



TIGER AND CLOUD

BY

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A HIMALAYAN FICTION

CHAPTERS:

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- ASSAULT
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MAIN CHARACTERS :

Choeki Tupten	Daughter of a noble Tibetan family
Dechen Gyaltsen	Head Nurse, hospital
Dorji Dukpa	Commander of joint forces RBG and RBA
Franz Mahler	Swiss project manager
Jahangir Babur	Captain, Indian convoy
Major Fernandez	Commander Indian Border Road Task Force
Martha Lautinger	Paul Lautinger's wife
Mirendra Kendup	Nepalese wife of Sonam Kendup
Mustapha Ali Khan	Airship commander, Pakistan army
Namgyal Tinley	Dasho Dzungda, governor Bumthang district
Norbu Genzin Rimpoche	Venerable Lama of the Nyingma school
Padre Fulvio	Jesuit priest
Paul Lautinger	Swiss medical officer, Bumthang district
Phuntso	Haed man agricultural project
Sonam Kendup	Police officer, Bumthang district
Tsering Choedrak	Commander 22 nd regiment of paratroopers
Ugen Tinley	Dasho Dzungda's wife

GLOSSARY:

AFI	Armed Forces of India
Bagdogra	Large city in Assam/India
Bakhoo	Traditional Bhutanese men's wear
Bhutan	Asian kingdom situated between India and Tibet
Bumthang	District capital in central Bhutan
Chang	Beer made from wheat or rice
Choerten	Buddhist religious monument
Chowkidhar	Housekeeper (Nepali language)
Chu	River
Dalai-Lama	Head of the Gelugpa school of Buddhism

Dorji	1 st meaning: Thunderbolt, ceremonial staff, symbol of wisdom
Dorji	2 nd meaning: Common name in Bhutan and Tibet
Druk Airlines	Bhutanese National Airlines
Druk Gyalpo	King of Bhutan
Druk Yul	Land of the Dragon = Bhutan
Dzong	Government and monastic fortress
Dzongka	Official national language of Bhutan
Guru Rimpoche	The second Buddha of our era (Tibetan name)
I Ching	‘Book of Changes’: Taoist scripture by Fu-Tsi
Kalimpong	Town in West Bengal/India
Karmapa	Head of the Karma-Kagyupa school of Buddhism
Karsumpe	Village in the Bumthang area
Katta	White ceremonial scarf
Kira	Traditional Bhutanese women’s wear
Kurje	Holy place in Bumthang where Guru Rimpoche lived
Là	Mountain pass
Lagkhang	Buddhist monastery
Lama	Buddhist Monk
Lord Jamba	See Meitreyia
Mahayana	Great Vehicle of Tibetan Buddhism
Maitreya	Buddha of the Future
Padmashambava	Same as Guru Rimpoche (Sanskrit name)
Paro	National airport in the western part of Bhutan
RGB	Royal Body Guards
Rimpoche	High ranking Buddhist monk
Siliguri	Town and Airport in West Bengal/India
Stupa	Buddhist religious monument (Sanskrit, ‘choerten’ in Tibetan)
Suja	Tibetan, salted butter tea
Tang valley	Valley in central Bhutan (north of Bumthang)
Termas	‘Treasures’ (scriptures or icons) hidden by Guru Rimpoche
Thanka	Buddhist, religious painting on a cotton sheet
Thimpu	Capital of Bhutan
Tiger unit	Special task force of the Royal Body Guards
Tongsa	District capital in central Bhutan
Tsampa	Roasted wheat flower
Tumba	Millet beer
Ugenchoelling	Village in the Tang valley
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
Vajrayana	Tantric school of Tibetan school of Buddhism
Wangdichoeling	Village in the Bumthang area
Wangdiphodrang	Town in western Bhutan
Yak	Bovid living at high altitudes in the Himalaya
Zampa	Tibetan staple food
Zau	Puffed, sweet rice

RISE

“What’s wrong?” alarmed by the stricken expression on the face of his wife, Doctor Lautinger called from the courtyard of the Wangdichoelling hospital.

“Come up quickly, we’ve got a letter!” Martha urged. He leaped up the stair to his house and hurriedly kissed his wife as he entered. She held out a thick letter pointing with the other hand at a brown parcel laying half open on the kitchen table.

“It’s from your brother Ernst,” she said.

“Anybody sick at home?” he asked out of breath.

“Worse!” she replied tersely.

As he read the letter blood drained from his face:

‘My dear Martha and Paul,

This is probably the unhappiest letter I will ever write in my whole life. Let me just tell you at the beginning that it is not about health or death in our family that I am writing. No, unfortunately it is about something far more dreadful. Let me come to the point right away:

As you know I am doing research at the Federal Polytechnic High School here in Zurich. My group is involved in secret, biomedical research ordered by our Swiss Government itself. Nothing is supposed to filter from here and by writing to you about my work I face prison as it was made clear to my entire group. And yet, I feel compelled to tell you about it because your life will depend on your knowing what is happening right under the collective nose of this world.

You have heard about BANG, the "Biologically Altered Natural Gas", the new substance supposed to replace petroleum. This easily synthesized stuff looks innocuous enough. No greenhouse gases and no toxic residues are expected when it is burned. During the first five years of its widespread use, it was handled rather carelessly since no untoward influences on human health were reported. In the process, a lot of BANG escaped into the atmosphere from the production-sites.

Two years ago, it was noted that no more birds flew near the BANG production sites. Soon thereafter, small domestic animals in these areas got sick and eventually died. The usual diagnosis was ‘small airways disease’. Little attention was paid to the phenomenon as it only involved animals. This attitude changed when the factory-workers in the BANG-plants started to cough and to complain about breathlessness and liver pain. In towns where BANG-plants were located, the medical community noticed rapidly that all their intensive-care beds were full with young workers needing artificial ventilation for an acute respiratory distress syndrome, called ARDS as you know Paul. In the U.S.A., the Center for Disease Control at Atlanta was brought in. They rapidly identified BANG as being the causative agent responsible for a slow intoxication resulting in a fibrosis of the lungs. Moreover, BANG brings about a fatty infiltration of the liver resulting eventually in cirrhosis. As you can see, these are two good reasons for people to be sick and to die. Of course, adequate steps were taken to protect the workers and to make the handling of BANG safer. It was presumed that the small amounts of BANG still escaping into the atmosphere would not be a hazard to public health. Sure enough, disease-rates among workers and domestic animals

decreased dramatically. Those afflicted by end-stage disease died, their families were paid off and since no new casualties occurred, the whole mess was soon forgotten. That's the official version on BANG as the BANG-lobby and the governments of industrialized countries tell it. But there is more to it and that's why the Federal Council itself set up my group. We directly and exclusively report to the Federal Counselor in charge of Health and Interior. A most unusual procedure for our country as you will agree.

A few months ago, news from a Swiss village near a BANG-plant alerted our authorities. The same disease recurred among the population of that area despite strict adherence to the new regulations. The production was immediately stopped and the whole thing was hushed up (we Swiss are good at it). A chemical warfare-team from our army was rushed in. They could not detect any leaks on the production lines. They discovered however a surprisingly high concentration of BANG in the air around the factory and in the nearby village. The concentration was highest at ground level a fact they thought was due to BANG's higher specific weight than air. Speculating that some BANG was trapped in the soil and gradually released into the air, they dug out a few samples of earth from the factory compound and from the surrounding fields to have them analyzed. That's when help from our laboratory was asked for. It looked like a routine job in the beginning, but soon, it turned into a nightmare. First, we discovered that all samples had the same content of BANG, irrespective of their distance from the factory. We then found out, much to our dismay that the concentration of BANG was much higher in all soil-samples than in even the most polluted air-samples taken from the factory itself.

Only two explanations could be given for this disturbing discovery: the first hypothesis stated that BANG was trapped by some compound of the soil, much like oxygen is trapped in our blood by the molecules of hemoglobin. The second hypothesis held that BANG is produced 'in loco', that is in the soil itself. This outrageous idea unfortunately proved to be correct: When we examined the sample for the second time, the concentration of BANG had doubled. The day thereafter, it doubled again reaching dangerous levels and forcing us to work under strict conditions of confinement. The process leveled off at a tenfold concentration of BANG as compared to the values of the first measurement. By high-speed centrifugation, we separated the different constituents of the soil-sample to determine what fraction produces BANG. That's how we got the full picture of the catastrophe blowing up in our faces: the BANG-producing particles were bacteria's, called Escherichia Coli. Our cell biologists, with the help of a nucleic acid amplifying method, i.e. the DNA-polymerase chain-reaction, found out that BANG induces a spontaneous genetic engineering process in Escherichia Coli. Much like we have these E. Coli produce Insulin, BANG is able to trigger a signal in their genetic code bringing about its self-replication.

By now, you will have guessed the terrible truth: this is a self-catalyzing process to which we see no end. Indeed, Escherichia Coli bacteria's are distributed worldwide, especially in areas with dense human and animal population. We carry billions of those germs in our bowels. Even the best maintained drinking-water supplies here in Switzerland contain a feeble amount of these bugs. We sooner or later will all be contaminated. There is no way to

contain the spread of BANG by now. You cannot eradicate E. Coli from this planet without killing all other life forms as well. And this is also the reason why our research is top-secret and will never be released to the public.

There is a second reason for secrecy. A most compelling one, I must say, but it brings a glimmer of hope: The amount of E. Coli bacteria decreases as you move up to higher regions. We exposed soil-samples taken from increasing altitudes of our Alps to BANG and maintained them under atmospheric pressure and light-conditions corresponding to the altitudes the samples were taken from. It turned out that the samples from above 2000 meters produce only trace amounts of BANG. Contaminated soil-samples cultured under conditions prevailing at 1500 meters failed to produce significant quantities of BANG. So far, we explain these observations by specific temperature-pressure conditions necessary for E. Coli to produce BANG, and by the fact that ultraviolet light, more intensive at these altitudes, breaks up the molecules of BANG.

The bottom line is that air-breathing life forms will only survive above 1500 to 1700 meters in the near future! No need to draw a picture of the chaos that will result if this information gets out to the world. But it sooner or later will, how could it be otherwise?

I therefore urge you to stay in Bumthang where you will be perfectly safe since you live at 2800 meters as you told us. Be ready to face a long and difficult wait up there! We haven't figured out yet, whether this process will come to an end spontaneously or if it will go on forever. In the parcel, you will find a battery-operated detector for BANG. One day, you might find it useful to determine what areas of Bhutan are still safe for men and animals. In a few weeks, I will load my family into our new jeep and head for a little house high up in the Alps. Forgive me for being so egoistic. But I see no point in telling a doomed world about its imminent downfall. All around the globe, only a few people will escape to habitable strongholds in their mountains. If the BANG-plague ever abates, we may be able to repopulate this planet. That will also be the time when we might meet again... If God lends us life until then.

*What else can I say? I miss you and I also love you very much.
Yours Ernst.'*

With tears in his eyes, Paul looked at Martha sitting silently on the bench next to him. His shaking hands reached around her shoulders drawing her close to him.

"My God, what will become of us?" he whispered.

"Homeless..." Martha answered.

"We could still go back to Switzerland and join Ernst," Paul objected.

"I don't think this is very realistic," Martha replied. "They didn't count us in. Moreover, we can't simply run away from things here."

"You're probably right," he admitted. "We wouldn't be of great use back home, whereas right here, we can still help people... If they let us stay, that is!"

He saw fright in the eyes of Martha. "You don't mean it," she said. "They wouldn't throw us out, would they?"

"Hard to guess people's reaction under such extreme conditions," Paul replied. "Some might panic and see all foreign presence as a threat to their own safety. Don't forget that this whole mess comes from countries like ours."

“We have to prevent it!” Martha stated getting up from the bench and pointing a finger at Paul. “We have to avoid such a thing, we owe it to our children, Paul!”

“Sure, sure,” he said lamely still shocked by the letter.

“Come on, Paul! We can’t resign, we have to fight!” Martha nearly shouted.

Paul looked at her flushed face and her resolute stance with both fists pressed to her hips. It shook his lethargy and slightly ashamed, he asked in a low voice: “How do you think we should go about it?”

“I don’t know, but we have to get organized,” she replied. “Maybe we should talk it over with the other Swiss here.”

“Hm, I suppose we should,” Paul mused. “All right, I will take the letter to Franz Mahler. As the project-manager, he has to know.”

Hurriedly he left the house and strode down to the river, across the hanging-bridge and up the hill on the other side of the valley. He reached the house of the project-manager just in time to prevent Franz Mahler from taking his usual siesta.

“Hello Paul!” Franz called out with a surprised smile on his face. “What brings you here at this time, completely out of breath?”

“Franz, I bring bad news, I’m afraid,” Paul Lautinger panted. “I want to talk to you in private.”

“I have never seen you like this,” Franz said. “Come, let’s go to my office!”

As they sat down in the small room with its windows overlooking the wide, peaceful Bumthang valley, Paul couldn’t suppress a sigh at the absurdity of what he just had learned.

“Franz, I got a letter from my brother Ernst today,” he addressed the project-manager. “I want you to read it. We will talk after that.”

Glad to share the burden, he handed the letter to Franz Mahler. Leaden silence spread in the room as the project-manager read page after devastating page. Mahler’s face was white when he finished the last sentence. Paul remained silent respecting the other man’s inner turmoil.

“Paul, this is doomsday!” Franz stammered as his whole body started to shake. Paul looked at Mahler wonderingly. He had never realized until now how frail Franz looked with his sunken cheeks under the grayish eyes, the thin, sharp nose protruding over small lips. The narrow shoulders had slumped forwards slightly as his hands moved aimlessly over the table disturbing the sheets of his brother’s letter.

In a low, even voice Paul said: “Look Franz, I can understand your reaction. It sure looks like just about everybody on Earth is going to die in this...”

“Deluge!” Franz moaned.

