

## Chapter 38

Secretary Ma Speaks Out Against Demons  
Norbu Swears a Solemn Oath

The very next morning, when Margaret went to the single workers' refectory for breakfast, he was sitting there facing the door. She had never seen him in the refectory before—him, nor any other Tibetans. People said they had their own food, which they preferred. When Norbu saw her, he gave her the insolent grin and called out very loud: “GOOD MORN-ING!” in his execrable English.

Margaret ignored him. She had some experience of boys making a nuisance of themselves. It had happened a lot at the Conservatory. A boy would follow her around, turn up everywhere she went, look at her with a sort of mournful expression, or pass her silly notes. You could stop it by just being frank with them; or, in the worst cases, by telling one of the leaders. She paid no attention to Norbu, just went to the counter for her porridge and batter-stick as usual. When she had handed in her coupon, she went to sit at the other end of the room, at a table by herself, as was her custom. At once Norbu picked up his dish and came over to join her.

“Go away,” said Margaret at once. “I don't like you.”

Norbu gave her another yard of grin. “Why not?”

“Because you're ugly, dirty and stupid.”

The boy raised his eyebrows and inverted the grin in mock dismay. “That's very comprehensive.”

“Go away. I think you're disgusting.”

“Oh, Teacher Han, don’t be so cruel. I promise not to talk about *tongfang*.”

“Oh! You’re really outrageous! Please go away immediately! If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll speak to the leaders about you.”

“The leaders would approve of my actions. Don’t you know about the new directive from Beijing?”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The leaders in Beijing want to encourage marriage between Tibetans and Chinese. So that we poor backward Tibetans can get some of your strong Chinese blood.”

“I don’t believe you. What do you know about directives from Beijing? You talk as if you were a leader yourself. You’re just a worker, like me. And I would rather kill myself than marry you.”

The boy took a mouthful of porridge, looking across at her over the spoon. “Of course. I’m just a silly Tibetan. Or am I a hard Tibetan? Which kind of Tibetan am I?”

This embarrassed Margaret. “Oh. You know we say that?”

Norbu laughed, so loud that people looked at them. “Of course. I can understand Chinese, can’t I? How can I be a good citizen of the Motherland if I don’t know Chinese? I know everything you say, and everything you think. Now, how about your situation? How’s your Tibetan? *Ngye jyuba kyen song ngye?*”

“Of course I don’t know any Tibetan. I’m Chinese. This is China. Chinese is our national language. All citizens must know Chinese. But there’s no need for any one to learn minority languages. Why should anybody do that? Minority languages are no use. What would be the advantage to me of learning Tibetan?”

“The advantage would be, that you would know what we say about you.”

“Who cares what you say? Who cares what you think? What are you doing in here anyway? Why aren’t you eating your Tibetan food? Barley-cakes and buttered tea!” She meant this to be teasing, but it didn’t come out quite right. However, Norbu seemed to take no offense.

“Why don’t *you* sit with your Chinese colleagues to eat?”

“What? I prefer to eat alone, that’s all.”

“Because you’re scared of them.”

“Nonsense! Don’t be stupid. Why should I be scared of my colleagues? You really say such crazy things.”

“Because you know they think you’re a loose woman. You have no face with them.”

This was too true to deny. But really, this crude boy and his crude manners were not to be tolerated.

“How about you? You think I’m a loose woman, too. That’s why you’re following me. You think one man has already taken advantage of me. Now you want to be the second one. Isn’t that right? Well, you’re dreaming. I would never let you touch me. If you tried to touch me, I would immediately report you to the leaders.”

Quickly, deliberately, he reached out his big hand and touched her sleeve. She pulled away. He was not grinning now. “Cheap?” he said. [The Chinese idiom for “take advantage of somebody” contains a word which also means “cheap”. He had picked out this word from her sentence.] With utmost seriousness he said: “I would pay ten thousand silver pieces for one kiss.”

“Oh! Outrageous!” Margaret stood up. “Now I really shall! I’ll report you to the leaders! You’ve made trouble for yourself now, you’ll see! Oh!” She picked up her dish and walked out.

