

Shadow of the Red Star

Excerpt from Chapter Ten

The White Ger

... “Your lama dell and trousers look terrible with all that dried blood.” Davaa shook his head. “It’s not good to dress like this when you are going to heaven. I’d like you to take my dell.”

“Oh no,” Baasan said. “I don’t want you to look dirty.”

“An old man can look dirty if he wants. You’re a young handsome man. You should look good. I wish my daughter Sendmaa married you and you never came here.”

Baasan ached to confess his love for Sendmaa. His voice wavered. “But by marrying my brother, Sendmaa may have saved his life.”

“Bold is not a lama. He’d have survived anyway. If your brother is anything like you, my daughter is a very lucky woman. I wish I could have seen my grandchild. I don’t even know if it was a boy or a girl.”

“You have a grandson, Davaa guyai,” Baasan said softly.

“How do you know?”

“I delivered the baby on the day we were arrested. It was a fine big boy.”

“Oh my god!” said Davaa. Tears came to his eyes. “How wonderful life is!”

Baasan stood up and walked to the small window. He gazed through the dirt-streaked window at the cloudless blue sky. A vision of Sendmaa and her newborn baby by the riverbank flashed into his mind. “Yes. Life is wonderful,” he said at last.

“Oh Baasan, please accept my dell in gratitude for telling me this good news!” Davaa stood up and began removing his dell and trousers. “As midwife to my first grandchild, you should accept my gesture and give me your dell and trousers.”

“My Dayan Deerkh Deity!” Baasan smiled as he unbuttoned his dell. “Your blue herdsman’s dell will look good on me but a little short.”

By midday, thick clouds enveloped the sun. Footsteps approached the door. Davaa grabbed Baasan’s hand. The lock was turned and the door opened. A guard looked around the room. “You four over there and you!” the guard pointed directly at Davaa.

Davaa slowly rose. Baasan attempted to stand with him, but Davaa pushed Baasan down with unexpected strength.

Davaa looked at Baasan. “Don’t be in a hurry to die,” he whispered. “Pray for a heavy rain to mask your escape. It is your only chance.”

A guard strode forward and grabbed Davaa and four other old men and pushed them out of the room. The door shut behind them.

“Escape?” Baasan whispered to himself. “We never discussed escape. How can I possibly escape?” Baasan pressed close to the window and with new purpose looked attentively at the layout of the prison.

Past an open trench in the foreground he saw lines of dark gers. Guards moved back and forth among them.

Davaa's last words echoed in his mind. "*Pray for a heavy rain to mask your escape.*"

"If it really rains, I'll find a way to cheat death for a little while, anyway," he muttered.

Baasan sat down and examined his wound. If he walked fast, it would tear and bleed. He tore a strip of red cloth from the underside of Davaa's dell and made a long bandage to wrap around his wound. He wrapped his leg from knee to mid-calf as tightly as Yanjiv had done a few days earlier.

Two guards hustled Davaa across a stretch of open space to another wing of Tahir Nagoon and into a small room. Two uniformed officers sat behind desks. High on the wall behind the officers, portraits of Choibalsan and Stalin glared from their frames. A small window on the wall to his left admitted some light. To his right stood, an odd-looking very high stool.

"Climb onto that chair!" Balgan commanded.

Davaa grabbed hold of the shoulder-high stool and tried to haul himself up.

"What happened to your dell?" Balgan demanded. "Why are you so bloody?"

"I've been urinating blood. I have a bad kidney," Davaa answered.

The younger officer caught Davaa's eye. Davaa blinked. He looked exactly like the shaman's son. Of course Od's son was in Tibet. Then he remembered the terrifying vision Od had about his son.

"Agvaan, Pick up your red pen and write everything down!" Balgan's voice interrupted Davaa's thoughts.

"So, his name was Agvaan, too. Could a Dayan Deerkh lama become an Interior Ministry inquisitor? If so, there is nothing I can assume with certainty in this world. Oh my Dayan Deerkh!" Davaa's arms grew weaker as he pondered the irony of a killer lama.

"Make him climb!" Balgan commanded toward two guards standing behind Davaa.

The guards kicked Davaa's legs and back. "Move! Move!" they yelled. Davaa fell to the ground. He looked over at Agvaan. The young lama was looking down at his papers and holding a red pencil.

Standing over Davaa, one of the guards placed a noose around his neck and pulled him upward. Choking, Davaa followed the rope up the stool.

Balgan laughed. "See, if you really want to, you can do it!" He nodded to the guard who released the noose.

Balgan waked around the high stool. "Tell me your name, your origin, and your age."

"Davaa Boli, 64, from Erdenebulgan soum."

"What is your religious title?"

"I have no religious title. Almost twenty years ago I left the Dayan Deerkh Monastery to become a secular man." Davaa answered calmly.

“What was your title when you served at the Dayan Deerkh Khuree?” Balgan asked.

“*Avragch*. I was a healer.”

“How many cattle you were given when you left the Khuree, 50 or 25?” Balgan asked.

“I received the number of cattle the monastery allowed to middle-ranking lamas departing the monastery, around twenty cattle. The herd grew bigger over time.” Davaa answered honestly.

“During Genden’s time?” Balgan quickly asked.

