes adjusted to the shimmering light, he saw the monk-like figure by the shore. He didn't think he made any noise, yet the figure turned towards him as soon as he stood. Then he saw her eyes.

How long did they stare at each other? One second? Ten seconds? Five minutes? John had no idea. His brain registered that her eyes were the only feature that distinguished her from a man at this distance. Her age was impossible to determine, she could be twenty or fifty. The absence of hair, the dirty, loose-flowing robe that had once been white, sufficiently masked both her age and her sex. The eyes though, they told everything. Her large brown eyes spoke to him of the beauty that once was. "Look here" they said, "don't look at the rest". They also told him that they had seen a lot, more than a woman or man should have to see in a lifetime. They looked tired, alert, and frightened all at the same time. They also had a very calculating look, as if experienced in evaluating critical situations.

If it were not for those eyes he might have noticed earlier that she carried his backpack. She obviously had the same survival instinct that he possessed, which was probably what had alerted her to the fact he stood up in the first place. She hunched down and bolted to her right, seeming to disappear in the tall grass.

John wasted another ten or fifteen seconds looking for his boots before realizing she must have taken them too.

He sprinted in the general direction where she was headed, on his bare, tender, city feet. He quickly lost site of her among the weaving grass, but she left a clear, trampled path in her wake. Head down he followed as fast as he could without losing the path that pointed in her direction like an arrow. The tough, sharp blades of grass began to cut at his aching feet. Ignoring the growing pain, he resolutely maintained his direction along the path. Then it ended. Damn, how could her path suddenly end? He stood up and tried to peer into the areas of grass around him, perhaps she had leapt just a few feet to cause a break in the path. He trampled around for a few precious moments before realizing that she might have backtracked. Between his bare feet and his need to follow her path, he must have been going slower than her. Perhaps she used the extra distance to buy some time to confuse the trail. For the first time he wished he had added hunting and tracking to his list of regular outdoor activities.

As he returned along the path at a slow, steady jog, this time he held his head high looking for new paths along the side of the main path. No sooner had he begun the search that he saw it, perhaps five yards from the end of the path. She indeed had run back along the path, and then jumped a few feet off to the side and continued her escape. What a smart, brave woman. The short distance between the end of the path and this new path encouraged him. She must not have been too far ahead of him or she would have backtracked further down her original path. But she had indeed bought herself precious seconds with her trick.

With one look at his bleeding feet, his will to catch her redoubled. Her new path seemed to go in a fairly straight line. If he tried carefully following her path, she would outdistance him. Time was on her side, he could not go much longer on his lacerated feet. Gambling, he sprinted headlong in the straight line of the path. He knew he would miss any more tricks she might have planned, and he would lose even more time if she suddenly made a sharp turn.

After a few breathless minutes of running at full gait John caught a glimpse of her ahead. She tried to run low, but he was near enough to see her bobbing head and she made her way through the grass. As he neared, she turned back once and opened her eyes wide with fear and surprise. He could ignore the pain in his feet, but she could not ignore the weight of his backpack.

With his lungs bursting for air John sped up to shorten the distance between them. His heart thundered in protest, and his stomach began to cramp. But the distance did close between them. When he was almost close enough to tackle her, she turned once more. Her eyes had changed, they were no longer afraid or surprised. In fact they seemed nothing at all, perhaps resigned, perhaps dead. Whoever said that the eyes were the windows to your soul must have seen a woman like this.

Before he could launch his final grab at her, she just collapsed on the ground. Without time for him to stop, he ran right over her, tripping on her body and tumbling forward. Dazed, he stood up as quickly as his shaky legs allowed. He felt sure that she had tricked him again and was well on her way once more. But as he turned around, John was stunned to see her lying motionless at his feet.

She had curled herself up into a ball, and trembled like a frightened rabbit. Up close he could see many more details of his thief. Her skin was a dark tanned brown, with the slightly wrinkled look of too much sun exposure. Her legs were bent at the knee, and were far too skinny to be considered attractive. Her emaciated arms protectively covered her head and neck. With a shock it dawned on him that she had the position of a person trying to avoid serious injury in an imminent beating. What had this woman been through?

His interest in the stolen boots all but disappeared as he slowly knelt beside her. When he gently laid his hand on her shoulder she shuddered.

“It’s OK, I won’t hurt you. Do you speak English?”

This time she cautiously raised her head and looked at him. His sweat-drenched face must not have conveyed the sorrow he felt for her, but he was certain that she saw no signs of anger and revenge. Perhaps he sent her the wrong message when he gently stroked her arm and shoulder again, because the fear, mixed with fury this time, entered her eyes once more. Oh, she was quick this one, John did not even see the rock in her hand until it was inches from his temple.

She never thought he could have run this far without his boots. Blood dripped from an ugly gash on the side of the man’s head. She dropped the stone limply, studying the effect of her work.

She bent cautiously to see if he was still breathing. Dizzy from exhaustion, she almost fell over him. He's a foreigner, and a man; he deserves what he got. Her bitter inner voice helped squelch the rising guilt invading her senses as blood continued to seep down the side of his head.

Like most pigs, he had tried to take her when he had caught up with her. She did not understand the words coming out in his foreign tongue, but she recognized the soft touch on her shoulder for what it was. He wanted the same thing that they all wanted from her. But she would die before letting another man take what he wanted. The bloodied stone, and the prone body at her feet proved that her conviction was more than idle words. This was the new Sherab Choezom. She might not live much longer, but she would live freely.

