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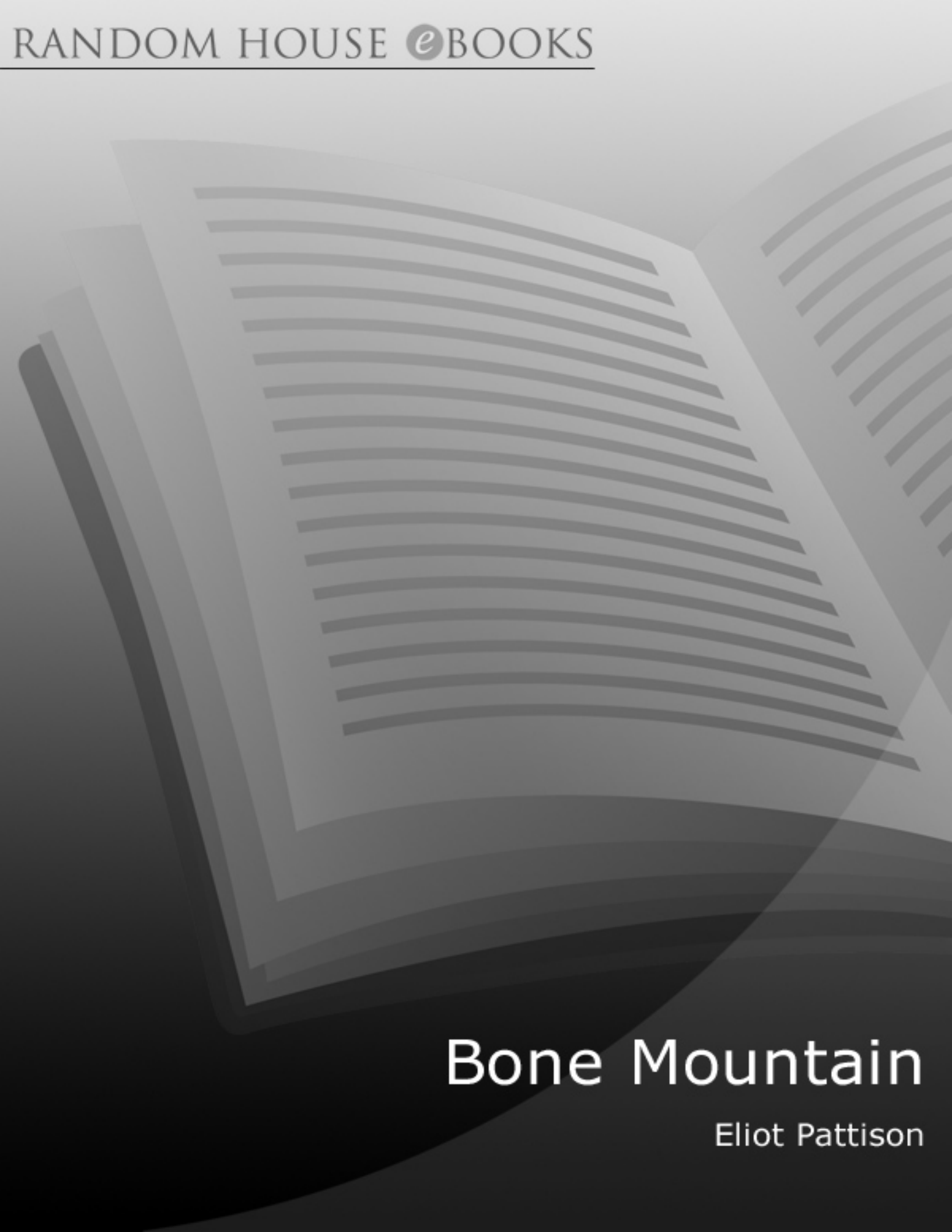

Bone Mountain

Eliot Pattison

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About the Book

When disgraced former inspector Shan Tao Yun joins a group of reverent Tibetans returning a sacred artefact to its home, it seems he has at last found the peace he has struggled for since leaving prison. What starts as a spiritual pilgrimage, however, quickly turns into a desperate flight through the Tibetan wilderness as the outlawed monk who guides them is murdered and Sham discovers that the artefact has recently been stolen from the Chinese army.