\* \* \*

To Margaret’s surprise, Norbu’s knowledge of directives from Beijing turned out to be accurate. The very next day there was a big Political Study meeting in the auditorium. Everybody in the station was there, both Tibetans and Chinese. This was new in itself. Usually Political Study meetings were held by unit—in Margaret’s case, by the middle school—and Tibetans didn’t participate. They were supposed to, but they just didn’t, and nobody bothered about it because nobody thought it important. Tibetans didn’t count. They wouldn’t have understood what was going on, anyway. When there was anything they had to know, they were called to special meetings in their own units.

On this occasion, however, a whole area of the auditorium—a full

third of the seats—was occupied by Tibetans. There was a guest speaker, too. He came up on the stage with the Party Secretaries, and stepped out to the front with Secretary Ma. He was thin, bald and old, with a look of great hauteur on his bony face. By Nakri standards he was very smartly dressed, with a well-worn but clean and neatly-pressed Sun Yatsen suit and a white inner collar. On his nose he wore a pair of pince-nez. Margaret had seen pince-nez before; old Bian, the sight-reading instructor at the Conservatory had worn them. To a few of those in the auditorium, however, the pince-nez were the most interesting thing they had seen that year, and there was a buzz of comment, some of the Tibetans pointing and calling out loud in their stupid, uncouth way. This was a minority reaction, however. To most of those present the man with the pince-nez was, apparently, a familiar figure.

Secretary Ma began reading from a sheet of paper. It was something about splittists. Margaret lost interest at once, as she always did in Political Study. However, she no longer had the habit of bringing a book to read, as she had at college. The middle school Political Study meetings were too small, you couldn't just sit reading a book. You had to go through the motions. This one was big enough that no-one would pay attention if she read a book, but she didn't have one.

She looked round the hall. Everybody was there. There must have been three hundred people crammed into the place. All the workers, the cadres, the Tibetans, her own students . . . Among the Tibetans she saw Norbu. He was sitting with his arms folded, and appeared to be listening intently to Secretary Ma.

Secretary Ma stopped reading and stepped back. The guest speaker, the one with the pince-nez, began reading. Margaret could not understand a word, but from the buzzing, hiccuping sound of his speech she assumed it was Tibetan. The man seemed not to have much interest in what he was reading. When he had finished he looked up at Secretary Ma. Secretary Ma stepped forward again.

“Comrades, we must be vigilant! We all feel that we are very remote here, far from important places. But no place is too remote for the splittist demons to find it and infiltrate it! Everybody must be alert! If you see any act of splittist sabotage, or hear any of the vile splittist poison-

propaganda, report it immediately! If you fail to report it, then you yourself are no better than the splittist snakes and turtles, who want to split and destroy our Motherland! Those who fail to report will be dealt with just as the splittist demons themselves! They will be smashed to pieces by the people's justice!" (Secretary Ma paused to ventilate his sinuses and spit into a cuspidor behind him.) "Comrades! Let's all work together, one heart one soul, to exterminate this menace! Let's drive out the filthy demons, back to hell! Let's cherish the Motherland! Remember the Three Loves: Love the Party, Love the Country, Love Socialism! Let's try to keep that spirit in our work, and in our daily lives! And comrades . . ." Here Secretary Ma lost his place, and shuffled his papers for a while. ". . .Comrades! We Han Chinese can also make a bigger contribution to the elimination of the splittist poison. We should make friends with our compatriots in the National Minorities. We shouldn't hold ourselves aloof from them. We are all one blood, one flesh. One Motherland. There should be more friendships between ourselves and our brothers and sisters in the minorities. Not only friendships: even marriages!" This caused a stir in the audience. Some of the single girls put their hands over their mouths and dropped their heads in embarrassment. One or two of the Tibetans yelped with surprise, and looked over at the Chinese section of the audience. Secretary Ma looked up sternly. "Why not? We are all Chinese, aren't we? If the Han Chinese look down on the minority peoples, and refuse to mix with them, what is that but a kind of splittism? Isn't that so? Isn't that just another way of splitting the Motherland? We should think about this point, comrades. In future the Party hopes to see more marriages between Han Chinese and our various nationalities."