The pain in Sherab's stomach reminded her of why she had robbed the foreigner in the first place. She debated whether to forage for food in his backpack now or to distance herself from him. Wisdom dictated that she push her starving body a little further, away from the white enemy. Her numbed and tired mind threw one last insightful spark when she thought he might have more goods back at his campsite. With that plan in mind, she resumed her dull, animalistic stride through the grasslands.

Sherab enjoyed walking through the fields. She could shut down her thought processes, and concentrate on the path ahead of her. Always alert for signs of other humans, she felt like a lioness on the prowl. I am a proud lioness, she thought with amusement, holding her head up a little higher. A lioness without a past, only with a future. This impersonation allowed her to forget her inner torment, leaving her with nothing but

physical pain. She welcomed the pain of weak, exhausted muscles, and of an empty stomach.

Halfway to the campsite she gave in to her hunger. No longer a proud lioness, the hungry scavenger dug through the stolen backpack with enthusiasm. The dried meat looked mildly revolting but she adored the sweet, dried fruit. Careful not to overstuff herself, she crunched on a small handful of nuts before reluctantly conserving the rest of the precious food. She smiled when she noticed that the man had been kind enough to include a full water gourd in his pack. She drank deeply, and appreciatively splashed the cool water on her face and shaven head. With an abundance of fast flowing water in the nearby river, she could afford to waste as much as she wanted. Feeling somewhat refreshed, she resumed her march towards the man's campsite.

The lean-to remained in place after the man's hasty departure that morning. With barely contained excitement, she slid into the man's bedroll. The comfort and warmth brought a relaxed smile to her face. Sherab knew she could not linger at the campsite for very long, for the man was sure to return as soon as he woke up. She rummaged around his small site, and gleefully poked her head into a spare food bag. She had missed it during her stealthy search while he slept.

It was time to move on, she had already stayed at the campsite too long. She walked quickly to the river to refill the drained water gourd. She stuffed the food bag into the already distended backpack, and hefted it onto her shoulder. The pack's weight threatened to crush her. She looked longingly at the bedroll, but knew she could not add it to her burden. A few weeks from now, if she lived that long, her body might have the strength to

carry more of the man's belongings. But for now, she accepted the limits that her frail body forced upon her.

The man's eyes were deceptive. She knew what he wanted when he touched her, but his eyes tried to trick her. It took a while for her mind to sort out exactly what feelings those eyes induced in her. His soft brown eyes seemed to want to help her, to take care of her. She shook her head in disgust at her weakness. Not since she lost her parents had anyone cared for her. She quickly shut out those memories, trying in vain to protect herself from the unwelcome pain. No one would ever care for her, especially not men. As long as she remembered that, she would be free.

With considerable effort she cleared her mind once more, and continued her march into the late afternoon. Her body trembled with exhaustion from the added weight of the backpack. She knew she should walk until dusk, but as usual, she lacked the strength to do what needed to be done. She despised her weakness. Sherab could not be sure who she hated more, herself or the rest of the world. She would welcome death like a lover when it came, for it would kiss away her misery.

She sat down heavily, choosing her resting place for the night. While she caught her breath, her eyes naturally gazed towards the majestic Himalayas. Ever since she left Lhasa several days ago, the mountains always seemed less than a day's walk away. Her objective lay halfway between her current position and the Himalayan foothills. The odds that they would let her get that far were terribly slim. Yet Sherab knew that she herself had no choice but to follow her destined path. She would fight as hard as she could to make it. But fate had already chosen the outcome, and Sherab had to wait to witness its fickle decision.

The early evening breeze blew colder, reminding her of how thin a robe she wore. She pushed away images of the man's abandoned bedroll, and searched through his backpack for some clothing. A warm flannel shirt promised to help her cope with the night's plummeting temperature. The shirt could not make her warm, but it would reduce the previous night's numbing cold. The man's scent permeated her senses as she wrapped herself into the large shirt.

The shirt hung down almost to her knees, and the sleeves flapped loosely over her hidden hands. The smell continued to assault her mind, almost making her throw the shirt away. Even his deceptive smell tried to trick her, she thought. She stomped her foot in rage, and began taking the shirt off. Sherab stopped herself with the shirt half off her right arm. Succumbing to the comforting smell was a sign of weakness. But not being able to deal with it, and throwing away the shirt's promised warmth was even weaker, and stupider. With an impatient tug she rewrapped the big shirt around her.

Sherab recognized her mounting anxiety and took a deep breath. Until she learned to control her anger, she knew she would remain in this most unpleasant realm. She wished she could consult with a monk to determine her place in the six Buddhist realms. Given the amount of suffering she continued to endure, she felt she had to be in either the hellish realm of the hungry ghost realm. The former sounded more appropriate for how she felt, given its emphasis on pain. The latter, characterized by constant deprivation of food and drink, was probably more accurate.

“Om Mani Padme Hum.” Her own voice startled her briefly, after the prolonged silence of solitude. With practiced ease she cleared her mind, and concentrated on reciting her favorite mantra. She rested her left hand on her lap, and laid her right hand on top of the left, with both thumbs touching. Her lips moved automatically and rhythmically to the sound of the mantra, while her mind explored its meaning. ‘Om’ symbolized the contrast between her own impure being and that of the exalted Buddha. ‘Mani’, or ‘jewel’, represented her intention to become enlightened, which would lead her to the higher realms. ‘Padme’, or ‘lotus’, symbolized the wisdom required to carry out her intentions. ‘Hum’ spoke of the indivisibility of wisdom and intent, both were required to reach towards nirvana.