But why is the army so desperate to find the artefact entrusted to Shan? Why is an aged medicine lama being stalked by government agents? Shan discovers not answers, but only new mysteries. And the further he travels into the mountains, the more he realises that what is at stake is not only justice but the spiritual survival of those who have joined his strange quest.

About the Author

Eliot Pattison's numerous books and articles on international policy issues have been published on three continents. He is a world traveller and frequent visitor to China. *The Skull Mantra*, his first work of fiction, won him the Edgar Award for Best First Novel from the Mystery Writers of America. *Bone Mountain* is Pattison's third novel featuring former Beijing Investigator, Shan Tao Yun.

Also by Eliot Pattison

The Skull Mantra

Water Touching Stone

Bone Mountain

Eliot Pattison

Century · London

For my mother

Part One

SALT

Chapter One

"SIFT THE SAND to find the seeds of the universe."

The voice that came to Shan Tao Yun through the night was like wind over grass. "Let them reach the original ground then plant them," the lama said as Shan's gaze drifted from the white sand in his palm to the brilliant half moon. He knew his teacher Gendun meant Shan's original ground, the seedbed of his soul, what Gendun called Shan's beginning place. But on such a night he could not shake the sense that Tibet itself was the true original ground, that the vast remote land was the world's beginning place, where the planet, and humankind, never stopped shaping themselves, where the highest mountains, the strongest winds, and the most rugged souls had always evolved together.

Ten feet farther down the river's edge Shan's old friend and former cellmate Lokesh chanted quietly, beads entwined in his fingers, his mantra almost indistinguishable from the rustle of the water. Shan breathed in the fragrant smoke of the juniper branches they had brought to burn at the water's edge and watched as a meteor flew over a low distant shimmering in the sky, the only hint of the snow-capped mountains that lined the horizon. It seemed he could reach out and touch the moon. If the earth had a place and a season for growing souls this was surely it, the chill moonlit spring of the high Tibetan wilderness.

Shan watched as though from a distance as Gendun gently opened Shan's fingers and lifted his hand toward the moon, then lowered it and turned Shan's wrist to empty the

sand into the small clay jar they had brought from their hermitage ten miles away.

"*Lha gyal lo*," a voice murmured on Shan's opposite side. It was the caretaker of the hermitage, Shopo, his voice cracking with emotion. "Victory to the gods." They had arrived at the river at dusk, and only now, after the lamas and Lokesh had spent two hours speaking with the *nagas*, the water deities, had Gendun decided Shan could begin collecting the special white sand.

"Lha gyal lo!" an excited voice echoed halfway up the slope behind them. It was one of the four *dropka*, Tibetan herders, who had escorted them to the river and now stood guard, nervously watching the darkened landscape. Gendun and Shopo were outlawed monks engaged in an outlawed ritual, and the patrols had grown aggressive.

Without even sensing the movement, Shan found his hand back in the water, and when he lifted it out it was full of the white sand again. In the moonlight he saw Lokesh's eyes widen and gleam with excitement as, slowly repeating the motions Gendun had shown him, Shan washed the sand in the moonlight then emptied his palm into the jar.

Gendun's face, worn smooth as a river stone, wrinkled with a smile. "Each of the grains is the essence of a mountain," the lama said as Shan's hand dipped into the water once more, "all that is left when the mountain has shed its husk." Shan had heard the words a dozen times during the past two months as they had ventured into the night to collect sands from places known only to Shopo and the herders. In their turn each of the vast peaks that lined the horizon would be reduced to such a grain, Gendun explained, and so it would be for all mountains, all continents, all planets. It would all end as it began, in such tiny seeds, and humankind in all its glory could never match the power reflected in a single grain. The words were a way of teaching impermanence, Shan knew, and of

showing respect for the nagas from whom they borrowed the sand.

Shan sensed a distant drumming noise in his ears and the moon seemed to edge even closer as he gathered another handful for the jar. His hand reached toward the clay jar then froze in midair as a frantic voice split the stillness.

"*Mik tada!* Watch out! Run!" It was one of the dropka sentinels on the ridge above. "The fire! Dowse the fire!"

Shan heard feet scrambling over the gravel of the slope above and looked up to see two men silhouetted in the moonlight, realizing in the same moment that the drumming was not in his head. It was a helicopter coming in low and fast, the way Public Security operated when raiding Tibetan camps.