“Damn it!” Paul snapped. “You are making things worse with your fucking, Christian interpretations!” Seeing the shock on Mahler’s face at his words, he continued more mildly:

“All right, I didn’t mean to hurt you. My own reaction to the news was pretty the same. Martha had to shake me out of it and that’s what I’m trying to do just now. Forgive me, but we have to be practical about the whole bloody mess. Right?”

Slowly Franz looked up and whispered: “Yes, you’re right, Paul. We shouldn’t be carried away.” Taking a deep breath, he steadied his voice: “Have you come up with any ideas so far?”

“Martha and I were wondering mainly about two things,” Paul replied. “What do the other Swiss want to do, stay or return home? And then we worried about the reaction of the Bhutanese. Will they allow us to stay on?”

“Some Swiss will want to go home,” Franz thought aloud. “I don’t really care. It’s their choice. As to those who want to stay... I will... Well, we’ll cross that bridge, when we reach it! But yes, some Bhutanese will want to kick us out. Let’s just hope that the prevailing opinion about us is positive.”

“We better make sure about it”, Paul insisted.

“How?” Mahler asked.

“We would gain a lot of sympathy with the authorities if we tell them about what we know,” Paul explained. “It would give them a lot of face being informed and able to take the right steps well in time. We’ll have to make it plain that our technical know-how might be useful to them in the near future.”

“Indeed,” Franz agreed, “we should immediately go and see the District Governor. I heard that Dasho Dzungda is in his office at the Jakar Dzong today. Let’s see whether our new telephone still works.”

It took a few minutes before the cheerful voice of Namgyal Tinley, the Bumthang Dzongda, could be heard over the line: “Hello Mister Mahler, I didn’t know you telephone during siesta-time. You’re not speaking in your sleep, are you?”

“Excuse me Dasho!” Franz Mahler replied tersely. “A matter of the greatest consequences has come up and I have to speak with you urgently.”

The sound of Mahler’s voice stopped the Dzongda’s teasing mood: “What’s so serious, dear Mister Mahler?”

“Dasho, I would rather not talk it over on the phone,” the project-manager replied. “I request an urgent audience with you and I would like to bring Doctor Lautinger along.”

“Ok, why don’t you come to my office right away?” Dasho Namgyal Tinley agreed.

“Thank you Dasho, we’ll be there in ten minutes,” Franz said and hung up. “Come on, Paul, let’s go!”

Gathering the sheets of his brother’s letter from the table, Lautinger followed the project-manager to his jeep.

* * *

They could be a troublesome lot, these Swiss, Namgyal Tinley thought as he put the receiver down. During his three years of posting as Dzongda to the Bumthang district, he had gone through a few clashes with the younger members of the Swiss team. Never though with Franz Mahler. The project-manager had been around too long to rush things. All the more surprising that he had so urgently requested a meeting with him. It made him feel uneasy. Could there be a link to the upsetting messages that he had received from the capital and from the governors of the southern districts? It looked like his job was getting more interesting than what he had thought in the beginning of his posting. To be sent as Dzongda to the Bumthang district, to the middle of nowhere, had felt like a punishment. After all, he had undergone extensive army training in India and he even held a master-degree in economics from the University of San Francisco. He had hoped for a high-echelon government job with the central administration in Thimpu giving him the possibility to enjoy the easy life of the capital. But the King himself had made it clear to him on his final briefing: Bumthang was to become a pilot-district under the newly decentralized government policy. A well educated, tough man was needed there to push the projects through and to hold the Swiss experts in line. The red scarf, a sign of high esteem by the King, had been awarded to him on his departure from the capital. His calm, yet firm manners and his sturdy stature had quickly brought him the respect of the villagers. A natural authority emanated from his strong willed face. The high-set cheekbones underlined his dark, slit eyes giving away his eastern Bhutanese origin. Turning away from the telephone, he met the questioning look of his young wife Ugen.

“Mahler and Doctor Lautinger want to see me,” he told her.

“Right away?” Ugen Tinley asked. “We’re supposed to go and see Norbu Genzin Rimpoche at the Kurje Monastery.”

“I know, ” he replied with a smile. “The Rimpoche will have to wait a little. Mahler sounded very upset and wanted the meeting right away.”

“What’s he so upset about?” she inquired.

“He didn’t want to speak on the phone,” Namgyal Tinley said.

“Can I stay with you, when they come?” Ugen pleaded.

“He wanted to see me alone,” he weakly objected.

“Please, it’s so boring for me out here,” she insisted.

He looked sadly at his young wife. It had been hard for the young Tibetan woman to leave the capital where her rich family had been living since 1959, when they had fled Tibet because of the brutal invasion of their country by the Chinese occupants. Her love was the single most precious gift that he had received in the forty years of his life. He knew how bored she was here in Bumthang not having been able yet to be with child.

“All right, love,” he conceded. “But you will keep all this to yourself.”

“Oh thank you, Namgyal,” she laughed as she put her arms around him kissing him softly on his neck. His bodies’ response to her embrace was disturbed by a soft knock on the door.

“What is it?” he snapped, regretfully stepping away from his wife. The head of their Nepalese housekeeper peeped through the slit of the half-open door.

“Dasho, Sahib Maurer and Doctor Lautinger come see you,” he murmured. “They say OK.”

“Let them enter!” the Dzungda ordered. Namgyal Tinley feigned to ignore the frown on Mahler’s face as the project-manager realized that his wife made no move to leave. Paul Lautinger seemed to be beyond caring.

“Welcome gentlemen,” he greeted them. “Please have a seat.” He didn’t let his curiosity show as he walked around his desk and sat down facing the two Swiss.

“Let Ugen serve you a cup of tea,” he said. “How do you like the beautiful spring weather we still enjoy? It’s quite exceptional for this time of the year. It looks like monsoon will be short this year.”

No way they would rush him to ask questions. After the shortest possible period of small talk, Franz Mahler came to the point: “Dasho, we asked to see you urgently because we got news of a disastrous kind. What we have to tell you will have immeasurable consequences for the district, for Bhutan and even for the entire planet.”

Surprised, Dasho Tinley leaned forwards and asked with an uncertain smile:

“What catastrophe are you talking about?”

“Sir, we must ask you and your wife to keep all this secret for the time being,” Franz Mahler urged.

“Sure, if you say so,” irritated the Dzungda answered.

“Well then, here is the story,” the project-manager sighed. “This morning, Doctor Lautinger got a letter from his brother Ernst, a professor in bio-medical research at the Federal Technical High school of Zurich in Switzerland. He is involved in a secret research-project set up by the Swiss Government. In his letter, he tells Doctor Lautinger about his work and about the frightening conclusions his group has reached. Dasho, you and your wife must be prepared to hear the most devastating news you can imagine. Please Paul, translate the letter to Dasho and his wife.”

With a strained voice, Doctor Lautinger started to retell, word after word, the calamitous letter of his brother. As Paul’s sad monologue filled the room, the Dzungda’s chest was invaded by an icy cold. From the frightened eyes of his young wife, he saw silent tears roll down her ashen

cheeks. Nobody spoke as Paul's flat voice stopped. Namgyal Tinley felt the gaze of the two Swiss as he stared dumbfounded at his desk. Lifting his head, he met the sad look of Doctor Lautinger and without thinking he asked: "How reliable is your Brother?" Inwardly, he winced at the coarseness of his question and yet, he had to establish this fact beyond doubt.

"I asked myself this question," Paul replied evenly. "First of all, I know my brother too well. He hasn't got the kind of humor to pull a stunt like this. Whatever he says or writes, he means it. And then, I have been reading some very disturbing reports on BANG in the New England Journal of Medicine from last month. In the section called 'letters to the editor', a group of doctors from Seattle report a recent increase of lung problems among farmers living near a BANG-factory. They draw no conclusions and the editors do not comment but simply ask doctors to report to them any similar occurrences. Let me just point out that this journal is the world's leading medical publication."

"Well this settles the question," the Dzungda concluded. "Where do we go from here?"

His question was met by silence and he resumed: "Since you were so kind as to bring these news to me on the spot, I would like to reciprocate by giving you some of my own information. It has to stay secret as well, gentlemen!" he said tapping his desk with a finger to emphasize his words. Swallowing hard, Mahler nodded his agreement. Namgyal Tinley got up from his chair behind the desk and walked to the window. With his hand he pointed at the yellow and mauve fields sloping down towards the river: "Thanks to the farming-techniques you have taught us, we were able to double the population in the Bumthang district. We even export a small surplus of food to poorer areas of the country. Two weeks ago, I received orders from the Department of Agriculture to draw up contingency plans of food production for a population twice the actual size. I thought that some crazy bureaucrat from the United Nation's FAO-program had run amuck from underemployment of his intellectual capacities. So I put the request at the bottom of my highest pile of semi-urgent files. Last week, the Dzungda from Geylephug, down at the border to India, sent me a long message asking about the possibilities to transfer people from the lowlands to our district. I know this man: he is no fool and if he wrote such a request he had his good reasons to do so."

"Did he give you these reasons?" Paul cut in.

"No, he didn't," the Dzungda sighed, "and I guess he had his good reasons for this too."

"Well, it fits," Franz Mahler stated flatly.

Returning to his seat, the Dzungda said: "We now have good, independent evidence to believe your brother's letter, Doctor Lautinger. It also means that we have to decide what to do about the whole thing."

"If I may make a suggestion," the project-manager blurted out, "wouldn't it be advisable to inform the Royal Government and His Majesty, of course?"

Namgyal Tinley had figured out as much for himself but he didn't show his irritation as he answered evenly: "I fully agree with you, Mister Mahler. The matter has to be taken to the King."

In the ensuing silence, the sound of a creaking plank behind the closed office-door made them jump up. With long strides, the Dzungda crossed the room to the door and pulled it open. Sticking his head out he heard footsteps receding down the corridor followed by silence. Over his shoulder, he asked his wife: "Who could that be, Ugen?"

"I don't know," she replied with a worried face. "The employees should have left by now. It might be our Nepalese Chowkidhar, the housekeeper."

"This is very upsetting," the Dzungda grumbled as he turned around closing the door behind him. "We will have to act fast now. I will order the telephone exchange to hold all outgoing messages for me to censor. Now regarding the information of His Majesty: I will not be able to

leave the district under the present circumstances. Since it is your letter, Doctor Lautinger, may I ask you to make the trip to Thimpu and break the news to our King?"

Looking surprised, Paul Lautinger answered:

"But I'm just an expatriate expert here. I can't just walk in on His Majesty."

"I know that!" the Dzongda snapped. "You will carry two introductory letters with you. The first will give you immediate access to the private secretary of the Druk Gyalpo, our King. The second letter will admit you right away to his Majesty. Such is the privilege of a Dzongda with his King."

"As you wish, Dasho," Franz Mahler unctuously said. "With your permission, I would like to bring up another matter."

Namgyal Tinley frowned. They had him over a barrel with the information they had offered him. Evenly, he said: "By all means!"

"The Bumthang district will face a very high population pressure," the project-manager ventured. "What are your feelings about the presence of Swiss people here?"

The bargain didn't come as a surprise to the Dzongda. It was a touchy question and he felt angry with the Swiss for asking it because under the circumstances, he could not commit himself without conferring with the central government. Hesitating briefly, he said: "Since we will bring the matter to the attention of the King, I feel it would only be fair to let him decide the issue." He could read the worry and the deception on the faces of the two Swiss at his reply. Getting up from his chair he tried to soothe them: "I'm sure, His Majesty will appreciate your cooperation and remember all the fine work you did for us. I hope he will find an appropriate answer when you put the question to him, as you sure will. Now gentlemen, we all have work to do if Doctor Lautinger is to be on his way tomorrow. I would like to thank you for the precious information you brought to me."

When the two experts had left he turned to his wife: "I hope you don't regret that you stayed here and heard these awful news."

Smiling bravely, Ugen Tinley replied: "No, I am glad I was with you in this terrible moment. I feel so sad, I can't even cry anymore. You remember that we were supposed to go and see Norbu Genzin Rimpoche. I'm sure the holy man can help us with his advice."

Surprised, Namgyal Tinley answered: "I completely forgot! But you're right we should talk with him. He will keep the news to himself if I ask him. Let's go then, it is still early enough!"

* * *

The meditation had lasted longer than he had anticipated. Norbu Genzin Rimpoche slowly took in the surroundings of the room. Part of his mind focused gradually on the objects around him while with the rest he still lingered in Milarepa's song of Ragma, the song he had chosen as guide to his afternoon's contemplation. How true he felt was the master's conclusion of the first chapter: 'Looking out over the valley from the Fort of Awakening, he takes in the scent of deliciously smelling lotus flowers, the view of humming bees, of apes with black faces swinging in the trees, of cattle scattering manure and of serfs laboring for material possessions attached to their mundane desires. With his clairvoyance, Milarepa sees the impermanence of this world where life is like the illusion of a dream seen through eyes whose vision is distorted by disease. Drawing strength from the void of space, he feels compassion for this infatuation.'

The Rimpoche lifted his eyes towards the long window-bay of the altar-room. Soft afternoon-light fell on the wooden planks. How he loved the delicate, beige color of the oak-planks, fragrant and shining from beeswax. Through the open windows, a gentle breeze swept in the resinous

smell of the sun-backed fir-wood growing behind the monastery. Looking out over the valley, Norbu Genzing realized with delight how much the pastures here resembled his vision of Milarepa's song: the cattle grazing down at the river, the Bumthang Chu. Farmers occupied to tend the flowering buckwheat fields scattered like mauve carpets over the wide valley.

His eyes followed the little path winding its way through the fields, south towards the Dzong and the village of Wanchdichoeling. He couldn't make out the visitors that he expected and yet his eyes were sharp despite the seventy years that he carried like a young man. A joyous mind spurred by the desire to spread the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, had kept his lean body agile and his bearing upright.