Secretary Ma stopped abruptly and stepped back. The haughty Tibetan began reading again. Apparently it was the same text, but this time when he came near to the end, the Tibetans all exploded with laughter. The haughty man paid no attention at all, but just went on reading in the same level voice, buzzing and hiccuping through the laughter.

\* \* \*

That evening, when Margaret went to fetch hot water from the boiler-house, Norbu was waiting for her outside the single women's dormitory. She almost walked into him. Her eyes met his for an instant, then she walked off at a brisk pace, determined not to pay any attention to him. At once he was at her side.

“*Good afternoon*, Teacher Han.”

“Go away. Go AWAY!”

“I saw you at the meeting. You see? It's quite all right. The Party wants us to get married.”

Margaret stopped. They were alone in the open outside the dormitory. The boiler-house was part of the station's power unit, in the center of the compound. “Listen to me . . .”

“Why don't you let me carry your flasks?” he interrupted.

Looking back on it much later, Margaret could see that what she did next led to everything else, everything else in her life, to the very end of her life. At the time, however, she had no idea why she did it, and cursed herself at once for a stupid error. What she *intended* to do was speak to him as sharply as she could—rudely, if necessary—to make it unmistakably clear to him that his attentions were not wanted. What she actually did, after a slight hesitation, was hand him the flasks. He took them, slipping his big hands through the handles, touching her own hands as he did so. There were four flasks, two for each hand; she was fetching water for Yong, the shortsighted girl, too. Looking at his hands she thought Norbu could just as easily have carried eight.

“All right. Come on,” said Norbu briskly. They walked on towards the boiler house. For a few paces, nothing was said. Then he turned to look at her with a new look: friendly, perhaps brotherly. “What did you think of the meeting?”

Silly question. One didn't think anything of Political Study meetings; one just endured them. “Not very interesting,” she said.

“Do you know what it was about?”

“Of course. Splittists. And . . . and relationships with the minorities.” She at once regretted the word “relationships”, which in Chinese carries a tinge of salacity.

“No. I meant, do you know the reason for it?”

“Reason? What do you mean? The reason was, that Secretary Ma wanted to have a meeting. That’s all.”

“Secretary Ma is a good soldier. He carries out the orders of his superiors.”

“Of course. That’s what he should do. And I suppose you know every word of those orders.”

Norbu laughed. “No. But I know the reason for them. All the Tibetans know. We always get a big meeting at this time of year.”

“Why is that?”

“Because there’s always trouble in Tibet in March. March ’59, that was when the People’s Liberation Army released us from the grip of feudal oppression and restored us to the warm bosom of the Motherland. Every year, every March, there are demonstrations in Lhasa. Then, a few weeks later, when the leaders in Beijing have issued the directives, we get a big meeting to warn against splittism.”

“Demonstrations? To commemorate the victory, you mean?”

He laughed. “Not exactly, Yuezhu.”

This was the first time he had ever used her given name. At once she felt that odd sensation in her gut, as she had two days before, on the mountain. They were silent again for a while.

To break the silence, she said: “Who was the Tibetan cadre who spoke?”

Norbu did not answer for a few paces, to the point where Margaret wondered if he had heard. Then: “That was Kesang Duoji,” he said.

He didn’t seem inclined to say anything else. They walked in silence a few yards.

“Is he an important cadre?” asked Margaret at last.

“Oh, yes. He’s a very important cadre.”

“He looked very distinguished.”

“Well, he was an aristocrat.”

“What?”

“Before he was a cadre, he was an aristocrat. Owned a lot of land here in Qinghai Province. Ruled over a lot of peasants.”

This was baffling to Margaret. The word “aristocrat” brought up an image of the villain in the army play, with upswept eyebrows and dark jowls.

“You mean he was a landlord? How could he become a high cadre, after being a landlord?” She had never heard of such a thing.

Norbu seemed to have recovered his good humor. “Oh, Tibet’s a strange country. All kinds of things are possible.”

They had reached the boiler house. They went inside, to the boiler, Norbu leading the way. He set the flasks down on the floor, which was made of stone slabs. One by one he filled them, moving each to the right and corking it as it was filled. When all was done he picked up the flasks and smiled at her. The same companionable smile. “Come on.”