Gradually the tension eased out of Sherab’s troubled mind. She welcomed the inner peace the mantra never failed to bring her. With a soft smile she settled down on the cold bare earth. Hugging the oversized shirt for warmth, she fell asleep dreaming of the higher realms.

Chapter 2

John never knew that one could dream when knocked unconscious. He dreamt of her eyes. In the darkness surrounding him, her eyes shone like twin beacons of light. She held him prisoner, and he could do nothing but follow the eyes through the darkness. He smiled when they were at peace, cowered when they were angry, and cried when they were sad. But he always followed, sometimes stumbling on unseen obstacles, but never stopping. They drew him towards her with the unrelenting force of a hurricane wind.

The early morning sun had nearly completed drying the dew off his clothes when he awoke. He tried to find some part of his body that did not ache, but failed. His face stung with what must have been a dreadful sunburn. He had begun his little adventure mid-morning on the previous day. That meant he had lain beneath the sun all afternoon, at a considerably high altitude. He had no doubt that his face would peel. The throbbing in his head seemed to take attention away from his feet, which felt like they were slowly roasting over hot coals. As he sat up to examine his feet, the increased pain in his head almost made him vomit. Determined not to lie back down, he sat there trying to figure out if he was going to die, throw up, or just remain in this hell of pain.

John's gaze turned absently to his feet. What must have been a dense criss-cross of small cuts managed to merge themselves together to form one large, raw wound on each foot. The underside of the feet thankfully did not seem as bad as the tops.

The skin was not only tougher, but the tops of the feet had been the ones whipping through the tall grass as he ran.

His hand gingerly touched the rock's point of impact on his temple. A blinding flash of pain rewarded his effort, along with some caked blood on his fingers. He would have to wash the wound soon, or risk infection. The local hospital would certainly sew in some stitches if he were home. Somehow clean, white hospital sheets sounded so comforting at the moment. John felt lucky that the thief looked half starved, otherwise he might never have woken up.

The hunger pains in his stomach finally got his attention after thinking of the half starved rock lady. He had to go back to his campsite to eat, if she had left him any food. Most of his supplies were gone with the backpack, but he did have some food laid out in a separate bag for yesterday's meals. Hopefully she had been nervous and rushed enough when she stole the backpack to overlook the food bag. His worries intensified when he remembered that she had not been rushed enough to overlook his boots.

Ignoring the pain in his head that increased with every movement, he took off his shirt. With the help of his teeth John tore it in half, and began to protectively wrap his feet. The pain was intense, and some of the deeper wounds re-opened, staining his shirt with fresh blood. How long he sat there after bandaging his feet, John could not tell. He knew that the thought of standing, much less walking, frightened and discouraged him.

With a grunt of pain he stood, somewhat wobbly at first. For a moment it was not clear if his legs would hold him or if they would drop him back down on his bottom.

“One step at a time,” he murmured to himself, as he began his old-man shuffle back down the path. Despite the discomfort he managed a smile when he thought of his assailant. She did not quite fit the image he had of the roving bands of Chinese thieves in these areas.

John wondered what his ex-wife would think of his situation at the moment. She had always resented the way he selfishly clung to his youth, while putting her in second place. He had vehemently denied her accusations back then. But over time, as women entered and left his life, he began to understand what she had meant those many years ago. She would probably laugh if she saw him now. Not out of malice, but more because of how predictable his lifestyle had become. Some of her resentment came from being left alone too often, but some of it came from watching him take unnecessary risks. Eighteen months later, she changed the locks on their door while he was gone on a canoe trip.

An hour went by as he slowly worked his way through the path. Yesterday’s chase could not have lasted more than thirty minutes. With his current walking speed, he did not know if he had another hour to his campsite or another day. Gradually his feet grew numb to the pain, and the throbbing in his head seemed to subside. John’s thoughts were empty, he simply followed the trail and tried to ignore his various aches and pain. He lost track of time, and enjoyed the unexpected surprise of stumbling into his campsite without warning. The joy did not last long.

She cleaned me out, he thought. The lean-to over his head, the bedroll under him, and a few cooking utensils were all she left behind. Even his spare shirt had vanished with the missing backpack. His water gourd, boots, knife, and food bag: all gone. His water supply would not run out because of the potable river water. Food would be a problem. He could head back to his guide, but that meant traveling away from the river. He might last three days without food, but not without water.

The thought of water awakened the latest lament of his body, his mouth felt full of sand it was so dry. John struggled with the idea of walking to the river for a drink and a bath, versus the bliss of curling up under the shade of his lean-to. His feet made the decision, as he collapsed to his knees and rolled himself under the lean-to. Sleep came to him without a struggle.

He did not know how long he had walked, or how long he slept. The stars shone on him when he awoke. Thirst had taken first place in his list of problems. He needed to go to the river urgently, but dared not try to get there in the dark. In his present state of mind he could so easily become disoriented and wander off in the wrong direction. He felt feverish, and for the first time began to fear for his life. Until now John had known he would find his way out of this predicament with some discomfort, and perhaps a bruised ego. But as he lay under the Tibetan night sky, shivering in the cold, sweating with a combination of shock and fever, he realized he might not get out alive. He drifted back into a fitful sleep, filled with dreams of angry, mocking eyes.