'The Dzongda is a busy man and some urgent matter must have kept him at the Dzong', Norbu Genzing reflected as he turned his attention to the old parchments lying on a low table in front of him. His whole life had been dedicated to the study of these teachings, preserved from destruction and brought to the present-day world by a lineage of masters reaching back hundreds and sometimes even more than two thousand years. The word of the Buddha had been preserved ever since he had set into motion the wheel of the Dharma in the Park of the Gazelles outside Benares. 'Evam me sutam': 'thus I heard' were the words that Ananda, the first disciple of the Buddha Gautama, had used to begin each recollection of the words of his Master when he spoke to the followers of the Tathagata at the first council. Two thousand five hundred years later, the Buddha was still heard and he, Norbu Genzing, was a link in this unbroken chain of messengers. It was a demanding task to fulfill. Despair sometimes tried to sneak into his soul when he realized how difficult it was to open the hearts of men to this teaching that had become so self-evident to him by now. But looking back now on a life that in a few years would reach its term, he felt happy to have followed the Dharma.

A soft knock on the door brought him out of his reverie. A young monk respectfully entered the room and addressed the Rimpoche in a low voice: "Precious Teacher, your visitors, Dasho Dzongda and his wife have arrived."

"Let them enter!" he gently ordered.

The distraught face of Namgyal Tinley gave him an uneasy foreboding. The Dzongda and his wife bowed presenting their Kattas, the white scarfs of welcome, to the Rimpoche who in turn wrapped them around their shoulders. After this formal exchange of greetings, Norbu Genzin invited the couple to sit down on two cushions placed at right angles to the Rimpoche's seat. In silence, Suja was served from a richly decorated tea-jug. With a gentle sign of his hand, Norbu Genzin invited his visitors to drink the hot, salted butter-tea.

"I was looking forward to your visit," Genzin Norbu said as the young lama had left them alone. "I hope that all are well in your families."

"Thank you, Rimpoche," the Dzongda answered. "We are all in good health. My wife and myself have also been looking forward to see you again. It always gives us great joy to have you here in Bumthang during summer time. And yet, today our hearts are heavy with sorrow."

"What is it, dear Namgyal, that makes you unhappy?" Genzin Rimpoche asked, surprised at the mention of grief so early in the course of their conversation.

"I'm sorry to blurt out like this," Namgyal Tinley excused himself. "We were just informed about a most dreadful catastrophe."

"I can see from your expressions that something must be very wrong," the Rimpoche said. "Is it something you care to tell me?"

"Yes, Precious Teacher," the Dzongda sighed, "we decided to ask your advice and I am very grateful to share with you this information. Your suggestions will help us a lot."

"Please go ahead then," Norbu Genzin invited the Dzongda.

Trying to keep his voice even, Namgyal Tinley recounted the letter of Doctor Lautinger. As the horrible news sunk into the mind of the Rimpoche, he felt aspirated by a irresistible force hurling him into a giant hurricane from where he could find no escape. He was lifted up and tossed down again like a feather in a storm desperately trying to find his center of clear light and unobstructed vision. All the while, the monotonous voice of the Dzungda roared in his head sending him whirling through space as news after terrible news exploded in his tormented mind. When the voice finally died down he felt expelled into the eye of the storm slowly floating down to the ground while the uproar still enclosed him by its whirling masses of dust. He desperately called upon his mental forces to lift him out of this nightmare. Slowly he managed to subdue the illusion that held him prisoner and he regained the vision of the room and of his two visitors who respectfully had bowed their heads at the sight of his ashen face.

“So much bad Karma has accumulated on this planet,” the Rimpoche murmured, “that now we have to pay. The predictions were true then...”

Silence followed this devastating statement. The Dzungda looked questioningly at the old lama but no answer came from the lips of the Rimpoche. His mind had traveled far from the room again. He explored the tantric teachings that he had received from his preceptor when he was still a young monk, studying at the Dzogchen Monastery in northeastern Tibet. He thought of the secret message that his lineage of the school of the “Ancients”, the Nyingmapas, had kept alive. The prediction was known only to the reincarnations he represented and to their preceptors. For centuries they had tried with all their forces to stem the tide of bad karma overflowing the world. They had asked help from other holy men and their lineages. Although the message was understood by those who could hear, it was sadly ignored by the majority whose hearts were closed to compassion and whose minds were prisoners of greed and illusions. During his whole life he had desperately hoped that the prediction would not come true, at least not in its apocalyptic sense. But what he had heard now was, word by word, the essence of the old warning. Focusing his mind on the room again he said to the Dzungda: “You heard me rightly, this catastrophe was foreseen long ago!”

“Excuse me, Precious Teacher!” Namgyal Tinley nearly shouted, “Why didn’t you do anything to avoid this disaster?”

“I can understand your revolt, Namgyal,” The Rimpoche softly replied, “But it is not in our power to bend the Karma of the many. Each and every person is responsible for his own Karma. Over the centuries, this wisdom was lost in many parts of the world and now we are presented with the bill for our collective errors of the past. We tried to warn as many as we could but our words were not understood.”

“So there is no hope left?” Ugen Tinley asked with a shaking voice.

Turning towards the Dzungda’s wife, Genzin Rimpoche answered: “Your question is pertinent and I am afraid that for the majority of people on Earth, all hope is lost in this life. Those who can survive will lead a very difficult existence where hunger, disease and ignorance will be the main enemies. Their survival and the survival of mankind as such are in danger. We will have to direct all our efforts at saving what is precious.”

“What do mean by precious?” the Dzungda inquired.

“As a monk,” the Rimpoche stated, “I have to think first about the reincarnations of old lineages, the Thulkus. We may not lose the wisdom they carry with them!”

“Does that mean that you will brake the secret to other monks?” the Dzungda asked.

“Do not worry, Namgyal, we know how to keep things secret. Nothing will filter, not even to the monk-body as a whole. Only the heads of the lineages will be informed. They expect this

news anyway since long ago and they have made provisions to withdraw to safe places without rousing suspicions.”

“Will there be many coming to this place?” the Dzungda wondered.

“Not many,” was the sibylline answer from the Rimpoche. “Don’t worry, I will personally take care of them. You should now go and make provisions for all eventualities that will befall your district. Whenever I can, I will help you in this difficult task. But do not forget that you are the administrator, I can only be the spiritual guide.”

Somewhat relieved at this promise, the Dzungda and his wife got up and respectfully took their leave.

* * *

“Choeki, don’t ever tell anybody that you got this information from me!” Ugen Tinley, the Dzungda’s wife pleaded. “I had to swear to my husband to keep quiet about it.”

“All right, Ugen,” Choeki Tupten soothed her. “You know I’m your friend and I will never give you away. You realize however that this catastrophe will affect us Tibetans.”

“Do you really think so?” Ugen mused.

“Of course, don’t hide your head in the sand, Ugen!” the fierce Tibetan girl said standing towering over her grief-stricken friend. Her blue-black hair fell loosely to her shoulders and hid half of her face red with anger. Pacing back and fro in the small room behind the liquor shop of the Bazaar, she banged her fist into the palm of her other hand: “We have to tell the ‘Network’ about it.”

“Oh no.” the Dzungda’s wife moaned.

“And why not?” Choeki hissed. “Do you want to betray your kinsmen by keeping the secret to yourself?”

“I’m so confused,” Ugen sobbed her shoulders shaking as she put her head into her hands. Choeki Tupten looked at the other woman sitting cross-legged on the Tibetan carpet near the only window. Little light came through the dark wooden-frame. Enough though for her to see her friend’s tears rolling down her cheeks like sparkling diamonds. It made her feel upset and angry. Angry at the weakness of her friend but also upset because she all too well understood and shared the misery of the Dzungda’s wife. She had to stay strong though. The Tibetan community trusted her and counted on her as a leader of the secret Network. She could not disappoint them in such a crisis. Kneeling down beside her friend, she gently stroked the other woman’s hair and murmured: “Look Ugen, let’s be reasonable! I don’t have to say you told me. As you explained, somebody was listening at the door of your husband’s office when Doctor Lautinger told you the story. I can always pretend that I got the news from this source.”

“Oh, you would do that for me?” Ugen Tinley asked.

“Of course, I will! You are my friend,” she murmured, “but you must promise to tell me all you hear in the Dzung.”

“Give and take, isn’t it?” Ugen answered with a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“Don’t be stupid now!” Choeki hotly replied. “By making it a personal thing between us, you mix up everything and you make it difficult for both of us. We’re not important, our people are.”

“You are so strong and brave,” Ugen admiringly said as she rose to her feet. “I wish I could keep my ideas straight as you do.”

“Come on, don’t say foolish things,” Choeki Tupten warded her off. “Hurry back to the Dzung and keep me informed if there are important developments!”

As soon as Ugen had left, Choeki wrapped a scarf over her Chuba, the traditional Tibetan women's dress, and left the house by the backdoor. Hurrying along the silent walls of the bazaar she hoped to make it to the road-junction before the departure of the truck, headed for the sawmill in the Geytsa valley. She knew the Tibetan driver and she hoped that he wouldn't ask questions. Her status among her people made it natural for him to offer her a seat in the driver's cabin instead of having her mount the open loading space. A few dark glances from the Bhutanese men and women sitting there made her keenly aware how fragile her position was, and yet she didn't let it show on her impassive face. Finally the driver climbed aboard and started to heat the diesel engine. With a lot of bucking and coughing the old vehicle came alive.

"Do you think it will last long enough to get us to Geytsa?" she teased the driver.

"You're eager to get there," came the sour reply.

So much for being pert, she thought as she replied offhandedly: "I don't really care to walk half the way."

"In a hurry, are you?" the driver insisted.

"Since when are you interested in my time-table?" she shot back.

"Sorry Ashi, I didn't mean to intrude..." he mocked her by using the honorific title.

"It's alright, I had a tiring day in the shop," she tried to soothe him.

Silence spread in the little cabin as the old truck slowly crept up the Kiki-La road negotiating every bend at the limit of its asthmatic breathlessness. The downward part towards Geytsa wasn't less agonizing as the vehicle gathered speed bouncing perilously from one pothole to the other. She didn't dare to interfere with the grim-faced driver whom she suspected of trying to impress her. Relief flooded her as the road flattened out towards the soft valley bottom and the truck was forced back to a more reasonable pace. Part of her mind took in the colorful spectacle of the setting sun shedding golden light over the dark-green pinewoods and pasture-grounds gliding by. The other part already worked on the meeting with the Tibetan leaders that she was going to ask for. It wasn't usual for a young woman to ask the dignitaries of her people to gather on short notice without a good reason given in advance. She would have to put all her persuasiveness to work to bring them together. And time was short. The cold evening-wind made her lean body shudder as she stepped from the cabin of the truck that had stopped in front of the sawmill.

* * *

Meticulously tipping off the ashes from his cigarette, Major Fernandez, commander in charge of the Indian Road Building Task Force stationed at Bumthang, took off his glasses and looked at his flabbergasted officers.

"That's where we stand right now, gentlemen," he addressed them. "May I have your suggestions, please?"

The silence was thick with anxiety in the little officer's mess. None of the five men cared to venture any ideas. They were still under choc from the news that the Nepali Chowkidhar of the Dzongda had brought to the Indian camp. Adjusting his already impeccable tie, Major Fernandez put his glasses back on his thin nose and resumed: "I take it that, for the time being, nobody has any suggestions to put forward. Let me brief you on what headquarter in Thimphu had to say about my query of this morning. So far, our government has not informed our Commander General about any danger resulting from BANG. I am, however inclined to believe the story of Doctor Lautinger. This Swiss expert didn't strike me so far as being eccentric apart from the fact that he willingly came to work in this place in the middle of nowhere." The remark got him a

terse laughter from the other officers. "We may thus assume that we are facing a major crisis. Now, what do we have to fear most?"

"The Bhutanese will throw us out of their country," came the anguished reply from the youngest officer.

"Supplies from India will stop, of course," another added.

"We will never see our families again," a third whispered.

This brought the agitated discussion to full stop. Their eyes swept towards their commander who slowly lifted his hands in a gesture of helplessness as he said: "All your remarks are absolutely correct. I would like to add that we should not count on headquarter in Thimpu to help us. Their situation will be just as disastrous as ours. Maybe more so since the population pressure in the capital is much higher and the self-reliance of that region is not at all assured." He stopped briefly to let the full meaning of his words sink in and resumed: "We therefore have to get organized right here with whatever means are at our disposal. Before we get into technical details, I would like to have some basic questions answered: first of all, what are our chances of staying here?"

"The Border Road Task Force has fifty regular members in the district of Bumthang," the officer-in charge of intendance offered. "All other persons working with us are either contractors or laborers of Indian or Nepalese origin. On a legal basis, they are not our responsibility."

"Nobody will care about what is legal or not in these troubled times," the head-engineer sarcastically threw in.

"Point taken," the Major replied, "and we better remember this as we analyze the situation."

"Well, under these circumstances," the head of intendance reflected, "it might be wise to make it clear to anybody that we are only speaking for the regular members of the Task Force. Fifty persons more or less will not affect the population pressure of a whole district."

"Objection!" the youngest officer vehemently said. "First of all this is immoral since we brought these poor devils up here, but I guess nobody cares about morality much anymore..."

"Easy, my young friend," the Major admonished him. "We are not here to quarrel!"

"Sorry, Sir!" the young officer excused himself. "I wanted to add that from a tactical point of view it might not be wise to dissociate ourselves from the rest of the labor force. We are only fifty regulars and we can easily be discarded since the Bhutanese outnumber us greatly. Together with our labor force we represent something like thousand people. If we succeed in rallying them around us we can impose our conditions."

"Our friend here got a good point," the engineer reflected.

"What about our so-called unofficial equipment?"

"The arms you mean?" the chief of intendance murmured looking questioningly at the Major who cleared his throat before answering:

"Gentlemen, I must remind you again that whatever we discuss here will not be disclosed to anybody, not even to the other regular members of the Force. Do I have your solemn promise on that?"

They all nodded their assent and he resumed: "It is true that we have, hidden among our technical equipment, quite a good stock of light firearms ranging from pistols to machine-guns. Secret instructions impose however that they only be used for defensive purposes and only under extreme conditions..."

"Ha, don't worry about instructions anymore," the engineer cut in. "And for the extreme conditions, I wonder what else you want."

