

## Prologue

“Holy Mother, are you alright?”

The high priestess gradually opened her eyes.

“Yes, dear. I have finally decided to stop the vision that has engulfed me these last, several days.”

The young attendant lowered her eyes and bowed her head.

“I’ll bring in the others so that we all might hear and learn from this new prophecy.”

The older woman replied, “Be sure to bring in all the young novices as well. This is as much for them as for the elders.”

“Yes, Holy Mother.”

It took only a few minutes for the group of about thirty, boys and girls and older men and women, to assemble in the high priestess’s private chamber. Everyone arranged themselves on cushions around the central figure or stood in the back.

“This morning, my children, I wish to relate to you something of the experience that has consumed me of late. Despite the rumors you might have heard, this is not a prophetic vision, predicting the kind of gloom and doom with which the oracles and soothsayers have been filling our heads in recent days. No...this vision is much more personal, for you are all in it.”

There were anxious looks around the room.

“This vision, or more accurately, this waking dream is of a time and place in the far distant future: millennia after our island home has disappeared and been forgotten. In many ways, this future seems more like our past. The conveniences we currently enjoy, the technology, even the spiritual knowledge that animates our entire culture are all gone: lost to the ages. Despite this, and though it is a time of growing spiritual darkness and materialism, there are still enlightened teachings and masters.”

“Holy Mother, why do you think such a vision, so divorced from our own present experience, came to you now? All the other prophecies urge us to change our ways in hopes of averting the foreseen disaster. How could we have any effect on events so far away or is the future already predetermined?” asked one of the young men in the back.

“That is something you will have to decide for yourself.

My own reflection on this visionary process has been that I was presented, very strongly, with images and information that are far beyond my ken. My living mind participated in this exchange and together a coherent narrative developed. Will the events I am about to describe actually occur as such? Probably not...Many things can affect changes. Are they mere fabrications devoid of truth? I would not have called you in here only to tell you entertaining stories."

There was a pause as the high priestess waited for other questions. At that moment, one of the attendants brought in some refreshment for the Holy Mother.

"Thank you, An-Suk. This is a perfect example of what I am talking about. You all know that I am very fond of this spiced fruit drink. In fact I cannot conceive of a life without it. Though it is highly unlikely that such a thing will exist in the time and place of my vision, nevertheless, somehow it was available. I enjoy it then as much as I enjoy it now."

There was light laughter around the room at the high priestess's admission.

"Holy Mother, you said that we were all in your vision. How could you tell? If it is in a time and place alien to our present experience, I would think we, too, would be quite different and unrecognizable."

"Yes, Tan-Luun, we are all quite different; but if you know yourself and others well, you can see the thread of continuity that holds our many lives together. This despite all the outer changes and...role reversals."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We have all been each other's friends, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, enemies, teachers, and students over the course of our many past and so again in our future lives. Our relationships change depending on the nature of the lessons we need to learn."

"I always want you to be my teacher, Holy Mother; not these other people."

The high priestess smiled at the little boy with sparkling eyes who was sitting right in front of her.

"So-Nam, we are to learn from all beings, because everyone has the divine spark of enlightenment. I assure you that you have been *my* teacher on many occasions in the past, as you will be on many occasions in the future."

The boy flushed red, but smiled mischievously at these words.

“Now...where should I begin? There is much that could be told. I shall begin with my death, for the events that concern us start there.”

There was unease in the group at these words, and a couple of the youngsters began to snifle.

“Holy Mother, I know you have many times taught us that in the cycle of existence, birth leads to death and death leads to rebirth, but it is still painful for us to think of your death. It means we will all be cast adrift without your love and protection.”

The high priestess sighed.

“We have all lived so many lives but always seem to be attached to the current one no matter how painful and unsatisfying it might be. It is not the death of my current life, though it, too, will most assuredly come, to which I am referring. By the time we reach this particular death of which I speak we all will have had many more lives, many more births, and so many more deaths.”

The high priestess paused again to let the group settle down.

“Maybe a short synopsis of the events preceding my death will be helpful... A great master has just died; killed by a flying barb from a criminal and a murderer who in turn was killed. I tried to save the master by doing what I could to stop the bleeding, but an artery was severed and our efforts were futile. He died in the arms of his lifelong companion and friend.”