The pre-dawn gray sky brought no soothing warmth when John awoke the next morning. His arms and legs were stiff with cold

as he clumsily made his way out of the lean-to. The first order of business was to get to the river, there was no debate this time. The throbbing in his head had diminished to a dull, but persistent, headache. His feet still hurt tremendously, but he thought they screamed a little less loudly than the day before.

By the time he knelt on the shore, the sun had risen and his limbs had loosened up. John drank slowly, remembering that filling up such an empty stomach would probably cause violent retching. When he dunked his head into the cold river, feeling a sharp sting on his wounded temple, all thoughts of death left him. The coolness eased the pain of his burned face, and made him smile with contentment. Next came off the rags, to let the cool water work its magic on his abused feet. After the initial shock and sting subsided, the cold water indeed numbed his feet. After a moment he gently washed most of the blood off them, and observed the interesting roadwork of cuts. Fortunately most cuts were quite shallow, and closing up nicely.

The cold water did not allow John to completely immerse himself. He contented himself with lying back on the shore to let his feet dry. His refreshed mind began to analyze the situation, so that he could begin to find a way out of this mess. His day and a half without water convinced him that he had to stay near the river. Tibet was an isolated area, but if there were any settlements nearby, they would also logically be near the river.

He decided to head west along the Tsangpo, towards the distant mountains. From his dim recollection of a few Tibet maps, there were cities east of Lhasa along the river. Whether they were a day's march or a week's march away made no

difference to him. Heading west he knew there were cities, heading east he knew nothing. The west at least held some hope, no matter how small.

His mind made up, John started back to the campsite. He shoved the fork and spoon into his pocket, thinking he may have a use for them later. The bedroll he decided to bring to keep warm at night. He debated whether or not to carry the lean-to. It would be very awkward to carry without a backpack to attach it to, especially in his weakened state. However it would provide shelter from wind, sun, and rain. In the end he decided he would not be able to carry it very far before being forced to abandon it in exhaustion. The rest of the cooking gear he also left behind. Without food, the cooking gear had little value. Armed with his fork, spoon, and bedroll, John began his western journey along the southern shore of the Tsangpo river.

With frequent stops to rest, he managed to walk most of that day. As the sun began to set, hunger induced dizzy spells forced him to stop for the night. He removed the bandages from his feet and washed them again. Only the wounds along the creases of the feet remained opened. Each step he took prevented these from closing up. Despite the headache that continued to assault him, and despite the ever-increasing hunger pains, he curled up in his bedroll and was fast asleep.

The next morning found John in the worst condition yet. The hunger was incapacitating, he had been without food for almost seventy-two hours. The pounding in his head also increased its tempo, and seemed to inflate his head with each beat. He became certain that the pressure would explode his brain matter all over the shore at any moment. John put his hand to his temple, and gasped with shock when it felt wet and sticky. With

a sinking feeling, he thought he was bleeding again. With horror he looked at his hand and saw it covered with a yellow-green slime. No, he was not bleeding, but infection had set into his skull.

In a panic he crawled to the water and began washing his head. The cool water revived him somewhat and he managed to bandage his feet and get up once more. He did not march west, he stumbled and shuffled west. John lost all track of time, his mind was a numb blank as he made his way along the shore. When he collapsed for the final time, the sun still hung high in the sky. He could not be sure if he walked until late morning or early afternoon. He did not partake in his ritual of washing his feet. John just lay there, feverish and in pain, until he fell asleep moments later.

He woke up under a dark sky. John crawled to the water to quench his thirst, and almost passed out with his head in the water. He dragged himself away, feeling nauseous from the dizzying spins he experienced. He could not make it to his bedroll, just out of reach of his outstretched arm. He fell asleep, or passed out is probably more precise, lying on his stomach, with the water lapping at his feet and his hand less than a yard from the bedroll.

Life is suffering, Sherab thought. She had no problem remembering Buddha's first Noble Truth, for it applied very well to her experiences. But she often had trouble with the second Noble Truth, identifying the cause of suffering. The wonders of freedom had left her ever since the encounter with

the white man. She no longer enjoyed her walks through the open grasslands. During the day she often stopped to meditate, trying desperately to stifle the anxiety that grew within her.

On this second night, after reciting her mantra countless times, Sherab thought she knew the cause of her present suffering. In her anger, she had made the white man suffer. Contrary to all Buddha's teachings, she had harmed another. She could not even try to use self-defense as an argument. The man had not yet done anything to harm her, but she struck him down. In all likelihood, he would have harmed her. But without proof, the guilt rested on her shoulders. Now she would suffer until his suffering ended. It would take days for his wounds to heal. Plus, she had left him without food.

What if he died? Sherab's eyes snapped open in terror at the thought. How many more lifetimes of misery would she endure for killing this man who had chased her after she robbed him of his only food? She began to tremble then, fearing for him, and for herself. She had to go back and help him, or at least ensure his survival. But after having robbed and assaulted him, Sherab had a good idea of the kind of reception she would get from him.

She would have to use stealth then. She would retrace her steps, and then try to track him down without being detected. She had done it once before, but then the man had not been on his guard. No doubt he would now be distrustful of his environment, and watchful for any new intruders. Of course she could not replace the food she had eaten. But if she did get near him, she could leave his backpack somewhere that he was sure not to miss. And afterwards, leave as fast as she could in case he decided to track her down.

Fear took second place to the overwhelming peace of mind that came from knowing how to partially right the wrongs she had done. She settled down more comfortably in the man's shirt now, aware that she would have to return it along with the backpack. Sleep came to her easily, despite the chilly evening breeze that blew over her, and up under her robe.