Outside he walked a few paces, then stopped. “Look, Yuezhu. Look.”

Margaret was caught unawares. “What? Look at what?” She looked around, but there was nothing unusual. The power house, which was made of brick. A long wall started on their right, surrounding the yard where the coal was kept. The wall was made of lumps of stone, loosely piled and roughly cemented together. Twenty yards away was the back of the administration building. “What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“The wall. See the wall?”

“Yes. It’s a wall. So what?”

“Those stones. Where are they from?”

“I don’t know. How should I know? What does it matter?”

He was gazing at the wall with a rather silly, fond look. “From the monastery.”

“What monastery?”

“The monastery where I met you. Day before yesterday.”

“Oh. So that place was a monastery? I didn’t know.”

“Yes. It was a monastery. Until your army . . . until it was destroyed.”

“You mean it was destroyed in the insurrection?” They were walking back toward the dormitory now.

“Even before, actually.”

Margaret felt a little uncomfortable. “Well, the stones are more use in the wall than in the monastery.”

Norbu said nothing to this. Then: “Would you like me to show you around the monastery?”

“Show me around”? You talk as if it was still in one piece.”

“All right. Show you around the ruins of the monastery.”

“No. Why should I want that? Sounds very boring.”

“It’s good to go walking. Healthy. Get you away from the station.”

“No. I don’t trust you.”

Norbu laughed his huge laugh again. Margaret felt glad to hear that laugh. The conversation had been proceeding in a way that made her feel uneasy.

“Do you think I will rape you?”

“Hush! You shouldn’t always speak so directly. And your way of speaking is really too disgusting. If you want to find a girlfriend, you should learn some sweet words. Words a girl will like to hear. Not ‘rape’ and . . . and . . . words of that kind.”

They had almost reached the dormitory. They stopped a few paces away, out of hearing range of anyone inside. He looked at her solemnly. “Yuezhu, I think you know that I would never harm you.”

“I don’t know that at all. Deeds follow words. If you speak so roughly, of course I’m bound to suspect that you will act roughly.”

Now he looked rather sheepish. “Yuezhu, if I have spoken in a way that upset you, I am very sorry. You know, every people has its own manners. Tibetan manners are not like Chinese manners.”

Looking at him, she felt rather regretful of her own harsh words. “Oh, all right. It doesn’t matter. Now, give me the water.”

He made no move. “Say you’ll come walking with me. On Sunday.”

“No, I won’t. And that’s that. Now, give me the water.”

Instead of giving it to her, he set down the flasks on the ground, two by each foot. “You really don’t trust me, do you?”

“No, I don’t. And in any case, I don’t want to get involved with you.”

Norbu had unfastened the top button of his jacket. He pulled it aside, and Margaret caught a glimpse of the picture he had showed her at the monastery, the bald man with glasses.

“I showed you this picture. Do you remember?” He looked extremely serious now.

“Yes, I remember. Your father. Will you please let me . . .”

“Why do you think I carry it?”

“I suppose you have strong feelings for your father.”

Norbu passed his right hand into the jacket, with his palm toward her, so that presumably his fingertips were against the picture. “This man means more to me than my life. Whatever he told me to do, I would do it. If he told me to leap off a mountain, I would do it at once, singing a joyful song.”

His voice was low and soft, full of emotion. Margaret was impressed.

“I can see your feelings are very deep . . .”

“This man’s flesh is my flesh. His blood is my blood. I swear, by his blood and my blood, I will never harm you. In the name of this man, Tenzin Gyatso, Gyalwa Rinpoche, I swear.”

This was said with great solemnity, the voice low but strong and firm.

“All right. I believe you.” Then, in an attempt at levity: “What complicated names you Tibetans have.”

His mood broke instantly. Here was the great grin, the confident laugh. “Then you’ll come walking with me on Sunday!”

His laugh, and his sudden change of mood, made Margaret laugh too. Laughing, she could not resist him. “All right.”

Now he was businesslike. “I’ll come here after lunch. Right here. Don’t forget.” He stepped back and, without further ado, walked away. Margaret picked up her flasks and went into the dormitory.