One of the guards, wearing a black wool cap, darted to the water's edge, futilely pulling on Lokesh's shoulder, then moving to Shan's side to tug on his collar. "You have to go patch that god!" the man shouted. "We must flee!"

Shan let himself be pulled to his feet, his spine chilling as he looked first toward the helicopter, then at the lamas, who only smiled and continued their homage to the river. Gendun and Shopo were accustomed to risking imprisonment for simple acts of reverence. And though Shan and the dropka might be disturbed by the increased pressure from Public Security, there was only one mystery that ever concerned Gendun, the mystery of growing and strengthening souls.

"If it is Public Security they will drop soldiers over the ridge to surround us!" the sentinel groaned as he kicked sticks from the small fire. "They will have machine guns and devices to see in the night!"

Shan studied the man in the black cap warily. He had more than a mere herder's grasp of Chinese weapons and tactics. Shan suddenly realized that he had not seen the man before, that he had not been part of their escort.

Gendun replied by raising a finger to his lips, then gestured toward the water. “There are nagas,” he observed quietly.

“The sand will be useless if you are arrested,” Shan whispered, his hand on Gendun’s shoulder.

“There are nagas,” the lama repeated.

“It’s only sand,” the stranger argued, casting a tormented glance in the direction of the approaching helicopter. Public Security had its own ways of teaching impermanence.

As Gendun turned back to the water Lokesh was suddenly at the stranger’s side, pulling him away from the lama. “We are creating something wonderful with that sand,” Shan’s old friend whispered, the white stubble of his whiskers glistening in the moonlight. He placed his hands on the man’s shoulders to be sure the young Tibetan was listening and gazed into his face. “When we are done,” he explained in a solemn, confiding tone, “it will change the world.”

The man in the black cap illuminated an electric lantern and aimed the beam into Lokesh’s face as if doubting he had heard the old Tibetan correctly, then, as the sound of the helicopter surged to a crescendo, he snapped off the light and dove to the ground. A moment later the machine was gone. It had skimmed the ridge above but had been traveling too fast to deploy troops.

The man in the cap lit his lantern and muttered under his breath, casting an accusing glance at the other guards, who had gathered behind Lokesh with sheepish, even embarrassed expressions. He aimed the light beam into each man’s face, settling it on Shan’s, which he studied with a frown. “You are supposed to be delivering an artifact,” he said to Lokesh, his voice heavy with impatience. He did not move the light from Shan.

“We are,” Lokesh agreed. “We are preparing for the journey,” he added with a gesture toward the two lamas,

who continued to speak over the swift dark river.

“Preparing?” the man scoffed. “What have you been doing for two months? You’re not preparing, you’re taking root! You will ruin us!”

Shan stepped beside Lokesh and pushed the man’s lantern down. “Those who brought the artifact agreed that the lamas will decide the proper way to return it.” He knew now the stranger, like those who had brought the sacred artifact to Shopo’s hermitage, was a *purba*, a member of the secret Tibetan resistance.

“You mean Drakte agreed.”

“Drakte is one of you,” Shan asserted. He and Lokesh had met Drakte nearly a year earlier aiding prisoners in the gulag camp where they had served. It had been Drakte who had intercepted them two months ago and taken them to Shopo’s hidden hermitage. “We will go when the lamas and Drakte are ready. He is coming to show us the way. A few more days at most.”

“We don’t have a few more days,” the purba groused. “And don’t expect Drakte. He’s not keeping his appointments.”

“Missing?” Shan noticed a bulge under the man’s jacket, at the waist, and looked back at Gendun. If the lamas thought the man had a gun they would insist he leave.

The purba shrugged. “Not where he was asked to be.”

“And you’ve come in his place?”

“No. But I was hoping to find him at that hermitage. There is news. And I brought something he had asked for,” he added in a peevish tone. “He said the lamas needed it. He said if we did not agree to retrieve it he would go himself, all the way to India if necessary.” The purba lowered a long, narrow sack from his shoulder and produced an eighteen-inch-long bamboo tube, which Lokesh eagerly accepted.

“What news?” Shan asked.