The next day Sherab marched long and hard back towards the campsite. Already she felt the effects of decent nutrition and hard exercise. Her legs carried her further and with less protest every day. Her back still ached from the backpack's weight, but even that pain seemed to subside over time.

On the morning of the second day she had covered the distance that had taken her a full two days previously. She stumbled unexpectedly into the campsite, and immediately crouched down into the tall grass. She waited several minutes for any sign that the man might be about. The area remained deserted, she could sense the emptiness around her. Cautiously, she stood and made her way into the center of the campsite.

The man had left behind the heavy lean-to, but had brought his bedroll with him. The missing bedroll filled her with hope. The man could not be seriously injured if he had been able to come here to get his bedroll. She considered leaving now, and accepting this piece of evidence that he would survive. His lack of food prompted Sherab to go on. She would never know the outcome of her attack until she restored his belongings to him.

Sherab had the man's water gourd, which meant he was forced to stay close to the river. She walked to the water, and began examining the sandy shore. A jumbled set of prints seemed to

lead in all directions. She walked eastward for perhaps twenty yards, but could not find a visible trail leading in that direction. Traveling westward, Sherab continued to make out an occasional footprint, or disturbance in the sand. Although large stretches of shore lacked any signs of trespassing, the occasional clue led her to believe she was on the right path.

Her heart nearly stopped when she found him the next morning. The frigid water lapped at his bloodied, bandaged feet. His naked back took on a sickly white pallor, like the underside a dead fish out of water. The ugly gash on his head, the gash she had caused, oozed pus over the encrusted blood smears. His utter stillness projected an image of rotting corpses along a war torn beach.

Holding her breath in tormented awe, Sherab slowly walked around the fallen man. As she drew near his turned face, his closed eyes mesmerized her. She had closed his eyes, bloodied his feet, and traumatized his head. Her hands trembled as the broken body held her guilt-stricken gaze with unrelenting cries of outrage. Sherab slowly sank to her knees, wetting them on the shore's damp sand. She held a quivering finger near his mouth and nose, hoping to feel a faint breath. Nothing.

Her hands recoiled at the touch of his cold, rubbery flesh when she bent to turn him over. Gritting her teeth to fight off the revulsion, she pulled on his shoulder until she rolled him onto his back. A low groan escaped his lips, causing her a frightened intake of breath. She quickly put an ear to his chest, and heard his slow, but steady heartbeat. Suddenly she no longer faced a corpse, but rather a life to save.

Sherab stood behind his head, put her hands under his arms, and began to drag him away from the wet sand. She hastily stripped off his shirt from her body, sat him up awkwardly, and managed to dress him with the shirt. She then took off the wet rags from his feet. The wet, wrinkled skin underneath looked like it belonged to an old man. She dried his feet as best as she could with her robe, and then retrieved his socks and boots from the backpack. How absurd that she had kept his boots, she thought. Perhaps part of her knew she would have to come back. Sherab smiled, thinking that some inner part of her might know the path to enlightenment after all.

He really needed a warm fire, but she had no suitable fuel to burn. She briefly considered lending him her only robe, but realized that she could not last long in this temperature without any clothes. With great difficulty, she managed to get his uncooperative body into the bedroll. Fortunately it had enough space for her to crawl in as well. She lied on top of him, transferring as much of her body heat as she could. At first his cold body seemed like it would win the battle, but eventually her body produced enough heat to warm them both.

She studied his face carefully. He had handsome features, for a white man. The thought made her suddenly feel very uncomfortable lying on top of him. She forced her mind to concentrate, and observe him some more. His lips continued to have a bluish hue, despite the warmth seeping into him. Their flaking dryness alarmed her more than their color. She would have to make him drink to overcome his extreme dehydration.

She turned his head slightly and examined the wound more closely. The ugly gash had not closed itself yet. The cut would leave a permanent scar, and should have been stitched days ago.

The best she could do for his head is keep the wound clean, and apply a soothing poultice to prevent further infection.

Sherab pressed the palm of her hand on the man's forehead. In contrast to his cold limbs, his head felt too hot. He would have to fight off the fever by himself, for she could do nothing but keep him warm. She let her head rest on his chest, and remained in this lover's embrace until his body heat returned to normal.

Sherab reluctantly climbed out of the warm bedroll to attend his wound. She took the rags that had wrapped his feet, and washed them in the river. His eyes remained shut when she gingerly cleaned the wound, but they flinched in unconscious pain. An anguished moan escaped his lips as she insistently cleaned the entire length of the gash with the rags. Fresh blood began to seep out of the open wound. She gathered a few large leaves from the nearby vegetation, and applied them to the wound. She wrapped his head loosely with the wet rag, to keep the makeshift poultice in place.

Finally, she had to get him to drink. She brought him into a sitting position, and had him lean back on her. She poured some water on his face, letting it run over his dry lips. He opened his mouth, letting some of the cool water splash onto his tongue. She brought the gourd to his lips, and tilted it just enough to let a small amount of water trickle out. At first he managed a few small swallows, but she soon had him coughing and sputtering with too much water in his mouth. She started over, more slowly this time, until he drank a few mouthfuls of precious water.

The fields around her held plenty of edible grains. Sherab decided to prepare a soupy gruel that the man might be able to

swallow. She crushed barley grains inside his metal cooking pot, and added small amounts of river water. Sitting him up again, she tried feeding him a small spoonful of the gruel. He began to gag and cough when she pushed the food in towards his throat. She quickly poured some water into his mouth. This caused him more choking, but at least it cleared away the food particles from his irritated throat. It was no use, she could not feed him until he regained consciousness.