“You might be right as to the instructions,” the Major tersely replied. “As to the conditions, they certainly are extreme, but they still do not dispense you from showing a minimum of respect towards your commanding-officer and they do not allow us to discard a honorable behavior.”

The engineer ducked his head at the rebuke.

“We are on our own as we said,” the Major continued, “and we have to bring together as many people as possible to defend our position. In this context it seems appropriate that we get a message to the members of the regular Indian Army operating secretly at the Chinese border. I feel that these men could be useful here since our own combat-experience is very limited.”

“With their help and experience it might be possible to shape our labor-force into something like a workable militia,” the young officer insisted.

“I start to like your idea,” the Major conceded. “It will moreover keep them from turning against us. We might even become a dominating force in the area. If you have no objections we will include this idea into our general strategy.”

“I hope that this idea will not result in an immediate confrontation with the Bhutanese authorities,” the officer of intendance stated. “We might lose such a battle if the Bhutanese army moves into the area.”

“You’re right,” the Major admitted. “Our aim should not be confrontation but collaboration from a position of force. I feel that as soon as we are organized, I have to go and see the Dzongda to offer him our full collaboration while making him aware of our fighting capacities.”

“You want to accept his orders then?” the engineer couldn’t help from asking.

“As he represents the legal authority of the country we are living in, I only feel this would be correct and for all the reasons we discussed the only realistic approach,” Major Fernandez answered. “Now let’s get organized! I will call each of you to my office during the day to have the details of our strategy worked out. In the mean time, please proceed with the usual work as if nothing had happened.”

Dismissing his officers with a stiff salute, he turned around and left the officer’s mess.

* * *

The runner was completely out of breath when he arrived at the hospital in Wangdichoeling. He burst into the outpatient clinic without taking notice of the disapproving glances that the waiting people shot at him.

“Please Dechen!” he addressed the head nurse, “You must immediately come to the house of Phuntso, the farm-manager. His brother arrived from India and their little son is very sick.”

“What’s he got?” Dechen Gyaltzen asked turning away from the woman she was bandaging.

“I don’t know, but he is very weak and his lips are dark.”

“All right, I’ll come immediately,” she replied. “Let me just finish this bandage and fetch my medical kit. Is Doctor Lautinger here?” she asked the health-worker who was helping her.

“No, he had to go up to the Choekhor-valley for a difficult delivery case. He left with our midwife,” the health-worker answered.

She went to the storeroom of the hospital. From a rack, she took down the first-aid kit for out-calls. Before leaving, she checked its content. ‘Better be sure, she thought, that the last person has replaced all items.’ Satisfied to have the necessary minimum, she called for the driver of the hospital to make the jeep ready. After a lot of shouting in the courtyard, the man finally emerged from one of the staff-buildings. From looking at his annoyed face she understood that once again, she had pulled him from one of his interminable Mahjong-parties.

“Having good joss with your Mahjong?” she teased him as they walked towards the old Mahindra jeep.

“Not when you’re around,” the driver grumbled. “Where are we going?”

“To Phuntso’s house at the farm,” she answered. “And we better make it quick. His brother’s little son is very sick.” Together with the runner, they climbed aboard the little car and set off as fast as the bumpy road allowed them. A man waving both arms indicated their destination among the many buildings of the farm complex. In a cloud of dust, the driver stopped the jeep in front of the little house. From a small window, framed by finely carved woodwork, an anguished young woman made urgent signs for them to enter. Phuntso, a stout man in his mid thirties, greeted Dechen as she climbed from the car: “Thank you for coming quickly. The little baby of my brother is very sick. I wonder whether he’ll make it.”

His dark, wide-set eyes observed her intently as she entered the smoky room where the whole family was sitting around the weeping, young mother who held a little bundle on her lap. From the adjoining room, Dechen heard the murmured prayers, the muffled sound of a Damulu, a small hand-drum and the ringing of the Drilbu, the ceremonial hand-bell. She could make out two monks in their red robes putting herbs on a little coal fire burning in an earthen pot. Although the incense smelled delightfully, she didn’t find it appropriate for the little, breathless baby to have to inhale this smoke.

“For heaven’s sake, open the windows a little,” she harshly said. “Can’t you see that the baby needs air, not smoke?”

Her brusque remark brought her a disapproving murmur from the grandmother sitting next to her daughter-in-law. Dechen was upset at the fact that once again the monks had been asked to celebrate a Puja before the people thought to bring in the people from the hospital. “It doesn’t look like their smoke cured the poor little thing so far,” she couldn’t help from bitching at the old woman. “Let me see the baby! What happened to him?”

“We came up from India two days ago. The baby hasn’t been too well for ten days now. During the journey he vomited and got this strange yellow color on his face,” Phuntso’s brother explained.

“Has he been coughing?” Dechen asked.

“Oh yes, a lot and he doesn’t sleep well,” the mother said.

“Has he got fever?”

“Fever? We don’t know, we have no thermometer,” Phuntso answered.

Angry with herself for asking such a question, Dechen pulled out the stethoscope from her kit and listened to the breath-sounds of the baby. The respiration was irregular and a lot of noise could be heard over both lung-fields. She took her own thermometer from a little metal box. To her great surprise, the child wasn’t running any temperature.

“He’s got no fever and yet it looks like he’s suffering from a severe pneumonia,” she told the anguished family. “You will have to come with the baby to the hospital, we can’t treat him here.”

All members of the family started to speak at once, asking questions, shouting at each other until the cacophony brought a miserable little cry from the baby.

“Silence!” Phuntso shouted. “It’s a disgrace the way we behave in front of the people from the hospital. Moreover we disturb the baby. If Dechen thinks that he has to go to the hospital, we should listen to her advice.”

“The Lamas are holding a Puja and it would not be auspicious to leave the house in the middle of it,” the grandmother objected.

“But look mother! The monks have been praying since yesterday and the baby is worse,” Phuntso countered.

“You have been waiting to call us... since yesterday?” Dechen burst out. Her remark brought an uneasy silence to the dark, little room.

After a while, Phuntso’s old father raised his head to look at Dechen and said: “Our Lamas have always helped us. It has been like this since many hundred seasons. We know that the child is very sick. If it is allowed to live it will be thanks to the help of the Lord Buddha. If it has to die then this is his Karma, what can we do?”

“You could be a little less fatalistic about the whole thing, “ Dechen insisted.

“We are praying,” the old man said in a low voice.

“That’s maybe not enough,” the nurse replied.

“What do you know about that?” Phuntso’s mother hissed. “You think you’re so smart because you’ve been to other countries. Maybe you forgot more than what you learned.”

The blow struck deep into Dechen’s heart. Modern medical training made her frustrated with these stubborn, old people and yet her traditional upbringing lingered on in her soul. Desperate, she turned towards Phuntso and his brother: “Are you also of her opinion?”

The two men didn’t dare to look into her eyes. As they remained silent, the young mother spoke for the first time: “We’re sitting here quarreling and my child is dying. I can feel it. The breathing becomes irregular and he doesn’t move his arms anymore.”

The attention shifted back to the child with everybody leaning over the little human being struggling desperately against death. Dechen stood up and hands on her hips shouted: “You will be responsible of his death if you don’t let me take care of him. And don’t forget that this will be part of your future karma!”

The old man slowly got to his feet stretching himself to his full length and in a hollow voice retorted: “If, on the threshold of death, this child is taken away from the house, away from the guardian deities of our family, the holy rituals for his passing into the realm of the Bardo cannot be celebrated and his soul might remain in the torments of the lower worlds of the hungry ghosts or of the animals. Can’t you understand the prayers of the monks in the other room? They are reciting the Book of the Dead. The Bardo Thödröl will see my grandson to a safe reincarnation. Now, leave us!”

The force of his voice made her retreat. With tears in her eyes she looked at the mother of the dying child who did not react to her now silent supplication. With eyes downcast, Phuntso let her out of the house stammering an excuse as she climbed into the jeep: “Please Dechen try to understand...”

“Oh, I understand all too well, but one day I will come back to talk to you about all this,” she said in a bitter voice.

“I would greatly appreciate it,” Phuntso answered to her surprise.

Without waiting for her orders, the driver started the engine and drove them back to hospital. Storming into the courtyard of the compound she looked for Doctor Lautinger. She finally found him in the pharmacy-room unpacking newly arrived medicine-bottles.

“What’s the matter, Dechen?” he exclaimed. “You look all worked up.”

Before a word came out, she burst into tears and collapsed on a wooden box holding her face hidden in both hands. She felt Paul’s hand on her shoulder and heard his soothing voice:

“Come on Dechen, what happened to you!”

Between sobs she told him in detail what had happened at Phuntso’s house. Doctor Lautinger didn’t interrupt once and remained silent for a long while before speaking like in trance: “The child had no fever, you said?”

“That’s right.”

“And yet his lungs sounded like he had pneumonia.”

“Absolutely, it was nasty noises on both sides, the breathing was fast, around seventy or eighty respirations per minute and the poor kid was all blue on his lips.”

“Well, I think we could not have saved the child anyway,” Paul Lautinger flatly stated.

“Why? With antibiotics given intravenously he might live,” Dechen insisted.

“Maybe it wasn’t pneumonia after all,” Paul Lautinger replied. “You told me that the child had no fever. This would be very unusual at this stage of infection. According to the parents it was a healthy child until a few days before they left India. We can reasonably rule out a heart problem to explain the conditions of his lungs. Where in India did they stay?”

“They went to Phuntso's other brother who is working in Gauhati,” she informed him.

“What is this brother doing there?” he inquired.

“He is working in some factory producing this new stuff that is supposed to replace petrol,” she ventured.

“BANG, you mean?” Paul asked.

“I guess so, why?” she said, surprised at his outburst.

“Look Dechen, there is something you need to know. It’s something terrible and you must swear to keep it to yourself for the time being. Tomorrow, I’ll leave for the capital to inform His Majesty about what I’ll tell you now.”

The imminent death of the little boy lost its reality to Dechen as Paul’s story on BANG sunk into her terrified mind.

* * *

No sleep had come to him this night. Namgyal Tinley felt exhausted and apprehensive. So far, no sign had come from the capital and yet Doctor Lautinger should have met the King by now. He could hear the regular breathing of his wife sleeping next to him. These last two days she had behaved in strange ways. Always present at his side and yet very distant. When he had asked her about her behavior, she had pointed out how much she was affected by the recent news. ‘Quite a logical explanation after all,’ he thought as he turned around in his bed and looked towards the window where he could make out a hesitant streak of grey light filtering through the wooden shutters.

‘I might as well get up,’ he told himself. Slowly as not to wake up his wife, he slid from the bed and left the room. The house was quiet and cold. No fire burned in the dark kitchen. He squatted in front of the chulo, the traditional cooking-stove made of clay. From a pile he took some finely cut firewood and put it into the opening of the stove. With his lighter he started the fire and covered it with a pot of water. Waiting for it to boil he warmed his hands at the fire. It wasn’t an occupation for a Dzungda, he realized inwardly amused at the face the housekeeper would make if she surprised him at it. Namgyal wondered for how long he would have the possibility to play his role as a Dzungda. Much depended on how the authority of the government was going to be respected in the near future. Again and again he wondered about the silence of the King. Maybe Doctor Lautinger was supposed to bring back the decisions of the government. He immediately rejected this idea, since such matters were never left to foreigners.

The gentle rumbling of the boiling water brought him out of his speculations. He decided to brew sweet tea and eat some Zau, the puffed, sweet rice. A cup of tea in one hand and a plate of Zau in the other, he crossed the kitchen and sat down on the bench in front of the window overlooking the inner courtyard of the Dzong. He loved the peaceful sight of the place. A little tree was growing in a corner where his wife had built a hen house. In the middle of the square was the old well, built centuries ago when such a water supply was mandatory for an often-besieged

fortress like the Jakar Dzong. 'Will it play this role again in the near future,' he wondered? Suddenly, he perceived a man entering the courtyard and walking towards the well. He made out the lean figure of his police officer, Sonam Kendup, who also lived in the Dzong with his wife of Nepali origin and two children. It looked like the information he had given Sonam had taken the man's sleep away too. Leaning out of the window, he made a hissing sound. As the police officer turned his head, Namgyal signaled him to come up to his kitchen. Sonam acknowledged the invitation with a smile and entered the house. He had to bend his head upon entering the kitchen door. Two piercing, black eyes over a sharp nose questioningly looked at the Dzongda. His thick mustache twisted nervously.

"Good morning, Sonam," Namgyal Tinley addressed him. "It's still early but we both can't sleep, it seems."

"Good morning, Dasho," Sonam stiffly replied. "Since you told me this story about BANG, I can't find any rest."

"I understand," the Dzongda said. "The thing keeps going round and round in my head too. But for the time being, what can we do? We have to keep quiet about the whole thing and wait for instructions from the King. Come sit down! Have a cup of tea and some Zau!"

"Thank you, Sir, but I'm worried that we might not be able to wait," the officer answered as he sat down on the kitchen-bench.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, and that's the other reason I couldn't sleep tonight, it looks like there has been a leak," Sonam offered.

"A leak? Where from?" the Dzongda exclaimed as he shot to his feet.

"Yesterday evening my wife was near hysterics," Sonam Kendup explained. "A rumor is circulating among the Nepali staff of the Dzong about this BANG thing."

"What did you tell her?" Namgyal asked.

"Nothing, of course, Dasho!" the police officer assured the Dzongda. "Your orders were quite clear."

"Sorry, Sonam, this was a stupid question. I'm so worried these days," Namgyal Tinley said. "This means that the noise I heard when discussing with Lautinger and Mahler came from this bloody Chowkidhar. I'm going to punish him!"

"What good would that do?" Sonam replied.

"Coming from a police-officer, this is surprising," the Dzongda stated.

"Not so much. After all, if you punish him you give official credit to his allegations. If we do not show any reaction, people might be in doubt about this crazy story. We can always discredit the man indirectly by spreading the rumor that he is not too well in his mind."