“Were you a disciple of this great master, Holy Mother?”

“No, I was his adversary and the disciple of the evil criminal and murderer.”

There was a gasp.

“The master had tried to turn me from following a path of evil, but I had stolen his sword and spurned him. It was only when he had saved my life and taken a flying barb meant for me that my heart changed. His companion spared my life as well even though I had repeatedly fought her and tried to kill her. I was very confused by these events and people’s generosity toward me when I hardly deserved it. Later I rendezvoused with my faithful lover, who was waiting for me in a sanctuary high above a raging river. He still loved me despite the trouble I had

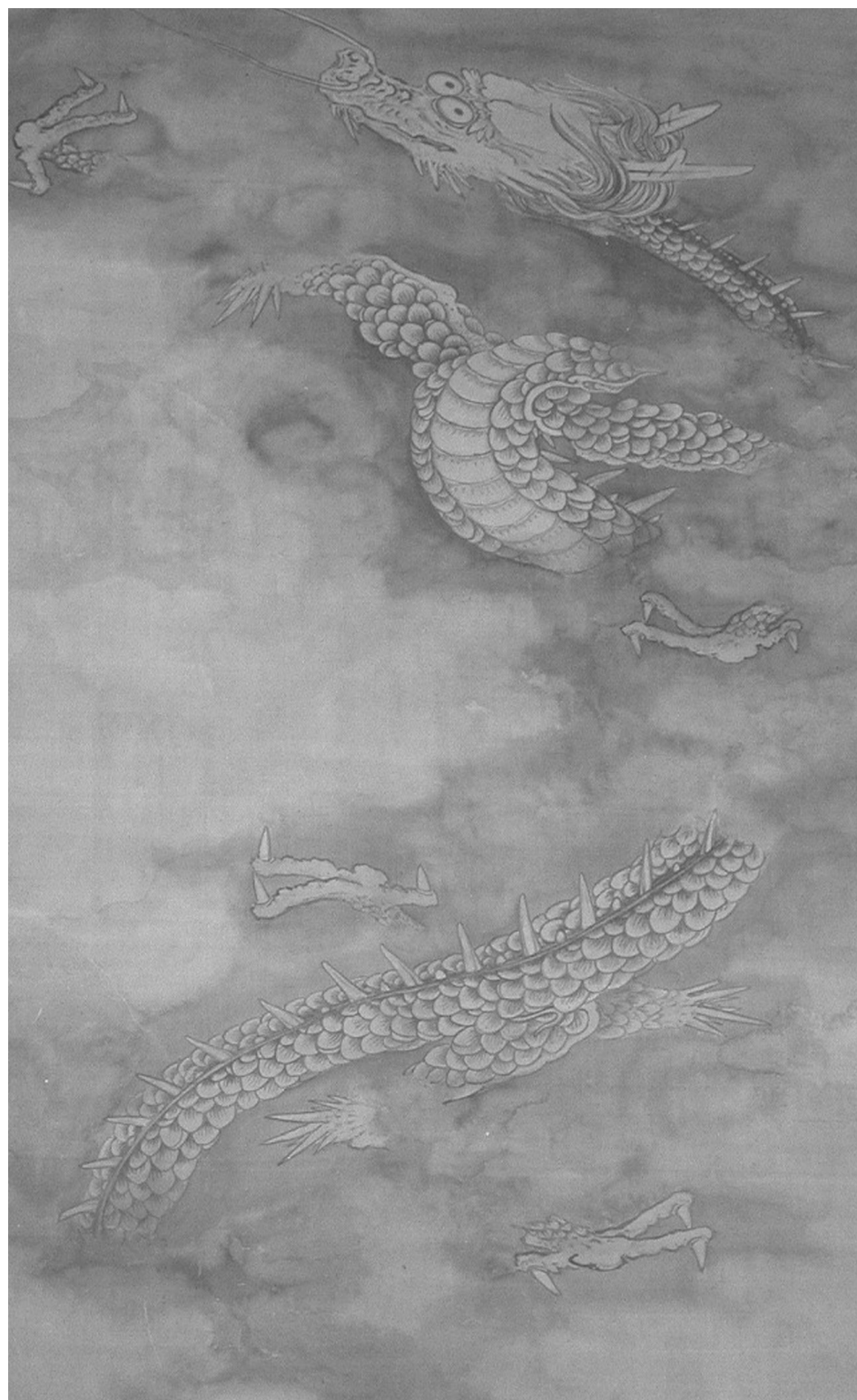
caused and only wanted us to be together. Somehow I believed that if I surrendered my life and put it in the hands of the great spirits then my lover would find his true happiness regardless of my fate. It was with this thought in mind that I left my lover and hurled myself into the abyss. My lover, though he was a fearsome bandit, could only weep. His name was Tak (*Tiger*)..."