She spent the rest of the day alternating between making him drink, warming his bed, and preparing grains for herself. She had decided to stop eating his dwindling food supply, and to begin surviving off the land. Before nightfall, she cleaned his wound and changed the poultice. With some apprehension, she slid into his bedroll to sleep for the night.

Chapter 3

John didn't know how many days he lay on that shore, thrashing with fever and chills. His days and nights were filled with dreams of the thief with the haunting eyes. The eyes were never angry. They often hovered near his face, seeming to soothe him just with their gaze. He dreamt that he ate a feast, again with the eyes just out of his reach. The eyes whispered to him, but he could not understand what they were telling him.

The first thing he noticed when he regained consciousness was that the throbbing in his head has lessened once again. John felt a slight pressure around his head. When he reached up with his hand, he found some sort of cloth had been wrapped around his head. Then he noticed that his hand was sticking out of a sleeve, he was wearing his spare shirt! He quickly tried to sit, but only managed to prop himself up on his elbows. He could not see her, but she had obviously returned. Nearby a small pot, one of his camping pots, he noticed, held some kind of liquid. It reminded him of chicken soup, and he hungrily reached for it. He was half way to sitting up before the dizziness overcame him, and he lay back down abruptly. John slipped into an unconscious sleep once more.

Nighttime. He looked side to side, but did not try to get up. He saw only shadows, no movement. He felt starved. Somehow she had kept him alive, he thought. Hell, more than kept alive, she was nursing him back to health. "But why?" he wondered. If she thought John was a rich foreigner, perhaps her and her band of thieves were planning to get a ransom for him. These disturbing thoughts could not prevent him from drifting off to sleep again.

The sun shone brightly in his eyes when he awoke the next morning. Perhaps it was the sun that woke him, or perhaps it was the small metallic clinking noise he heard. John turned his head towards the sound and saw her for the first time since she had knocked him out with a rock. Alarmingly, she once again had a rock in her hand. But this time she used it to grind some kind of grain inside the cooking pot. Still unaware of being watched, she added more grains and continued her rotating, grinding motion with the rock.

He took advantage of his undetected awakening to study her further. He felt foolish for thinking she wanted him for ransom. She barely looked like she could keep herself alive, much less hang out with a gang of thieves and kidnap foreigners. Thankfully her eyes were lowered towards her work in progress, otherwise he might get lost in them once more and fail to see the rest of her.

Her head was not bald as he previously thought, in fact there was a short crop of dark hair growing. The scalp also seemed dark, as if she had been bald until recently. Above her left ear, a patch of ugly white scar tissue prevented hair from growing. Perhaps she had suffered a serious accident which caused a head injury, he hoped. At the moment, he preferred not to think of the way she cowered at his feet when he had stood over her an eternity ago.

As she bent over the pot, John guiltily looked down the top of her robe. She had removed his old shirt from his feet, and managed to cover herself with some form of undershirt. He concluded this was for warmth, and not modesty. Still, with a trickle of sweat running down the length of her neck, and into

his old shirt, he could not help thinking about her as a woman. Fortunately he was weak enough that there was no visible physical response to his lecherous mind.

Her bony arms continued to pound the grain with a force that seemed unnatural for such thin muscles. He could see her small calf muscles working as well as she squatted in front of the cooking pot. She held the rock with both hands, although her small finger on her right hand stuck out at an odd angle, hooked like a talon. If her other fingers had been similarly malformed he might have guessed that she suffered from some form of arthritis. But the broken finger formed one more piece of the ugly puzzle that was her life.

“Good morning,” John croaked from his dry voice box.

She let out a startled gasp, dropped the rock, and spilled her pot of grains. She fell back from her squatting position into a clumsy sitting position with legs spread out. He caught a glimpse of where he should not have, before she recovered, got on her knees and quickly picked up her rock. This time the rock’s target was not the pot of grains, she was threatening John once again.

“Please, no!” he said as his outstretched arms prepared to fend off any missiles she might throw his way. It only took her a moment to calm down and see how weak he was. She waved her hand at him and spoke in a rapid singsong oriental voice. John had no idea what she said, or even in which language she spoke. In typical western arrogance he had entered this country without understanding a word of its language.

“I don’t understand,” he said, shrugging his shoulders in what he hoped was an international gesture of ignorance. She ignored him then and began picking up what crushed grain she could salvage.

This woman had saved his life. Even though she originally caused his problems, he still felt indebted that she returned to care for him.

“Thank you,” he said. She looked up at the sound of his voice, to see him pat his heart and extend his hand to her. He felt a little foolish, in some ways it looked like he was saying “I love you”. John hoped she understood that he felt gratitude and that he knew that he was alive only because of her. She studied him without expression for a moment, before returning to her grains. But not before he caught a small light in her eyes.

When she had ground a sufficient amount of grain, she added river water to the pot. This time she used her fingers to stir it up into a coarse dough-like substance. She approached him with the pot, offering an evening meal.

“Tsampa” she said, with a small smile on her lips. Her head bobbed side to side, with the body language that suggested what she had was only an approximation of tsampa. He happily understood her, for tsampa was a staple food of the Tibetan people. It was a kind of dough made with roasted barley flour mixed with tea and yak butter. He was not familiar enough with grains to know if she had crushed barley or not, but the river water in place of tea, and the absence of butter, made this dish a far cry from tsampa. John could not believe it, she had gone from thievery, to assault, and now she cracked a joke! He could

not help but smile, because of the humor and because they had achieved some form of communication.