"You're right Sonam," the Dzongda conceded. "But it still means that the secret has leaked out. And that means that if the Nepalis know about it, the Indians will very soon be informed. Their Nepalese contractors depend on them. My God, I wonder how fast this news will reach India. We can't censor their communications since they have their own radio-link to the capital and from there they will immediately alert New Delhi. I will have to inform His Majesty about this immediately. First thing you will have to do when you get to your office, is to send the following wireless to the Royal Cottage: Information sent to His Majesty through L. are known to others in Bumthang by now."

"I will do that as soon as time for transmission has come," the officer said. "There is still another fact which bothers me, Dasho."

"What other catastrophe has turned up?" the Dzongda sighed.

“I’m probably overreacting, but you should know about it. Yesterday, one of my contacts in the Indian camp informed me, that the officers had an unscheduled and very long meeting in the morning. After that, Major Fernandez conferred with each officer separately during the day. He never does that otherwise.”

“He maybe adopted a new style of command,” the Dzungda countered. “Was there any suspect activity at the camp yesterday?”

“Not really...”

“Meaning?”

“Well, the usual work went on undisturbed, but a messenger left for the Choekoerte valley.”

“They have no business up there,” the Dzungda wondered.

“Indeed,” Sonam replied. “But it is the way up to the border where their regular army is hidden.”

“My God! Do you really think they are about to contact them?” the Dzungda asked.

“I don’t know,” the police officer replied. “But to be on the safe side, I sent two of my men after the messenger. They carry a good radio with them and will keep me informed.”

“When are they supposed to call?” Namgyal inquired.

“At eight o’clock in the morning, two p.m. and nine in the evening.”

“All right, keep me informed about everything! I will stay in the Dzong all day. Try to find out whether other people are informed and what their reaction is! This afternoon, right after the radio-contact, I want you to come to my office. We’ll have to discuss our defense-options. Please give this a thought in the mean time.”

Sonam Kendup rose from the bench and inclined his head as he took leave.

* * *

He couldn’t concentrate properly on his work. Running the farm seemed so pointless to Phuntso after the death of his brother’s little boy. In his soul, he was torn between a sense of guilt and the acceptance of the old ways. He would never forget the look in Dechen’s eyes when she had climbed into the keep. The question whether the Swiss Doctor could have saved the little child kept returning to his burning mind. At the same time he was comforted by the idea that the monks had held the proper rituals. Still, the whole thing was strange. How could such a healthy baby be carried away just like this? Moreover, he didn’t like the way his brother coughed and was short of breath. Could it be that he had contracted tuberculosis down in India?

The last two days his Swiss counterpart had been nervous, at times shouting at people for no reason, at times sitting prostrated in his office doing nothing. People had turned to him for advice and he was unable in his state of mind to help them much. Of course, they had understood and yet, he hated to be like this. Usually of a happy nature, he liked to laugh and do his work swiftly and well.

He got up from his chair and walked to the door of the little office building overlooking the pasture ground. On the old hanging bridge, he could make out a lean woman coming towards his side of the river. As she drew nearer, he recognized Choeki Tupten. She was wearing a beautiful Chuba, the traditional dress of the Tibetan women. In her hair, she wore corals and turquoise. Phuntso felt his heart accelerate when he realized that the beautiful girl was coming his way. Many times, he had tried to attract her attention, but the proud girl of the rich shopkeeper had never taken notice of him. He had accepted the fact that a man without his own land was of no interest to a lady of high birth like Choeki Tupten.

“Hello, Phuntso!” she waved as she came up to the little office building. “You’re taking a sun-bath?”

“Good morning, Ashi,” he addressed her politely. “I don’t really feel like sun-bathing, you know.”

“Sorry, Phuntso,” Choeki excused herself. “I imagine how terrible you must feel after what happened in your family. I came to express my sympathy.”

“Thank you very much,” he automatically replied, surprised at the warmth in her voice.

“It must be hard for you to run the farm while your heart is weeping,” Choeki Tupten insisted.

“Indeed. Specially after the unexpected course the disease took,” he agreed happy to speak finally with somebody who seemed to care.

“Unexpected course...?” Choeki asked noncommittally. “Why don’t we take a little walk around the farm? You show me your work and tell me about the little boy’s death.”

Happy at the unexpected distraction, Phuntso fetched his coat and locked the door of his office. Showing the way, he led her to the huge stable where they kept the imposing Swiss bulls.

“Do you remember the fuss when one of these beasts broke loose last year?” he asked Choeki.

“Oh for sure!” she smiled. “These beasts are really impressing, I wouldn’t want one of them chasing after me. They are much bigger than our local livestock. Is your cross-breeding program going nicely?”

“Come, let’s go over to the cow-shed!” he invited her. “Yesterday, two cross-breed were born. They are very nice.”

The humid, warm smell of cattle embraced them as they stepped into the stable. Phuntso led Choeki to an enclosed area where two cows were laying with their little calves.

“How cute they are!” Choeki exclaimed as she bent down to stroke the small calves. Phuntso sat down on a wooden plank contemplating the young girl, his heart heavy from the realization that this moment was unique. His mind did still not understand her sudden interest in him, but his heart was all too ready to surrender without questions asked. Several minutes went by in complete silence before she lifted her head and asked him gently: “You said before that the course of the disease of your brother’s boy was so unexpected.”

“Hm, what did you say?” Phuntso came out of his reverie.

“Are you day-dreaming, Phuntso?” Choeki teased him. “I was asking about the unexpected disease...”

“Oh yes, of course,” he stuttered feeling foolish with his hot, red cheeks. “It was unexpected because the little boy was perfectly healthy a few days before.”

“But this can happen with small children,” she objected. “One day they are fine and then they are carried away like a feather in the wind.”

“Sure, but still, something is bothering me,” he replied.

“What is it?” she inquired.

“It’s something Dechen Gyaltzen, the head-nurse of the hospital, said,” he answered. “The whole thing looked like pneumonia, but when she took the temperature of the boy, he wasn’t running any fever. Dechen was very surprised and said that this was not normal.”

“Well, if she said so then there must be something to it,” Choeki mused. “Did she give an other explanation?”

“No, she didn’t,” he lamely stated. “There was some fighting after that.”

“Fighting?”

“Yes, unfortunately we got into an argument,” Phuntso explained. “Dechen absolutely wanted to take the child to the hospital but my parents were opposed. They had called the monks to read from the Bardo Thödröl and they didn’t want the child to be moved from the house.”

“How terrible this must have been for you,” Choeki said.

“What would you have done, Choeki?” he asked his soul reaching out to her.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We are living in such difficult times. On one hand we cherish the old traditions and on the other hand we hear so much from the outside world that seems to be in contradiction with these believes.”

“I’m glad you understand,” Phuntso sighed. “It means much to me, you know.”

He looked at her anxiously after his outburst of feelings for her. Her full lips smiled but the coal-black eyes that looked at him remained impenetrable as she replied: “You honor me with your frankness. Please, tell me more about your brother and his child!”

Phuntso felt happy and frustrated at the same time. Her reply was a masterpiece of diplomacy. But so far he hadn’t fouled up. He felt relieved as he recounted the miserable days he had spent. Choeki didn’t interrupt him once until the end of his story.

“...and there is something else which bothers me about the whole thing. My brother is not well either.”

“What do you mean, not well?” she asked.

“He too, is coughing and short of breath,” Phuntso said.

“Did he go to the hospital to see the Doctor?” she inquired.

“Yes, he did and now we are really worried,” he informed her. “Doctor Lautinger had barely come home from Thimpu and was all upset about my brother's problem. He asked him a lot of questions about his work in India and finally urged my brother to go to Thimpu to have some serious check-up done.”

“Did he go?” Choeki simply asked.

“No, why should he?” Phuntso asked. “He doesn’t feel that bad, after all.”

“He might soon!” she ominously replied.

“What do you mean?” he exclaimed as he jumped to his feet.

“Phuntso, listen well to what I have to tell you!” she solemnly said. “You showed me trust by telling me about you and your family. Now I must ask you the same in return for a terrible secret, which might concern your brother. Can you promise to keep quiet about something very serious?”

Surprised by the insistence of her voice, he sat down again and asked her: “Is that why you came to see me?”

“Not only, Phuntso. I really wanted to tell you how sorry I felt about the tragedy in your family. At the same time, I wanted to find out whether my suspicions about the death of your brother’s child fit the rumors I came across lately.”

It was his turn now to remain quiet for a seemingly endless time. Her face was drawn and her voice hollow when she concluded: “Our leaders have therefore decided that we inform all important members of the Tibetan community about the imminent catastrophe in order to take steps to protect us from any harsh decisions of the local authorities. I remind you, Phuntso, that your family is one of us and that you play an important role among the Tibetan workers at the farm. You must help us!”

Her words cut into his tormented mind like a knife producing sheer agony. ‘What an utterly senseless world I have to live in,’ he bitterly thought. ‘Is it possible that men in their ignorance could produce so much destruction?’

“Choeki, how can this be possible?” he exclaimed. “What did we do to merit such a Karma?”

“I know, Phuntso, I had the same reaction when I learned the news,” she tried to soothe him.

“How can you be so calm?” he accusingly asked her.

“I’m trying with all my force to fight the panic, but believe me, it’s not easy and I’ve been crying my deal,” she evenly replied.

“Sorry Choeki, I didn’t mean to hurt you, but it’s too much for my head,” he whispered ashamed that he couldn’t hold back his tears in front of her. She got to her feet, came close to him and to his surprise softly put a hand on his shoulder.

“Phuntso, I understand,” she murmured. “Let’s return outside. The fresh air will help us get our thoughts together.”

After the damp atmosphere of the cowshed, the cold wind cleared Phuntso’s brain. They walked a mile upriver where they found a dried out tree trunk lying along their way. Without exchanging a word they rested looking into the brown water of the Bumthang Chu. The drifting wood gliding by reminded Phuntso of their precarious situation. No way to know how long their journey would be, whether the rocks on the way would crush them or if by chance they could reach down to the ocean to float peacefully without purpose before decaying only to recommence the ceaseless cycle of all life-forms. Hypnotized by the movement of the river, he felt like merging with something he could not give a name to, but whose nature seemed peaceful and bearer of hidden purpose. The words came unconsciously over his lips: “It doesn’t really matter where we go, what we become, we return anyway to where we come from and this is good.”

“What are you speaking of?” Choeki’s voice cut into his dream.

With regret he let the image float down the river and reemerged into the immediate reality:

“I had a strange vision while staring into the water,” he explained. “Maybe these events aren’t all that bad...”

“I’ll be damned!,” she dryly stated. “I tell you that nearly all mankind is going to be wiped out and you declare that all this is ok. What kind of man are you?”

“I’m not a monster,” he defended himself. “Look, Choeki, I was experiencing a very strong feeling of belonging to some kind of greater reality than what I can grasp with my ordinary senses. Maybe it is the choc of what you told me that gave me this vision. I was like outside and yet inside myself, but definitely not in my normal state of mind.”

“What did you see?” she asked with a trace of urgency in her voice.

Spurred by her interest, he explained: “You see, I should normally be deadly afraid of what is going to happen to us. I should fear for myself, for my family, for you... for everything that is dear to me. And yet this strange feeling comes up and I realize that this fear is not the ultimate level of my reality. How can I make myself clear? It is like our present life is just a passage, a trip on a ship crossing some river or lake. But the ship and maybe the river are not so terribly important. It is the crossing and the realization of the crossing that counts. Can you understand?”

“I try, but honestly you sound a little strange.”

“But Choeki! Isn’t that what we learn from our Lamas, when they speak of reincarnation?” he urged.

“I never took their explanations that literally,” she admitted. “Are you sure this is a correct interpretation of their teaching?”

“How can I be sure in such things,” he burst out. “A few moments ago, I was in a different state of mind than normally. And yet the images were just as strong and just as present as you are now for me.”

“You have to be patient with me!” Choeki pleaded. “Could you tell me in detail what you saw. It might help me to deal with our situation.”

“I’ll try,” he agreed. “When I was looking into the water, I saw these pieces of wood floating by. They come from upriver where they were once part of a living plant. Now they are pieces of wood, ripped from some tree trunk and washed down this river. This river appeared to me like

life, full of movement in all directions. Look at the water how it is whirling, sometimes it looks like little parts of the water are flowing upstream or going round in circles. There are some creeks in the riverbank where it nearly stands still. It becomes quiet. But you can see from the pieces of wood laying there that after some time they are dragged along again and they have to follow the flow of the river. The force of the flowing water is fascinating. I felt like I was such a piece of wood dragged along by this irresistible force of the river. We only see a small part of the river from here. Look after the hanging bridge, there is a bend to the right and afterwards we can't see it anymore. We know part of its further course. You've been walking along the Bumthang Chu, haven't you, Choeki?"

"Yes, indeed I know its course for some miles," she conceded suspended at his lips.

"So, for some distance we know the river and we think we know how our lives are going to be. But then things become less clear. We know from this river that it will eventually reach the ocean somewhere down in India. It is strange that we do not know much about the intermediate part of our river and of our life, but we know, at least we think we know, where and how it will end. In school I learned that the sun heats the water of the ocean. It becomes steam, rises to high altitude and falls down as rain again, here in the mountains. This is the circle of the live-force."

"And what about the pieces of wood?" Choeki asked. "That's important too, since you said that it represents your own existence."

"That's true, the river is like the life-force and the piece of wood like me," he reflected. "What happens to that piece of wood, I wonder? There are so many dangers on the road. It can be washed ashore and dry out, not giving raise to any useful things. It can splinter if it hits a rock or it can be sucked down in turbulence and remain for hundreds of year's prisoner of the depth of this river. It might also reach the ocean..."

"And then? What point is there to float in that ocean?" Choeki interrupted.

"But there is life in the ocean," Phuntso objected. "The piece of wood will decay, that's what my teacher told me at school. It will become food for the fishes. Some of these fishes will swim upstream again or they will be caught and eaten. The piece of wood will fall apart and it will not exist as such, that is true enough. But its essence, you see, will somehow live on or give life to other things."