Before he replied the man pointed to one of the herders, then to the top of the hill where the guards had been watching the road beyond. The herder sprang up the slope. “A man was killed. An official, in Amdo town,” he said, referring to the closest settlement of any size, nearly a hundred miles away. “Public Security will sweep the hills and detain people. When they interrogate, they will learn of the hermitage.” He cast another frown toward the lamas. “You may call it sacred, what you are doing, but they will call it a crime against the state.” He took a step toward Gendun as though to try again to drag him away, but a herder in a fleece vest stepped forward with a hand raised in warning.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?” The purba’s hands clenched and unclenched repeatedly. He seemed ready to do battle with them. “No one told us you would wander around the mountains like this. You could go to prison, all of you. For what? You can’t fight the Chinese with sand and prayers.”

Lokesh uttered a hoarse sound that Shan recognized as a laugh. “I have known Chinese prisons,” the old Tibetan said. “Sometimes sand and prayers are the only way.”

The purba fixed Shan with a bitter stare. “You are the famous Chinese who fixes things for Tibetans. You know better, but still you let them do this.”

Shan paused to study Gendun and Shopo. “If these lamas asked me to jump into this river with my pockets stuffed with rocks,” he said quietly, “I would thank them and leap in.”

“Lha gyal lo,” the herder in the vest whispered, as if to cheer Shan on.

Lokesh touched the warrior’s arm. “It is difficult for one so young to understand these things,” the old Tibetan said. “You should return with us to the hermitage and see.”

“Unlike Drakte, I obey my orders,” the man snapped. “I am needed elsewhere.”

Lokesh raised the bamboo tube in his hand. “Then look now,” he suggested, extracting a roll of cloth from the tube. As Lokesh straightened it Shan saw that it was an old *thangka*, one of the cloth paintings used to depict the icons of Tibetan Buddhism.

When the purba’s light hit the painting the man grimaced and retreated a step. One of the dropka guards moaned loudly. It was the image of a fierce demon, with the head of a bull garlanded with human skulls, surrounded by swords and spears and arrows, holding a cup of blood. The flayed skins of its victims lay at its feet. Lokesh studied the image with a satisfied grin, then motioned the purba forward.

“Look carefully,” the old Tibetan said, pointing to the head of the terrifying image. “This is what we are doing. This is how we win without violence. This is how the artifact will be returned, how that deity is going to be repaired. Because this is what he is becoming.”

“Who?” the purba asked, the anger in his voice now tinged with confusion.

In the dim light Shan thought he saw surprise on Lokesh’s face, as though the answer were obvious. Then Lokesh gestured from the skull-clad demon to Shan. “Our friend. Our Shan.”

The spell cast by the words silenced the purba and the dropka, all of whom stared uneasily at Shan. Shan searched Lokesh’s face for an explanation, but his friend just grinned back expectantly, as if he had given Shan a great gift.

Suddenly another desperate cry split the air. The guard at the top of the ridge frantically stumbled down the slope. “A patrol! Knobs!” he cried, meaning the soldiers of the Public Security Bureau. The purba and Shan leapt up and moments later gazed down at a troop transport half a mile away, edging its way slowly toward their position.

“That helicopter spotted us,” the purba said. “Last month they used infrared to find an old hermit who only

came out at night to pray.” Shan sensed the fierce determination rising in the warrior’s voice and shuddered.

At the river three of the dropka were in a cluster around the lamas, facing outward, as if preparing to engage the knobs with their staffs. The fourth, the man wearing the fleece vest, stood apart, staring into the black water. As the purba marched purposefully toward the lamas the herder in the vest spun about and hurled himself on the purba, shoving him to the ground, then just as abruptly pulling away. In his hand was a large automatic pistol.

“You fool!” the purba spat. “They have to be taken away! We can’t fight those knobs.”

Shame crossed the herder’s face as he looked at the pistol in his hand, and he held the weapon clumsily, fingers around only the grip, not touching the trigger. “You see that one,” he said, nodding toward Gendun, who still communed with the river. “My mother stays at that tent by the hermitage. She calls him the Pure Water Lama. You know why? Not just because he never registered with the bastards at the Bureau of Religious Affairs, but because he took his vows more than fifty years ago, before the invasion. Before the Chinese scoured our land and changed it forever. He has never gone into exile, never been captured. His words are uncontaminated, my mother says, because they flow from a stream the Chinese never discovered.” The man spoke slowly, with a tone of wonder, as if he had forgotten the knob patrol. Beside him two of the herders knelt at the river and began collecting pebbles.