“Tsampa!” he replied, nodding his head and smiling. Rather than accepting the pot, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the spoon he had rescued from the campsite. After dropping it into the pot, John gently pushed the pot back to her. Her eyes struck him then. She not so much stared at him, but stared into him. At first he did not know if he had violated some custom by giving her a chance to eat before him. After a moment she lowered her eyes, perhaps conscious of how naked he felt under her gaze.

“Thu-chi che” she said softly. John did not need to understand Tibetan to understand her meaning, the tone said thank you. She briefly studied the spoon before awkwardly scooping up some pseudo-tsampa and eating it. She ate perhaps one quarter of the mixture before passing him the pot. Ignoring his ravenous hunger, John carefully ate the same amount before passing it back to her. This time she was the one to refuse the pot and gently push it back to him. He gave in to his hunger and nearly finished the entire pot before lamely trying to offer her the last few spoonfuls. She declined with a firm shake of her head. Only a strong act of will stopped him from licking every last grain out of the pot.

John lied back down, and patted his stomach with a satisfied look for this morning’s cook. It seemed pointless for her to know how unsatisfied he was, John felt he could have eaten ten more pots of those grains. She must have sensed his hunger, because she prepared an early lunch, and took the time to prepare much more grain than the breakfast had.

After lunch, she brought John his backpack, and with downcast eyes she knelt before him. He tried to understand what she meant by this gesture. Did she regret having stolen from him? Had she decided that she needed him to survive and therefore restored his goods? The latter seemed hard to believe, by now she knew his lack of survival skills in her country. Perhaps she wasn't a thief after all, but simply a hungry, desperate woman.

"It's OK," he told her, "I forgive you." Again he had to rely on the tone of voice and body language to convey what he meant. As he uttered the words, John gently placed his hands on both her shoulders, trying to comfort her. He touched her without thinking of the consequences of the last time he had touched her like this. No stone came ripping at his temple this time. Instead she looked up at him with disappointment and sadness in her eyes. As the tears began to flow she lay down on the grass before him, hiked up her robe and spread her quivering legs invitingly.

Seeing her spread-eagled in front of him stunned John for several seconds before he understood what she was thinking. God, did she think I was such an ass, he thought? Did she think he expected sex as a payment for forgiving her thievery?

"No!" he shouted, perhaps too harshly. A frightened, wary look came into her eyes as she closed her legs and backed away a little bit. "No need for that," he said more softly this time, trying to relax the tenseness in his facial expression. He walked up to her, knelt, and pulled her robe back over her legs. He needed to make her understand that touch did not mean sex. He held her shoulders once more, with his hands moving slightly up and down her arms as he simply gazed into her eyes. Unable to help himself, John knelt closer to her and brought her into a

hug. Great racking sobs engulfed her then, she lay like a child in his arms, soaking his shirt with her tears.

This seemed to go on for perhaps twenty minutes before she cried herself out. At one point John had to shift his weight, his legs were cramping from being in a kneeling position. Eventually he sat, and she leaned against him to cry.

When she recovered she slowly backed away, never lifting her eyes to meet his. John felt so frustrated at their inability to communicate. Who was she? Where was she headed? What had happened to her to get her into this poor physical and emotional state? He had so many questions to ask this strange, beautiful woman. He was startled to realize he now thought of her as a beautiful woman. Her current physical appearance was anything but beautiful. John thought her eyes helped him see her as she was before her body had been wasted away.

During the afternoon he felt well enough to get up and walk a little. When she left to gather their evening grain, John followed her and tried to assist. She gave him that penetrating look again when she realized he came to help. He began to wonder if help was an unaccustomed event in her life. She showed him how to strip the grain from the stalk. Before long he got the hang of it, but at about half speed of what she gathered. He also needed to take a few breaks, his bout with fever and infection had left him severely weakened. After perhaps thirty minutes of gathering, she uttered a few words in her language and headed back to their campsite. John assumed she meant they had gathered enough for supper. Along the way she stopped to pick up a few more plants. He had not seen her prepare these before, and thought they might enjoy a bit more flavor in tonight's menu.

While she prepared the supper grains John took out some of the dry salted meat he carried in his backpack. She gratefully accepted some and put down her grinding stone. They chewed in silence for a while, occasionally stealing a glance at each other. He wondered if she felt the same frustration at not being able to speak to him. She resumed her grinding, and soon served up another pot of grain mixture.

After supper she came to him and gently removed the bandage around his head. He reached up with his hand and found it had at least stopped leaking pus. She gathered the plants he had presumed were herbs for their dinner, and prepared a kind of poultice, which she then applied to his head. John let her work on him as she saw fit, she had the confidence of someone with experience in treating wounds. She carefully wrapped his head once again, tucking the ends in on the uninjured side of his head.

“My name is John Pearson,” he told her. She studied his face, trying to grasp his meaning. He felt like he was in an old Tarzan movie, “Me Tarzan, you Jane”.

He patted his chest with both hands, “John Pearson” he repeated.

Her eyes lit up, she understood. “Ja Peywsan” she repeated.

He smiled, and discarded the last name. “John” he repeated slowly, patting his chest again. This time she managed to pronounce it reasonably well. He then moved his hands to her, palms held upwards.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Sherab Choezom,” she said, patting her chest. “Sherab”, she repeated.