"I start to understand," she said, uncertainty in her voice. "You very well describe how things happen and it sounds quite plausible. But you do not give an answer as to why things are happening this way. Specially why we have to face such a catastrophe."

"That's the difficult part," he admitted. "I'm not so sure that I have a good answer for this. But when my thoughts wandered a few moments ago, I asked myself this question. Do you remember Choeki, when the lama spoke to us about 'karma'?"

"Sure enough, I remember," she replied. "Whatever we did in the past, influences what we do now, and what we do now influences what we will do later on. That's the law of 'karma', as I understand it."

"Hm, that's part of it," he reflected. "But it is not only about what we do. It probably is also about what we are."

"What do you mean?"

"Actions bring results," he explained. "Good actions bring good results, bad actions bad results. That means our present form of being depends on what has happened and on what has been before. You see this goes for every human being, but I guess, it goes for the world as a whole. There has to be some kind of force or law - call it what you want - that is responsible for what will happen to the piece of wood floating in the ocean. I think that's what karma stands for:

a supervising force that directs everything where it has to go according to what has happened in the past. And that's where I see an explanation for what you told me about BANG."

"You mean, that this force summed up the global actions of mankind on this planet and now presents us with the global bill to pay", Choeki wondered.

"Somewhere along these lines lies the answer, I guess," Phuntso concluded.

The wind splashed a cold drizzle into their faces and made them shudder. Phuntso got to his feet and helping Choeki up said: "Let's walk back to the farm or we will get cold. On the way, you can explain what you expect from me."

"After what we discussed it sounds very trivial," Choeki said as they strolled along the river towards the shelter of the farm buildings. "But probably you agree that we still have to take care of the little piece of the river's course that we can see from where we are."

"Of course, Choeki," he smiled.

"Well, we are worried that the Bhutanese authorities will take unfriendly decision regarding foreign nationals. Food will be scarce and they will want it for themselves. We have to get organized to prevent that."

"And just how do you want to go about it?" he asked surprised at the determination in her voice.

"I'm allowed to tell you, but you must keep it to yourself, that we have a stock of arms hidden in the Geytsa valley. We plan to form a militia to defend us."

"Are you serious?" Phuntso burst out.

"And why not, Mister Phuntso?" Choeki shot back.

"Because to form a militia you need the number, you need time and you need training, that's why, Miss Choeki," he replied sternly.

"And you think we don't have it?" she asked, doubt creeping into her voice.

"I don't know about the time, but it might be terribly short," he argued. "For the training, you know that for yourself, we have none."

"That's not true," she objected. "Many among us have been freedom fighters in Tibet before and after the Dalai Lama's departure from Tibet."

"Look that's an old story by now. These old farts can hardly hold a riffle by now, let alone shoot one. And then for the number, Choeki! We haven't the slightest chance to stand up against even one battalion of the Bhutanese army. You can be damned sure they will send troops here. Bumthang is much too valuable to the government to leave it undefended. No, no, I think this idea of militia is a lot of bullshit."

"So, what does Mister Clever propose then?" she hotly asked him.

"Look, I don't want to quarrel with you," he tried to calm her. "I'm no strategist, but I feel that the only chance to survive here is to remind the authorities about our skills."

"You think that will placate them?" she doubted.

"So far, nobody gave evidence of being hostile towards the Tibetans," he reminded her. "But I agree, we better make sure they are not tempted into becoming unfriendly."

"But how?" she insisted.

"Maybe by making them aware that it would mean a lot of trouble to throw us out," he ventured. "If we start to resist it will take them a lot of force to get rid of us, because we could easily withdraw to the forests and start some kind of guerilla fighting."

"So we are back to the idea of a militia," she triumphantly stated.

"No, it's not the same," he objected. "Militia-fighting means holding a position, whereas guerillas come and go and immobilize a lot of troops for very small results. That's the message we should get to the authorities..."

“...and to our own people!” Choeki cut in. “Yes, I think you’re right. I will go and see our leaders to tell them about this idea. Will you please keep quiet about our discussion for the time being?”

“I promise, Choeki,” Phuntso agreed.

As they arrived at the office building of the farm, Choeki blew him a kiss and hurried back over the hanging-bridge to her shop in the bazaar.

* * *

The delivery case had been a catastrophe. Exhausted, Paul Lautinger made his way out of the village accompanied by a health worker. The woman had been in uninterrupted labor for twenty hours before the family had decided to call the people from the hospital. When he had arrived high up in the Chamkar valley it had been too late for the mother and the baby. He felt frustrated because this same lady had already had a stillbirth and this time, she had never come to their monthly clinic-days where they examined the pregnant women and the small babies. It explained why the transverse position of the baby had not been noticed and now of course, the result was a dead mother and child. How many years of explaining would it take before everybody understood the message?

As they rounded the corner of the last house the village-headman stepped into their way, his face looking grim. The Doctor greeted him politely but hardly got a glance from the man who started to shout angrily at the health worker in the local dialect. After a few moments of this harsh behavior, Paul Lautinger interrupted the clamor: “Tell that man to shut up! And please, translate what he is saying!”

The Bhutanese health worker, ill at ease tried to stop the flow of words and answered: “The headman is angry because of the death of the mother and the child. He is related to them.”

“Please tell him,” Lautinger replied, “that I’m very sorry too, but that all this could have been prevented had the lady come to our monthly check-ups.”

“I tried to do so,” the health worker said, “but he keeps rambling on about some poisoning coming up from India and that all this is due to these new technical inventions. He says it is your fault.”

“What’s this nonsense?” the Doctor asked with a sinking feeling.

The health worker turned back to the village headman and questioned him more in detail. The man’s shouting and gesticulating had attracted the villagers who now surrounded them forming a circle of hostile faces. Sweating slightly, the health worker turned back to Paul Lautinger and explained: “A rumor is circulating in the village that a poisonous gas is creeping up the valleys from the Indian plains and that this gas is produced by factories which are run by western people. Now the villagers believe that the gas has reached here and that it is attacking pregnant women and small babies first. As a westerner, they hold you responsible for the death of this woman and her baby.”

Feverishly, Paul sought for an answer as the attitude of the villagers became menacing. Desperate, he said: “Tell these people that this lady already had a still-birth two years ago, that she lived on after that and that in the mean time and until very recently, many babies were born here and that they are healthy. No other cases of unexplained death have occurred in this village these last months.”

The explanation somewhat calmed the angry attitude of the people around them. Paul chose this moment to urge his companion on their way fearing that the mood of the villagers might

change quickly. When they were safely out of eyesight of the village, he forced their pace. Surprised, the health worker asked: "Why are you hurrying so much?"

"I didn't like the attitude of these people," Paul replied, "This is the first time since I'm in Bhutan that people have been hostile towards me. How come they have these ideas?"

"Maybe some Pamo," the health worker tried to explain, "You know, these Bön priestesses hate us because we take their jobs away. No sick people ask for their help anymore."

"Maybe, maybe not! Who brought this rumor to the village," Paul insisted.

"The headman was speaking of a young boy of the village working in the Indian road worker camp," the Health worker offered. "Is it important?"

"Never mind, but I'll have to find out," Paul concluded, "because I don't want to be lynched next time I go to a village and have some problem with a patient."

Without speaking, they continued on their way home towards Wangdichoeling. As they approached the hospital they could make out a cloud of dust speeding towards them on the little road they were following. They soon made out the silhouette of a Mahindra-jeep.

"It's Dasho Dzungda coming," the health worker noted as he stepped to the side of the road. He bowed respectfully when the car came to a skidding stop a few yards away from them. The Dzungda climbed out of the jeep wearing a worried expression on his face.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he greeted them. "May I have a word with you, Doctor?"

"By all means, Dasho," Paul replied.

The two men walked a short distance away from the health worker and the jeep-driver. In a low voice, the district-governor said: "Some very disturbing news have come up and I would like to have your opinion on them."

"The same happened to me, Dasho," Paul sadly said.

"What do you mean?" the Dzungda snapped.

Paul told him about the incidence in the village.

"This unfortunately confirms my information," Dasho Tinley noted. "My police-officer, Sonam Kendup, reported to me this morning that the rumor has spread to the Indian camp. The Indians moreover sent two messengers to their troops up at the border. I fear that the whole story will be public knowledge in a few days. It will create havoc in the district!"

"Did you inform the government in Thimpu about it?" Paul inquired.

"I did so first thing in the morning," the governor answered. "They sent a cable back telling me that a battalion, that is six hundred men, of the Royal Bhutanese Army will immediately be sent here to guarantee law and order."

"I wonder whether they will be strong enough to keep things nice and calm here?" Lautinger doubted.

"A detachment of Royal Body Guards is coming along. They are tough chaps and highly respected around the place. But you're right, it might not be sufficient," the Dzungda admitted.

"What else can we do?"

"The worst thing will be the crazy rumors spreading like a bushfire," Paul Lautinger reflected. "People might panic and do crazy things..."

"Like what?"

"Well, like what happened to me a few hours ago, for instance. They might start stealing food from each other, killing people, and God knows what other foolish thing they'll be capable of!"

"I agree with you," the Dzungda admitted, "False rumors is the number one enemy we'll have to fight. It is right on our doorstep but others will follow."

"What are you planning to do?" Paul asked.

“The only solution I can see is to convene an extraordinary district assembly,” Dasho Namgyal Tinley decided. “As soon as the army has arrived - that is tomorrow - runners will be sent out to the whole district to ask the Gapos, the headmen, to come to Jakar Dzong. We will have to give them the full picture to ensure their wholehearted collaboration.”

“That also goes for the other groups in the district,” Paul swiftly put in.

“Meaning?”

“Dasho, let’s face it!” Doctor Lautinger insisted, “This district was helped in its development by Indian, Tibetan and Swiss people. They can give their useful contribution to survival of the district’s population. I solemnly ask you to convene these people as well and make it clear to everybody that we are all sitting in the same boat with the same duties and the same privileges.”

“That’s a decision the central government has...”

“Bullshit, Dasho!” the Doctor burst out. “And you know it. Sorry for being rude but this is no time for diplomatic delicacies. The central government in Thimpu will not have much saying in this district in the near future since communication with the capital will break down. The road from there to Bumthang runs well below two thousand meters in the Wangdiphodrang district. We will be pretty much on our own and so will the more eastern districts be. As a result, you will be the supreme authority around here provided you can impose yourself on the commanding officers of the army and the Royal Body Guards. That will be your number two problem! Our collaboration can strengthen your authority... Having us as enemies will weaken it. May I now have your decision, Dasho?”

Clasping his hands behind his back, the governor took some steps to and fro on the little road. Turning around abruptly, he faced Lautinger and with a threatening voice declared: “Alright, Doctor, you win! But I want the solemn promise of your community that in exchange, you abide unflinching by my authority. The alternative will be expulsion from the district!”

“Yes, Dasho!” Paul Lautinger swallowed hard. “I will do my level best to get the agreement of my compatriots.”

“You better do!” the Dzongda tersely replied as he strode back to his jeep.

* * *

There hadn’t been much time to prepare the arrival of the Dzongda at the Indian camp. Major Fernandez nervously inspected the storerooms with the officer in charge of intendance.

“Are you sure that he will not find the boxes with our weapons?” he asked.

“There shouldn’t be a problem, actually,” the officer answered.

“All weaponry is hidden under heavy mining equipment.”

“Well, that should be ok,” Major Fernandez conceded. “The governor isn’t coming for an inspection, I was told. Let’s go to the officer’s mess and wait for him there.”

It wasn’t long before the Dzongda's jeep entered the camp. Fernandez stepped outside to welcome his guest: “I’m very honored, Dasho, to have you among us today!”

“Good afternoon, Major,” the Dzongda coolly replied shaking the major’s hand.

“Dasho, would you please come this way. My officers are waiting for you in the mess.”

“This will not be necessary, you can dismiss your men,” the governor tersely announced.

“But, Dasho...”

“You heard me correctly, I would like to have a word with you alone. In your office!”

“Very well, Sir,” Major Fernandez conceded, furious at the public display of force. He led Dasho Tinley to his small office- building and showed him inside.

“Please excuse the disorder of the place,” he offered lamely. “I didn’t expect to receive you in this humble place.”

“This will perfectly do,” the Dzungda said as he sat down on the chair facing the only table. “There is no time to waste on niceties, so let me come to the point straight away: how come you sent two messengers to the northern border without asking for my permission?”

Major Fernandez had difficulties hiding his emotions. This kind of rudeness was unprecedented! There hadn’t been the slightest attempt on the side of the governor to respect even a minimum of protocol. And now this question shot directly at him before he could even gather his wits. Trying to sound calm, he answered: “Some problem has come up in our work that required the expertise of one of our men up at the border. They went to fetch that man.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” the Dzungda insisted. “Why didn’t you ask for a permit?”

“I forgot...”

“You perfectly know the rules!” the governor shot back. “And you are too meticulous to forget this kind of things. So don’t try to fool me!”

“But really, I am absolutely confused...”

“Major, don’t think that this is an ordinary meeting of diplomatic chitchat,” Namgyal Tinley retorted. “Try to level with me, all right?”

“Whatever you say,” Major Fernandez capitulated.

“Ok then. You are aware of the information that Doctor Lautinger has brought to me a few days ago, aren’t you, Major?”

“That is to say...”

“Are you or are you not? For heaven’s sake, stop this cat and mouse play!” the Dzungda shouted.

“Please, Dasho, don’t get angry, you must understand how upset I am,” the major pleaded. “Indeed the information was brought to me as a rumor.”

“Good, I will accept this as an answer,” the governor replied more calmly. “The problem is that you did not hear a rumor but the bloody truth. You may take this as an official confirmation by Bhutanese government sources emanating from the capital. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Well then, let me go on. We know that you had intense radio-contact with the capital these last two days. I’m not asking you what was said since I have been extensively briefed on your conversations by our special forces working within your headquarters at Thimpu.”

Major Fernandez felt completely at a loss at this revelation. His trump cards were pulled out of his hands and he couldn’t even react.

“I’m moreover perfectly aware of the discussions you had and the decisions you took with your officers these last days here in Bumthang,” the Dzungda relentlessly continued.