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# **Mountain Dragon**

## **Aspiration**

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# Chapter 1

## Sam-pa Drub-mo

The midday sun was beating on their heads and there was still no sign of them. Tak and his men had been waiting for hours for the caravan to enter their ambush site. Then he saw them—vultures: hundreds of them, circling, just a ways back up in the hills. Something was wrong and he didn't like to contemplate the possibilities.

In the five years since his return to the desert, after his ill-conceived trip to the Middle Kingdom, much had changed. No longer were he and his men supreme among those who preyed on the trade routes. A new force had entered his domain, Ali Khan. This black menace had started in the far west and had relentlessly gathered strength and numbers. Whereas Tak relied on the strength of his sword and spear, Ali Khan had guns, ammunition and was totally ruthless in their use. It was only Tak's cunning and knowledge of the desert that had allowed him and his men to hold their ground. The cost, however, had been high. Tak's band had numbered over two hundred men in its heyday, but now there were just over thirty. It had been months since they had successfully taken a caravan and they needed something soon, if only to restore their confidence. This desperation had led them to abandon the lucrative Northern Trade Routes that linked central regions of the Middle Kingdom with the desert oases and ultimately with Persia, for the Southern Trade Routes between the Middle Kingdom and Tibet. Tak was Khampa Tibetan by birth and though he had long ago severed any real connection with his homeland, he and his men had often found safe haven from the authorities with the people of the Tibetan plateau, who were also extremely suspicious of their large neighbor to the east. Attacking a Tibetan caravan showed just how low he had sunk and how much he needed a successful kill.

The first thing that hit them—and this was well before they reached the site of the caravan's encampment—was the stench. The smell of death was heavy in the air and the hot desert sun was making everything worse. Even suspecting there had been a slaughter here the previous night did not prepare

them for what they saw when they came over the last rise. Before them was spread out some kind of surreal battlefield. There were carcasses of dead animals, horses and ponies mostly, and bodies of dead men strewn everywhere. At least they were animals and men originally. Not only had every man and animal been shot dead, but every single being there had had its head chopped off and other body parts severed and left lying here and there, some of them already quite unrecognizable. The more Tak and his men looked at them the more their minds and hearts and guts couldn't believe they could actually be standing before such a scene. Slowly, they started to enter the charnel field. Most of their horses refused to move; several bolted altogether once their riders dismounted. Tak walked slowly amongst the remains, careful not to step on someone's body, or hand, or... His mind kept battling between believing and disbelieving; maybe this was some horrible nightmare, and he was still in his sleeping roll and he would be getting ready for the day's real raid when he woke up in a few minutes. It seemed that everything that had the slightest value had already been stripped away. Saddles, clothes, weapons, even the cooking pots had been taken, and the smoldering cooking fires had been kicked apart with not even a teapot left on them.