That was pretty easy. “Sherab,” he repeated. They now knew each other on a first name basis, he thought with a smile. Two weeks ago he could never have imagined spending an evening with someone called Sherab.

The setting sun brought on the cool night air. John felt a sudden discomfort as he began to wonder what the sleeping arrangements were. The falling temperature was too harsh for him to sleep without his bedroll, yet how could he let this thin robed figure sleep without covers? Surprisingly, she took charge of the situation by getting the bedroll herself. He watched her quizzically, wondering what social graces demanded in this situation. She spread the bedroll near his side and motioned him to lie down. Now he was the one that felt like a child. He meekly went over and lay down as she indicated. Without hesitation she curled up against his back and threw the rest of the bedroll over them.

John’s entire body stiffened with shock and embarrassment. How could she sleep with him so easily? She felt his rigid body, and tentatively brought her hand on his shoulder, mimicking the times he had touched her. After a moment he began to relax. John supposed that living in harsh conditions had led her to sleep with others quite frequently. The need for mutual warmth against the cold nights quickly did away with the social implications of sleeping together. His first active day since the fever struck had exhausted him. He soon fell into a deep and untroubled sleep.

They repeated this restful pattern another day as his strength returned. On the following day he decided to begin the trek back to his guide. John and Mr. Yu had agreed to meet ten to twelve days after separating. Assuming that he had been unconscious with fever for about two days, then John had left the guide thirteen days ago now. How long would the guide wait for him? Since Yu risked punishment for letting John go alone, John thought the guide would patiently wait for him, and perhaps start walking in the direction he had left.

Other than getting him back home, the guide also offered John the chance to help his new friend. Yu represented the closest thing to the authorities that John had encountered. If Yu could not help Sherab, at least he would know where to bring her for help. At a minimum, they must speak the same language, so Yu and John both could put their minds to helping her out. That she needed help, John had no doubt. Someone had mistreated her, and that someone was going to pay.

With the return of his backpack, John and Sherab now had the resources to travel inland. The easiest way to explain to her that it was time to leave was to simply start packing up. It did not take her long to catch on, and she helped John pack up the few remaining items, and attach the bedroll to the backpack.

The unaccustomed load on his back left John momentarily dizzy, this would be a short hiking day. He headed inland towards his guide's location. It was shorter to go directly to the guide rather than picking up his lean-to at the old campsite. For the few remaining days he had left in this primitive wilderness, John could do without the lean-to. His desire to be in a warm, soft bed brought urgency to his plans.

After a few steps he looked back to ensure that Sherab remained in step with him. He saw a very anxious woman looking at him, she had not moved from the campsite. John had feared Sherab might not know if she should follow. Rather than trying to explain it to her, he deliberately started walking away.

“Come,” he said, beckoning her with his hands, “John will help”.

A visible relief swept over her face as she quickly jogged up to him. The poor thing had no way of knowing how he would react now that he was healed. It really was all her fault, he thought with a smile. She had stolen from him, and then struck him with the rock. But he saw the tenderness in her when she nursed him back to health. He knew she had robbed him out of desperation, not from a lack of morals.

John smiled at her, and continued to walk. A firm hand on his shoulder stopped him. Sherab shook her head when he turned around, and pointed to the Himalayas. His confused stare made her take his arm and start walking towards the mountains. If he had any doubts before, they all but disappeared when she forcibly dragged him. He could not understand why she wanted to go to the mountains, but this Canadian had endured quite enough camping.

“No!” John exclaimed, planting his feet in the ground. She stumbled after his sleeve slipped out of her grasp. She began to speak excitedly to him in her language, all the while pointing to the forbidding mountain range. John had no desire to climb Mount Everest before he came to this country, and he certainly had no interest now.

“No!” John repeated emphatically, and took a few steps backwards. He stopped shaking his head when he felt a headache returning. Even as she kept jabbering at him in her foreign tongue, John turned around and resolutely marched in the direction of his guide. The pitch of her voice briefly rose before she gave up. The rustling of the grass underneath his boots only deepened the silence of her abruptly cut off voice.

John stopped again a moment later. The need for her to come with him over-powered his senses. Sometimes there are feelings he could not explain or ignore. This woman had to come with him to Mr. Yu. He turned again and watched her agonized confusion. She wanted the mountains, but she also wanted the safety of traveling in twos.

He gave her his most confident look and told her: “Come with me, I will help you.” One hand lay over his heart and the other hand waved her towards him. She seemed to weigh her alternatives carefully before hesitantly coming towards him.

Sherab seemed emotionally exhausted as she drew up next to him. John put his hand on her shoulder once more, leaned down and put his face just inches away for hers.

“It’s OK,” he said to her, almost in a confidential whisper, “John will help you”.

She nodded briefly, understanding that he meant well. With a last lingering look at the mountains, she headed off in the direction towards the guide.

John calculated that they had a healthy two and a half day march to the guide’s location, given that they were bypassing

the original campsite. Add to that another half to full day for the fact they were anything but healthy. On the other hand, with some luck Yu was already heading their way.

They traveled most of that day, with plenty of rests. That night John had Sherab lie down on the bedroll first, and took the pleasure of holding her from behind as he went to sleep. It had been a long time since he had held a woman like this. They still had a platonic relationship, but they lay there with the comfort that only years of marriage can usually bring. He smiled contently as he felt Sherab back up and press herself into him. For the first time she fell asleep before him. John felt warmth inside him as she slept soundly in his arms. If he could, John would have stayed awake a long time to enjoy the feeling. But by next morning, the short-lived moment seemed more like a dream.