“But Dasho, this you certainly understand,” the Major interjected feebly.

“Oh, I very well understand!” came the sarcastic reply from the Dzungda. “You try to cover your ass! Look Major, I’ve been in the army too and I know how things are handled when the shit hits the fan. I expect you to behave as a fellow officer under fire. I don’t want any prissy reactions from your side. We talk straight and we collaborate honestly or else I’m going to throw your whole lot out of the district first thing tomorrow when the Bhutanese army is here. Do you read me, Major?”

“I read you five,” Fernandez surrendered. “What do you want me to do?”

“That a boy!” the governor smiled. “We are both aware that the district of Bumthang will be a place of possible survival. A lot of people will try to break in. As the Dzungda of this place, I am firmly determined to defend it as well as possible. But it will not be easy. Just think of all your

fellow officers down in India. As soon as they hear the good news they will try to march up here with their troops. No internationally recognized borders will be respected anymore. From the north we can expect Chinese incursions for food into our area. Even if they will not be directly affected by the plague, they will still suffer from famine because most of the food for the Chinese invaders is brought up from the lowlands. You see Major, we can expect a lot of uninvited guests at our table.”

“Indeed Dasho, the situation will be very tough here,” Major Fernandez agreed. “But how can we defend ourselves?”

“The first thing is to be united!” the Dzongda pointed out. “You hear me, united! We have to stick together if we want to have the slightest chance of surviving. I don’t really mind your troops being alerted, but I want them to follow my orders and I don’t care whether they are Indians and as such not under my authority. Times have changed. New rules have to be worked out and this will be one of the new rules, Major.”

“I see,” the Indian noncommittally answered.

“No, you don’t see!” the governor banged his fist on the table. “I’m not asking you this, I’m ordering you this! I want you to send somebody else to the border. He is to convey this decision to your troops who are to withdraw down to this valley. As soon as they are here, we will incorporate them into our army under a joint command with me as the supreme-commander-in-chief. Got it Major?”

“Well, you have a way of making things plain,” Major Fernandez replied.

“Very well then. I’m glad you got my message. All this will be publicly discussed at an extraordinary district meeting I’m planning to hold three days from now. You and your officers of the Road Working Force and of the army are invited to join the deliberations where the major decisions will be taken.”

Surprised, Major Fernandez looked at the Dzongda. But before he could ask any questions, the governor rose and left the office shaking briefly his hand. Lost in thoughts, he followed with his eyes the cloud of dust trailing behind the Dzongda’s jeep as it sped back to the Jakar Dzong.

* * *

Even the worst potholes in the road didn’t keep him awake for more than a few seconds. The week since the meeting between the King and Doctor Lautinger had been hell for Dorji Dukpa. He tried to find a more comfortable position in the seat of his command-vehicle of the Royal Body Guards. His Sovereign had entrusted him with the command of the detachment of the Body Guards, known as the ‘Tiger Unit’, and of an elite brigade from the Royal Bhutanese Army. It was a risky idea to put men from the RBG and RBA under the command of one single man. But the King had been adamant: there was to be one and only one authority to represent him in the Bumthang district. Dorji Dukpa’s reputation and the respect for his person were tremendous even among army officers. Backed by the authority of the Druk Gyalpo, the ruler of Bhutan, they had of course accepted him as their commander. It had been a week of hasty preparations surrounded by strict secrecy. Rumors had circulated; families of soldiers had worried about the unexplained departure of their husbands and brothers. Some members of the government, aware of the catastrophe, had tried to get a ride with him to Bumthang. It had taken all the authority of the King to keep things smooth in the capital.

The final briefing with the Druk Gyalpo had been hard on Dorji Dukpa despite his soul steeled under extreme combat conditions: “As commander of the joint forces of the RBG and RBA you are to represent my authority in the district of Bumthang. This area is very dear to me and to all

Bhutanese since our most treasured religious monuments and the last resting place of my father lay there. Under no conditions is this area to fall into the hands of any intruder. I hold you personally responsible for this. You will encounter a very difficult situation there. People will not want to abide by my authority because they think that now that communications are going to be difficult, they can behave the way they want. Bumthang is a rich area and one of the few places people can take refuge in. It may well happen that Bhutan will fall apart as a nation and go back to what it was up to the last century before my family welded it into a modern nation: a loosely knit unit ruled by local warlords. The actual Dzongda of Jakar Dzong, Namgyal Tinley, is a trustworthy and highly capable man. But be aware, he is also strong willed. That is why I choose him for this difficult job. You will have to deal with him very diplomatically but also very firmly. You will carry to this effect a personal letter for him, in which I remind him of his duties towards the crown even under these extreme conditions. It is possible, even likely, that he will be tempted to gain unrestricted power over the district. It will be difficult for you, despite all your men, to keep him from doing so. I therefore advise you to adapt a flexible attitude. He will need you and you will need him to keep things orderly. It is not the immediate and apparent balance of power that counts. You have to think of the long term. That means that your first priority is to keep your fighting force intact. The loyalty of your officers and soldiers towards you must be preserved in order to be able to defend the authority of the constitutional organization of Bhutan as soon as things have cooled down.

For the time being, I will have to remain here in the capital to set an example: the central government under my direction is functioning as always. When time is ripe, I will travel throughout my country on foot as my predecessors did and rally the population of Bhutan under the authority of Our House. However, it is by no means certain whether I will have the pleasure to see you again, my dear Dorji Dukpa. You have served me in an outstanding way during your whole career and we have successfully managed many crises together. To show you my gratitude I decided to offer you this Patang, the sword my father used to wear on official occasions. Its possession puts you on the same level as any Dzongda of Bhutan. This is made clear in the document I give you together with the sword, my friend.”

Dorji Dukpa, overwhelmed by emotion, had saluted stiffly and knelt down to receive the precious sword from the hands of his ruler. It now was safely wrapped in a yellow silk scarf lying in his box of personal belongings in the rear of the bumping car. The voice of his driver brought him out of his brooding: “We are arriving at the sawmill in Geytsa, Sir. Do you want to stop here?”

“Yes, pull to the side!” he ordered. “We will check whether all our cars are following.”

The commander of the Tigers climbed stiffly from his car and stretched his aching bones. In no time, tens of people came to greet them and to inquire about the reason of their presence. Such a concentration of army vehicles and soldiers was unusual for this remote area. Dorji Dukpa took advantage of the situation to spread the rumor that their force was going to spend some time in the Bumthang district for extensive training. He made sure that the message was well heard by the crowd gathered around his vehicle. As soon as the last truck had arrived he called for the transmission-officer: “Establish radio-contact with the wireless station at the Jakar post-office. Send the following message: ‘In care of Dasho Dzongda Jakar Dzong stop Army convoy arriving eighteen hours Bumthang valley stop Send advance party to direct troops to camping grounds stop Provide food for tonight stop Meeting requested with yourself upon arriving stop signed Dorji Dukpa, Commander-in-Chief RBG and RBA.’”

He climbed back onboard of the command-vehicle and ordered the convoy on. In less than an hour he would have his first decisive meeting with Tinley Namgyal. He knew the Dzongda well.

They were of the same age and had undergone their officer's training together in India. He was a tough man, sure of himself but on the whole, a reasonable chap. It wouldn't be easy to have the upper hand though.

The view from the top of Kiki-Là, the pass giving access to the Bumthang valley, was spectacular as always. White mountain peaks formed a majestic background to an enchanting, wide valley stretching for miles from north to south. Dark-green pine trees formed a dense cover on the smoothly rising slopes on each side. Towards the bottom of the valley, the lighter green of the pasture-grounds was blotted by white and brown spots of small hamlets from where smoke-columns rose lazily into the clear mountain-sky. Small cattle were grazing between the trees of the orchards. Dorji Dukpa's heart was aching at the idea that this fairylike 'Shangri-Là' was going to be the battleground of desperate people fleeing their cruel destiny. Dusk was setting in when they arrived at the village lying at the foot of the Jakar Dzong. The welcome party was waiting for them, headed by the Dungpa, the assistant administrator of the Dzong. Dorji Dukpa wasn't too surprised that the Dzongda hadn't come himself. The subtleties of protocol and the show of face were of course still mandatory. Without showing his irritation, he greeted the Dungpa: "Thank you for coming to meet us. Please indicate to my officers the place where my men can put up the camp."

"You mean the Body Guards, Commander?"

"No, the whole bunch. I'm the commanding officer of both RBG and RBA men."

The Dungpa trying to hide his surprise gave the necessary instructions to the officers and then turned back to Dorji Dukpa: "May I please ask you to come with me? The Dzongda is waiting for you and would be very pleased to have you as a guest in the Dzong for dinner tonight."

As they arrived in the courtyard of the Jakar Dzong, Namgyal Tinley stepped out of the building to greet his former comrade-in-arms: "I am very glad to see you again, Dorji. Too bad it has to be under such inauspicious circumstances."

"Indeed, Namgyal, me too, I would have liked to see you on a happier day," Dorji Dukpa replied. "It still is a great pleasure to be with you after all these years."

"Please come inside," the Dzongda urged. "My wife is preparing a good supper for us. But before that, let's go to my office. I think we have a lot of things to discuss that should not wait too long."

"What is the information from the capital?" Namgyal Tinley opened the observation round.

"Well, Doctor Lautinger's news were double-checked by our government," Dorji Dukpa informed him. "We have good links to the Swiss authorities. They unfortunately confirmed his story whereas New Delhi denied any such information. We got ambivalent answers from the United Kingdom. American sources are not government but from two big universities. They gave us the same pessimistic picture."

"Does that mean that there is still doubt about the plague?" the Dzongda ventured.

"No, my friend, we can't fool ourselves," Dorji replied sadly. "All evidence in our possession points to the fact that the catastrophe is well underway even though most official sources will still try to deny it."

"So we'll have to prepare for the worst," Namgyal mused.

"Please tell me what are the instructions from our King?"

"Before we talk about them, why don't you tell me more about the local situation, Namgyal?"

"Pretty bad, I'm afraid to say!"

"That is?"

"As I informed the government, the rumor has spread to almost the whole district."

"How could that happen?"

“Somebody was listening at my door when Doctor Lautinger came to inform me.”

“Who listened?” Dorji insisted.

“I think it was the Nepali Chowkidhar.” the Dzongda answered. “That’s why I took some decisions we have to talk over together.”

“Such as?”

“First thing, Dorji,” the Dzongda explained, “we have to call the population of the district to an extraordinary district meeting. I want to inform them fully about what is happening.”

“Why?” Dorji couldn’t hide his surprise.

“The thing is that I was contacted by several people representing their respective communities more or less officially. There are of course the Swiss. They naturally were the first to know. Although they do not count numerically speaking, they still are useful allies... or disturbing adversaries...because of their technical know-how. Then I had to go through a showdown with the Indian commanding-officer of the Road Worker Force, Major Fernandez.”

“A sly fox,” Dorji put in.

“Indeed, but not much backbone,” the Dzongda noted. “He tried to pull a few tricks but thanks to the good information from the capital I could handle that. He alarmed their forces at the northern border. They have some two hundred men stationed up there. I ordered him to get them down here and have them incorporated into our own forces.”

“I see, you took quite some decisions,” Dorji noncommittally stated.

“You don’t like them?” Namgyal Tinley shot back.

“No, on the contrary, I would have done the same. Do you think the Indians will like the idea?”

“I made it clear to Major Fernandez that he could take it or leave it: without cooperation from their side, I was going to throw them out of my district...”

“You were going to throw them out?” Dorji smilingly asked.

“Well of course,” the Dzongda hastily added, “your men will throw them out, won’t they?”

“Hm, I’ll have to think about it.”

“You do that,” the governor nervously said. “The Indians weren’t the last group to announce trouble. There are also the Tibetans.”

“The Tibetans?”

“Yeah, they can be a pain in the neck.”

“How many of them are in the district?” Dorji Dukpa inquired.

“Roughly speaking about ten thousand including women, children and old men. People capable of fighting, maybe three thousand.”

“Armed?”

“Not really, but a few old guns here and there.”

“And what kind of trouble did they promise you?”

“They want to be considered equal to the Bhutanese and take part in the assembly.”

“If not...?”

“They’ll withdraw to the forests and start a guerilla warfare,” the Dzongda informed Dorji.

“That means a lot of people to keep in line,” Dorji Dukpa pointed out. “I don’t think that we can match them all if it comes to a confrontation.”

“That’s exactly what I thought,” the governor eagerly replied. “And that’s why I think we should make plans to incorporate these forces into one single combat-unit capable of defending the district. What do you think, Dorji?”

“I agree with you on that point, Namgyal. There remains however one point to be discussed...”

“Which is?”

“To put it bluntly: who’s going to run the show? I mean, to be perfectly clear, who is going to be the commander of that force?”

“You, of course!” the governor unflinchingly answered.

“That is not what Major Fernandez radioed to Thimpu yesterday, my friend!” Dorji Dukpa dryly stated. He was amused to see the color drain from the face of the Dzungda at this revelation.

“What did this asshole tell his headquarter?” the Dzungda defended himself.

“That the Indian troops were to be put under Bhutanese command with you as the supreme commanding-officer.”

“But I’m the Dzungda of this district...”

“That still doesn’t make you the commander-in-chief of our troops. The King is very clear on this matter,” the commander of the Royal Body Guards said presenting the written orders of the Druk Gyalpo to the Dzungda. The governor read the letter with trembling hands.

“All right, that’s what His Majesty orders,” he acknowledged. “Now what are we going to do?”

“You mean you’re not going to respect his will?” Dorji Dukpa menacingly asked.

“No, no, don’t get it wrong!” the governor hastily replied. “I fully accept the authority of the King. But we have to be realistic. He is in Thimpu and soon it will be impossible to travel back and forth unless you go over the northern route on foot.”

“So what?”

“Well, it means that we two are representing the constitutional authority...”

“I heard you right: the constitutional authority?”

“Yes. Well, that is to say, the authority...period!”