“I need my gun,” growled the purba, still sprawled on the ground. He was scared, Shan saw. Sometimes traditional Tibetans hated the purbas as much as the Chinese. “We need to get them out of here.”

The herder shook his head. “I have never done anything with my life,” he said in a hollow voice. “The Chinese would not let me go to school. They wouldn’t let me travel. They wouldn’t let me get a job. I’m like a little stunted tree that

can never grow, and that one, the Pure Water Lama, he is like the towering survivor of a forest where everything else was leveled."

He cast a smile toward Gendun, then looked at the purba, his face hardening. "Here is how we protect such men," he said, and he threw the gun into the black water. The two herders at the river's edge rose and stepped to his side, pulling slings from their pockets. "We have heard how to do this from others. We will smash their searchlights and fill the air with stones. If we are lucky they will not see us. Chinese soldiers get scared in the night. They hear stories of demons." He glanced at the thangka, still in Lokesh's hand, then at Shan. "The lamas must fill the jar," he said to the purba, "and then you will take them back. My younger brother knows the way," he said, gesturing toward the remaining herder. "If we do not stop the patrol, you are the one who best knows how to evade the soldiers."

When the man lifted his sling his hand shook. "Patch the deity," he said in a rushed whisper to Shan, then faded into the shadows with his companions.

As Shan helped the purba to his feet the man looked into the darkness, in the direction the herders had gone, a mixture of anger and awe on his face. "That artifact," he said in a hollow voice, "I hear it's just a little piece of stone."

The events of the night haunted Shan during their long trek back toward the hermitage, and stayed with him as he lay restlessly on his pallet finding it impossible to sleep. It was nearly dawn when he stepped into the little chapel of the hermitage, the *lhakang*, and settled cross-legged before the altar. Before its cracked wooden Buddha, flanked by butter lamps, sat a jagged piece of stone, six inches long and curved along its front, where a faint circle of red was centered, a dim remnant of an eye that had once been

painted there. Just a piece of stone. But it was why the dropka had risked their lives the night before. It was why Lokesh said Shan was becoming the demon, why the purbas were so upset that Shan and his friends lingered at the hermitage, why they had gone to such lengths to bring Shan there.

He and Lokesh had been slowly returning from a pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, in southwestern Tibet, walking on remote trails, sometimes daring to ride an hour or two on trucks bound for central Tibet. One night the truck they had been traveling on had been abruptly stopped by a horse cart drawn across the road. Several young men sprang from the surrounding rocks, running not toward the driver but toward the cargo bay, closing in on Shan and Lokesh before their feet were on the ground. Shan recognized Drakte instantly, a tall lean Tibetan with a double looping scar on his forehead, received from a knob riot squad that had wrapped barbed wire around their truncheons.

“We’ve been looking for you,” Drakte had announced and studied the two men peevishly, as though Shan and Lokesh had been deliberately avoiding him.

“We’ve had a pilgrimage,” Lokesh offered brightly. “We’re going back home, to Lhadrung.”

“No, you’re not,” the purba had insisted. He spoke briefly with the driver, handed the man a *khata*, a prayer scarf, and as the man sped away Drakte had gestured them into a smaller truck that emerged from the rocks.

For three days they had driven through the rugged mountains and valleys northwest of Lhasa, skirting the town of Shigatse on roads that were little more than rutted game trails, then heading north through small barren villages and onto the *changtang* plateau, the vast wilderness land of north central Tibet, before turning east at the mining town of Doba. As they sat around their campfires Drakte had spoken of his beloved changtang, and

many other things, but never of the reason he had intercepted them or where he was taking them. On the fourth day, when they had been met in a canyon by dropka horsemen leading two mounts, Drakte watched Shan leave with a strange longing in his eyes.

“Do this thing for all of us,” the young purba said to Shan as they parted. “When it is time, I will come to take you,” he promised, and Shan had thought he had seen the stirring of friendship in the man’s eyes.