Toward the center of this jumble of death were the remains of the main tent. From the looks of it, it belonged to a wealthy and well-positioned family. With his sword, Tak lifted the shards of canvas that still draped this spot, his mind already numbed as to what he would discover. Under the canvas were the bloody remains of the nobleman and his wife. Their stripped and mutilated bodies were lying in a heap near what was probably once their bed. The man's head had been severed, and a bloody pulp, which was probably its crushed remains, lay in a heap nearby. The elder woman's body was... Tak forced himself to pull his eyes away from the scene and survey the rest of the tent area. The naked remains of two, maybe three young serving girls were heaped in a corner. Three of Tak's men came and looked over his shoulder as he stood there, and all three of them turned violently away, retching up what little was left in their guts. These were men who had fought and killed next to him for years, accepting everything the desert had thrown at them. Maybe it was the stench, or the scene, or a combination of both, but something also died in every man who walked on



that field this day. Tak just stood there, angry, hurtful tears welling in his eyes. The only thing to do at this point was to gather everything together and burn it—burn it all!—so that no trace was left on this earth. And so no one else had to see or feel what was going on within him on this day, ever again. The men wrapped scarves around their faces and began the gruesome task of hauling bodies and debris and throwing them on a large fire they had built right on the site of the main tent. Tak was there, too, dragging and lifting, what it was didn't matter. It all had to be burned. As he approached the wreckage of the family's sedan chair, Tak heard a soft whimpering coming from underneath it: probably an injured pet or some other small animal, he thought, the sole survivor of the massacre. Well, he would find the poor suffering thing and quickly put it out of its misery. Then the job begun the previous night would be complete.

As he stuck his hand in, something vicious chomped down on his thumb.

"Yeow," he yelled as he jerked his hand back, wondering if whatever it was still hung on to him.

As Tak knocked over the rubble of what was left of the sedan chair, out sprang a young child about five years old, running like a rabbit with a small dagger in her hand. It took a couple of moments before recognition dawned in him, but this little banshee was definitely a girl, and of Tibetan extraction. Most of the other men in the area looked up at Tak's yell and quickly tried to make sense of what was going on through their numbed minds and hearts. Tak was sucking on his bleeding thumb as he motioned to the others to surround the girl so she couldn't get away. When the girl realized she was surrounded she stopped and slowly turned around with her dagger stretched out, ready to lash at anyone who came near her. A couple of the men were chuckling and began whispering to each other about the comedy of this situation, but as they caught sight of her eyes they didn't see the eyes of a scared little baby, they saw the steely, furious eyes of someone who would, and could, take out an eye or cut off an ear if they got in range of her knife. This, of course, was making everyone quite nervous and they wondered who wanted to risk something like that just for a little girl. Tak was creeping forward toward the girl, talking gently to her in his best colloquial Tibetan, much as he might do with a wild young pony he was trying to break or a young hawk he was trying to

train.

“Come on now, you can put the knife down, we’re not going to hurt you.”

“You’re the people that came last night and killed everybody,” came the response.

“No, no, my friends and I only arrived a short time ago. We are as upset as you are about what happened and we only want to help.” Even though this was exactly how Tak felt, the rough demeanor of Tak and his men convinced the girl otherwise.

“Even if you’re not the ones who did it, you’re just as bad as them. And now you just want to kill me, too, as I’m the only one left.”

Tak could see he wasn’t getting anywhere, and he began to worry that she was getting ready to bolt through the circle like a cornered wild animal, lashing out with her dagger at anyone in her way. His men sensed this, too, and he could see that most would be more than happy to let her run right past them if it meant they could avoid having that dagger end up in some sensitive or vital spot.

“Come on now, don’t be that way. I’ll bet you could use something to eat. We’ve got lots of food in our saddle bags, and you can have whatever you want.”

“I’m not hungry, and I won’t go anywhere with you, and I won’t put my knife down.”

Tak crept a few more feet toward her on his hands and knees so now he was less than ten feet from her.

“We aren’t going to hurt you. Look, I don’t even have a weapon.” This wasn’t exactly true. He always carried a long knife in his boot even if he didn’t have his saber with him, as was the case now. His men, of course, still had knives and sabers dangling from their waists or lashed to their backs.

“Look, my name is Tak. What’s your name?”

With this the girl spit in his face, and though he wasn’t really close enough to get hit, the effect was still the same.

“Pstte! I didn’t know Tibetans named their children Psttel!”

Things had now deteriorated pretty badly, and Tak was desperately trying to resolve this situation and quickly. Whether it was a flash of insight or something else, Tak reached into the breast pocket inside his *chuba* and pulled out something he had been keeping as the last reminder of a life long ago.