“During Prime Minister Genden’s time there were almost no taxes. We didn’t have to sell animals to pay them. That surely helped a lot.”

“Climb down. The questioning is over.” Balgan called to the guards at the door. “Take him out to the truck.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“You will wait in the track outside until it is loaded.”

“Does it mean that I am innocent?” Davaa asked.

“You just confessed to being a supporter of the traitor Genden. Now out!” Balgan pushed Davaa toward the guards. “Bring in the next one!” he shouted.

Davaa was pushed out of the building and onto an open truck bed where his legs were tied to another prisoner’s. His arms were tied behind him.

Suddenly Davaa felt a rain drop. He looked up. Thick dark clouds stretched to the horizon. “Baasan, be my lucky boy,” he whispered. “Don’t come to this truck!”

When the sounds of running and shouting were gone, Baasan lifted his head and looked around. He could see no one. The heavy wind and rain kept the guards pinned down. Baasan slid slowly on his belly toward the compound fence. Once in the deep shadow of a ger, he stood up. The nearby fence was higher than his raised hand.

I've got to find some kind of pole to get over this, he thought. *Perhaps away from the building the fence will be lower.* Baasan moved carefully along the fence away from the stinking hell of Tahir Nagoon.

Somebody grabbed his collar. Baasan's heart jumped.

"What are you doing out here, feudalist?"

A lightening flash overhead revealed a soldier, rifle in hand.

"Baasan!" Nyamjav's voice was distorted by a tremendous thunder clap. "I was looking for you in the interrogation room!"

Nyamjav pushed him inside a nearby ger.

"Stay inside! Don't dare stick your head out, understand. It will mean your life!" he said. More quietly he added, "Other inmates will soon be assigned to this ger. Make no mention of how you came to be here."

"But why..." Baasan began.

Nyamjav slammed the ger door in Baasan's face.

By evening, the truck was full. Davaa felt every drop of rain slap like a bullet against his weakening body. All around him the old men coughed and shivered.

“Okay, go!” somebody yelled. The truck got underway. The soldiers covered themselves in thick raincoats, held their rifles close and watched the helpless prisoners like wolves circling a wounded deer.

Davaa sat back and pressed his palms behind his back. The rope that bound his arms tightened in the rain. Davaa’s fingers were numb. “Thank you God for sending this rain today. Thank you Dayan Deerkh, for not bringing Baasan to this truck.” Davaa watched the lights of Muren valley disappear in the stormy darkness. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine how his grandson must look and how Sendmaa would sing him a lullaby.

“I am a grandfather! My blood continues in the next generation!”

Davaa imagined himself riding a horse to the Arkhan valley. A small boy riding a wooden stick ran toward him.

“Grandpa! Grandpa!” the barefoot child shouted, “Look! My horse is faster than yours! Chu! Chu!”

“Hey you!” Davaa called dismounting, “Where’s your grandma, boy?”

“There!” The boy pointed toward a white ger on the sloping sides of which several wooden trays of aaruul dried in the afternoon sun. “Grandma is making milk vodka.”

“Hmm, vodka?” Davaa smiled. “Can I have some vodka at your grandma’s?”

“Sure grandpa. It’s for you!”

“And why are you riding so far from home, young horseman?” Davaa asked.

“I am riding to guard the border. I’m a guardian.” The boy lifted his chin. “I ride to the very top of that mountain and see the border.”

Davaa looked at the mountain. “Poouh, that’s too far to reach riding your stick, isn’t it?”

“Well, this is just pretend, grandpa, but I will ride a real horse and reach there soon. Look how well I can ride.” The boy mounted his stick and urged his wooden horse forward with a cheerful “Chu!”

“That is my grandson, indeed!” Davaa smiled after the running boy and remounted his horse in hope of tasting Adya’s milk vodka before it cooled.

The truck stopped abruptly, throwing the prisoners on their sides. The rain continued to pour. With a heavy “clang!” soldiers lowered the truck’s gate. They detached the rope binding the prisoners to the truck and pushed them out of the truck so quickly that they fell over each other. Davaa was knocked down by two falling prisoners and fell over someone who’d preceded him.

“Everybody stand and walk up the hill,” a guard yelled over the wind.

Walking up the muddy water-soaked ravine against the strong rain was like walking against knives.

After an hour of hard walking, Davaa’s group halted. When Davaa pushed someone to get moving, he pushed back.

“There is a deep hole here. Don’t move further,” the fellow lama cautioned.

“How deep,” he asked.

“Can’t tell,” the lama replied. “There’s a lot of rain water at the bottom.”

Davaa looked around. Soldiers were forcing the last of the long chain of prisoners to the edge of the big hole. It struck Davaa like a cold knife to his heart that he was standing next to his grave.

Guns thundered. Davaa's friends fell dragging him toward the pit. Davaa felt a bullet rip into his stomach. He closed his eyes and tried to see the Arkhan Valley in his mind one more time.

The little boy riding the stick was running to the same white ger toward which Davaa rode.

Adya stepped from the ger and hugged the little boy.

Davaa dismounted and hurried to his wife.

“My darling!” he whispered. Waves of weariness washed over Davaa's body, colder than the watery pit into which he'd fallen. Slowly, he sank into the void.

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