“I see. You are dreaming of setting up an independent district rule here, aren’t you?”

“Look Dorji, try to look at things as they are. From a practical point of view that’s what is going to happen: we will be on our own. If we want to hold things together here, we better not fight among us. Don’t we, Dorji?”

“From a practical point of view...as you put it...there is something in what you say. But I still do not like your attitude towards the supreme authority of our ruler.”

“I think you got me all wrong,” the Dzungda backtracked, “I didn’t challenge the Crown. I don’t want to become a local warlord. I want to run things smoothly here.”

“We agree on this point,” Dorji answered. “But that’s not enough for me.”

“What else do you want?”

“I want to know who commands the troops, it’s as easy as that!” In the ensuing silence, he observed the Dzungda as he nervously got up and paced to and fro in the office. Dorji was amused to see the Dzungda walk around his desk and sit down on his chair resuming thus his position of power.

“Look Dorji, I want to avoid a stalemate between the two of us. So let’s strike a deal: I will officially be the supreme political authority of the district and you will be the Commander-in-Chief, the supreme military authority. But I want to hear from you that we are not going to disagree publicly on any issues that will come up as long as this situation of isolation lasts. And I want you to confirm this to the civil and religious authorities at the upcoming district assembly.”

Dorji Dukpa got up from his chair and walked over to the desk. Holding out his hand he said evenly: “You’ve got a deal there!”

They left the office to go to the Dzungda’s apartment, where deliciously smelling food awaited them.

* * *

A cold wind pushed heavy monsoon clouds over a grey sky. Gusts of rain drenched the people who struggled up the steep path leading to the Jakar Dzong. In the middle of the huge entrance gate stood the imposing figure of the Dzungda, clad in his best Bakkhoo weaved from red and yellow raw silk of his home district of Tashigang. He wore the red scarf of office thrown over his right shoulder and his Patang, the ceremonial sword of the Bhutanese dignitaries. Personally, he welcomed every group of villagers and told them how to proceed to the assembly hall located in the main monastic building. He met anxious looks as the people respectfully bowed to him. Angry faces from Tibetans mustered him, showing defiance. The Indians saluted stiffly as they walked by. The Swiss made a show of being casual. The courtyard and the corridors of the Dzong leading to the altar-room were lined by soldiers. Norbu Genzin Rimpoche sat in front of the statue of Guru Rimpoche. At right angles, two rows of monks took up the space next to him. Hundreds of butter lamps illuminated the statue and the old Thankas. The flickering light gave the pictures an eerie quality of living reality. Along the walls, the Royal Body Guards wearing their red berets, stood immobile with hand clasped in their back, silently surveying the room as it filled with people.

The Dzungda entered with the last group. He walked up to the Rimpoche and curtly bowed in front of the venerable Lama before he sat down on a cushion next to the monk, establishing thus his authority in the eyes of the audience. The murmurs gave way to the sound of ceremonial drums, cymbals, longhorns and the deeply vibrating song of the monks. The essence of burning incense swept through the air adding to the solemnity of the moment. A blow on the big gong brought the music to an abrupt end. The voice of Genzin Norbu Rimpoche echoed from the high walls as he recited a blessing. Judging from the expressions on the faces of the people, the Dzungda felt that the intensity of the Lama's incantation was not lost on the audience. When the Rimpoche had finished his prayer, the governor got to his feet and addressed the assembly:

“Our precious teacher, Genzin Norbu Rimpoche, has given us his blessing and we thank him deeply. This blessing was meant for all the people of this area, whether Bhutanese or foreign friends. Let me make this clear right at the beginning. You will be surprised to hear me say this, just as you were surprised when I called you together for this extraordinary meeting in the Dzong. So far, such an event has never taken place. The reason for my call, as you will see, gives ample justification to my decision.”

He briefly paused to look at the assembly breathlessly suspended at his lips before resuming:

“Rumors of a coming disaster have spread throughout the district. The precise nature of this catastrophe is unclear to most of you and thus creates anguish and inadequate reactions among the population of our district. I therefore decided, in accordance with Commander Dorji Dukpa, personal envoy of his Majesty, to give you a complete and honest information about the crisis we are going to face very soon.”

Murmurs of surprise at this information went through the crowd quickly, silenced by the strong voice of the Dzungda: “Our friend from Switzerland, Doctor Lautinger, received terrifying information from his brother working at the biggest university of Switzerland. In a letter, he informed our friend about a worldwide plague, ready to spread over the entire planet and capable of wiping out all life on earth...”

Pandemonium broke out at these words. People started crying, tearing their hair and shouting at each other. It took all the authority of the Royal Body Guards to restore order before the governor could carry on with his speech: “I am sorry to have caused you such distress, but it is my duty to inform you to the last detail about what we have to expect. Let me tell you right now that we belong to the lucky few because the plague is expected to affect only areas whose altitude

is less than 1700 meters. If this holds true, the immediate effects of the plague will spare our area. But as you will later understand, we'll have to face other dangers just as serious as the plague itself. Now what is this plague? For years, petroleum, as a source of energy, has gradually been replaced by what is known as the BANG-compound. This substance looked inoffensive enough in the beginning but slowly it became clear that something dreadful was evolving from this technology..."

No sound came from the crowd as the governor mercilessly explained the full extent of the disaster to his people. Even the faces of the battle-steeled bodyguards became white as the unacceptable truth was revealed.

"...and I therefore ask you all to cooperate and help us to work for the survival of as many people as possible in this area. We must stand together or we will go under together in this storm rising," the Dzungda concluded. "Commander Dorji Dukpa will now address the honorable assembly to inform you about the decisions that we have jointly taken to ensure the safety of this district. You will then have the possibility to ask questions and make suggestions. Please, Commander Dukpa."

Stepping in front of the crowd, the head of the Royal Body Guards addressed them in his deep and clear voice: "As the personal representative of our beloved King, I first want to convey the message of His Majesty to the people of Bumthang." Taking a piece of paper from his breast pocket, he began to read: "Dear Bhutanese citizens and dear foreign friends, the news you have heard from your local authorities must unfortunately be confirmed by us. In these difficult times, we and the Royal Government of Bhutan ask you to stand with the legal authorities of our nation as represented by Dzungda, Tinley Namgyal, and our personal representative, Commander Dorji Dukpa. They will lead you in the coming struggle that you will have to endure to make your district a stronghold, where precious human life can be preserved. It is only under this condition that you will be victorious. Fighting among you will bring destruction to all. Every person, presently living in the area of Bumthang has our personal promise that he or she can stay on, provided they are loyal to the supreme authority of the Bhutanese Crown. As soon as prevailing conditions will allow travel, we will come to your place to share your difficulties and to assist in any possible way.

May the spiritual guidance of our respected Lamas help you and may Lord Buddha protect this holiest place of Bhutan where the remains of our beloved, late King are resting forever."

It took all his soldier's inner strength to show an impassive face as he continued his speech:

"Dasho Dzungda and myself are determined to undertake everything in our power to make this place safe and worth living in. Let there be no doubts among you: we have the means to keep up law and order in the area. The loyalty and strength of the bodyguards present here are beyond discussion. They are all members of the Tiger-Force."

Respectful murmurs were heard in the crowd before the Commander could carry on: "The soldiers of the RBA, the Bhutanese Army, were handpicked every single one, and they are determined to be as good as the Tigers. So nobody should be fooled into believing that he can do, as he wants. You will realize that the worst thing that could happen to us is anarchy. We will be a small community that has to defend itself against invaders. Moreover, we will have to rely on our own resources. This means that a very strict system of food rationing will be introduced right away. Any violation of the rules that will be issued shall be punished by death penalty! This is in accordance with our constitution under martial law, which hereby is introduced with immediate effect as decided jointly by Dasho Dzungda and myself."

Clasping his hands behind his back, he slowly balanced himself back and fro stretching to his full length. His piercing look met frightened faces but the assembly voiced no objection as he

resumed: “As to the military organization, let me tell you this much: The RBA will have the task of defending the district’s limits as far as the five main valleys of the Bumthang district are concerned. That is Chumey in the southwest, Ura to the northeast, and Choekhor in the center, Tang to the north and finally Chamkhar to the northwest. The Royal Body Guards will be mobile and give a hand to the local police force as asked for by the Police Officer. The Royal Body Guards will also have the task of training young people to build up a militia. They will help the armed forces and the population with any difficulty that may arise. All nationalities are welcomed into this militia-force,” he added staring at the silent Tibetan community. “As to the Indian border troops, what news can you give us today, Major Fernandez?”

Surprised and frightened, the Indian Officer got to his feet and saluted: “Sir, we are without news from them, but as per order of yourself, I sent them a message as soon as possible.”

“No wonder, Major, that you didn’t get an answer so far. Let me tell you about this Indian army force: since it was a well-guarded military secret you were not informed that these troops are of a special kind. Bhutan could not accept soldiers of Indian origin on its territory. It was therefore agreed between the Royal Government and the Government of India that the units stationed up at the border were to be selected among the 22nd regiment of paratroops.”

As Major Fernandez’ face went white, Dorji Dukpa smilingly continued: “I can see that you are aware that the twenty second regiment is formed exclusively by Tibetans, also known as the Tigers, just as we are. Let me tell you another secret: it is no coincidence that we carry the same name. We are loyal to the same authority! I just want to add for the benefit of our Tibetan friends here that they will not be able to draw any profit from this fact, as the Tibetan Tigers have pledged obedience to our King, whose authority for the time being, I am the only one to represent here in Bumthang!”

The Dzongda’s face did show no emotion at the revelation of this fact. He felt glad that he had struck a deal with the Commander. Judging from the unbending authority of Dorji Dukpa, there was no doubt in his mind that he would be on his way to some jail in Thimphu had he plotted against the King.

“We now have to address the issue of what is going to happen in the next few days or weeks,” Dorji Dukpa went on. “From reliable sources in southern Bhutan, we learned that troop movements of a disorderly type are taking place in the states of Assam and West Bengal. From its radio communications we learned that the North-Eastern Command of the Indian Army does not control these movements any more. Our government has decided to oppose minimum resistance at the border itself and to withdraw our troops immediately to higher regions should their positions become untenable. This means that we have to expect an influx of thousands of people to areas above two thousand meters. Our area being higher up, we can hope that the flow will abate somewhat before it reaches our district. We will still be faced with a big number of refugees. We will have to decide what our attitude towards these people will be.”

He stopped shortly in his speech to let the meaning of his last sentence sink into the minds of the people in the assembly and then resumed: “Dasho Dzongda and myself feel that this issue must be debated publicly because the ethic implications are such that a decision by all the people of the area is called for.”

The Dzongda got up from his seat and addressed the assembly: “Before we get into this highly emotional issue, I would like to make a statement: There is no doubt that hundreds or even thousands of people will try to reach this place. Before we start a discussion on whether we let them in or not, we should answer two questions first. Are we able to stop them really? And can we support an increase of the population in the area without all starving to death? Before discussing my first question, I would like to hear the answer to the second question from our

Agricultural Officer. Please step forward and explain to the assembly what our resources in food production are!”

A sturdy Bhutanese man with grey hair stood up and came forward. With a shaking voice he started to explain: “Food production in the district is in excess of the demands. We currently have a population of approximately twenty-five thousand people in the district. Main food production takes place in the valleys that Commander Dukpa is prepared to defend. All types of food necessary for basic alimentation are produced locally. I will give you the exact metric tons of each product as quickly as possible. The land available for agriculture is not fully used in the district. If we cultivate flat forest areas we might gain something like twenty-five percent of surface for farming. I would guess that we could feed maybe ten thousand more people.”

At this statement angry voices came from the assembly. A village headman, from the Tang valley stood up and shouted: “Are you a sorcerer or the Agricultural Officer? In the Tang valley, we are cultivating every bloody piece of soil we can!”

“I was speaking of the whole district,” the Agricultural Officer defended himself. “And you people in Tang were never keen to accept our advice about modern farming-techniques...”

“With your modern techniques, are you shitting potatoes and peeing milk?” came the prompt reply from the Tang-guapo. Despite the tension in the room, this outburst brought a good deal of laughter to the tense assembly.

“Silence!” the Dzongda shouted. “The issue at hand is far too serious to quarrel about such stupid things. The fact is that we can boost food production by at least twenty percent. I guess that ten thousand more people can live here, but that probably is the maximum. Any comments?”

All eyes converged on the figure of Genzin Norbu Rimpoche who rose from his seat:

“I have little to offer in terms of practical means for survival. Nevertheless, I feel that the survival of a lucky population will only be possible if we take into account a few basic ideas as our Lord Buddha taught them to us. It is said that to be born as a human being is an extremely rare and auspicious event. The human body is a unique vehicle in the sense that it carries the most evolved type of consciousness known on this planet. Even though an ant carries the Buddha within, it is clear that the human being is closest to the possibility of becoming a fully enlightened being. His life is therefore precious and may not be put into jeopardy lightly. The bad karma of this planet has brought about a disaster of unprecedented dimensions. Very few human beings of this world will survive. They will be the only remaining vehicles of this highly evolved consciousness. We must undertake whatever is in our power to preserve these few and hope that in a distant future, we will be able again to spread over the disease ridden plains again.

In one of his previous incarnations, the Lord Buddha was captain of a ship, on which a hundred merchants had gone aboard to cross the river. Among them was one man who had decided to kill the ninety-nine other merchants during the night and to steal their goods. Buddha, in his omniscience knew this. He decided to kill the future murderer with his own hands to preserve the life’s of the ninety-nine honest men. He thus accepted to take this bad karma upon himself in order to avoid even greater bad karma to happen. We should therefore strain our compassion to the limit of the possible, but not any further. If we listen to our agricultural officer, we understand that ten thousand more human beings can live with us. So let them in and stop the rest!”

Sitting down slowly on his cushion he made a sign to the monks who took up their instruments and started to play their hypnotizing music again.

The Dzongda understood that at this point the spiritual authority of the Rimpoche had decided the issue and that further discussions had to be delayed. With a sign of his hands he invited the assembly to get up and leave the altar-room.

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