For two more days they had ridden, the dropka never speaking of their destination, until finally they had crested a high windswept ridge to find a group of ragged buildings in the small hollow below. Three of the largest had been repaired in a patchwork fashion, with plywood, tin, and cardboard fastened to the packed earth and stone walls of the original construction. Inside the compact stone building that housed the lhakang, he had discovered Gendun. Along with a middle-aged lama and a nun he sat at the altar before the jagged eye, reading long narrow sheets of text, unbound pages from a traditional teaching book. Gendun, whom Shan had last seen over four months earlier hundreds of miles away in the western Kunlun Mountains, acknowledged him with a serene smile and gestured for the two men to sit in the empty space beside him, as though they had been expected. It had been more than two hours later, as a meal of roasted barley and buttered tea was being prepared, when Gendun had finally introduced Shopo, and Nyma, a sturdy woman of perhaps thirty.

Nyma had burst into an excited greeting. “We’ve waited so long,” she exclaimed, “and now at last you have come. All these years,” she sighed.

“Years?” Shan asked in confusion as he had studied the young woman’s leathery face and strong shoulders. But for her robe he would have taken her for another herder. “The purbas found us last week.”

The nun laughed and pointed toward the lhakang. “Many decades ago it was lost—stolen and taken out of Tibet as a trophy.”

“The eye?” Shan asked, remembering what he had seen on the altar. “That broken stone?”

Nyma nodded enthusiastically, moving up and down on her toes, barely in control of her emotions. “From the deity that guards our valley. Only five years ago did it return to Tibet, and only a few weeks ago was it freed from Lhasa,” she said, as though the stone had been in prison. “We knew he must have his eye returned, we always knew it would come back eventually. But no one could find the way back for it. Now we have you. The things he will see,” she added ominously. “The things he will do then.”

After they had eaten that first night Shopo had explained that three months earlier, before news of its recovery had even reached the valley, an oracle in the Yapchi Valley, where the eye belonged, had declared that the eye could only be returned by a virtuous Chinese, a certain Chinese of pure heart. Gendun had been on his way to Lhadrung when this news had reached him, and he had instantly changed his direction to find those who had been debating the words of the oracle. He had known whom that Chinese must be.

Shan had not pressed the Tibetans with questions. The story of the stone had to come out at its own pace, in its own way. He had learned long ago that there usually were no words for the things most important to the Tibetans, and even when they might find words, they were wary of speaking them. To people like Gendun and Lokesh words were treacherous, imperfect things, capable of connecting people in only the most tenuous ways. If the eye were truly important, they would teach Shan not about the eye as such but about how to think about the eye, how to fit the eye into his particular awareness.

Yet after so many weeks with it, Shan thought he would have understood it better. The stone eye seemed to mock him, still caused an ache in that part of the old Shan that would not die, the investigator who could not stop asking questions. Why were Tibetans willing to die for the stone?

Outside, a voice shouted in excitement, then another. In an instant Shan was at the doorway. The middle-aged dropka woman who watched over the hermitage with her brother was on the ridge above, pointing over the buildings to the opposite slope. Several of the dropka who had pitched a tent two hundred yards away had taken up the call. Shan darted to the back of the building and to his relief saw a familiar figure in a long brown robe.

It was Nyma, who had left the hermitage the week before to retrieve the special vermilion sand that was found only in the bed of a spring near one of the high glaciers. Nyma turned and swayed as she descended the trail. She did not believe anyone was watching, Shan realized, and she was dancing; dancing because, he sensed, she was filled with joy, because she was bringing the last of the sands they needed.

Nyma could not stop smiling as the inhabitants of the hermitage sat with her ten minutes later, encircling the pouch of sand she had brought from the glacier. “The stream was frozen,” she said, explaining why she had been gone several days longer than expected. “So I sat and waited.” Slowly, ceremoniously, she used both hands to remove the derby that covered the braids she kept pinned over her crown, set the hat on the ground and folded her hands over her lap. “On the second day a warm wind came, and the ice began to melt. On the third I watched as a hole opened, just big enough for my hand to fit through.”

Shan gazed about the circle at the three men who sat with them. Lokesh offered his lopsided grin, made crooked years earlier when the boot of a knob had broken his jaw. He looked from Lokesh into the smiling countenance of

Gendun, who solemnly nodded at Nyma, then at Shan, as if to confirm that yes, this would be the night, yes, despite the torment raging elsewhere in Tibet, in their little remote outpost all was right with the universe.

Beside them, in a tattered maroon robe, sat Shopo, who had tended the illegal hermitage since being driven from his monastery twenty years earlier. “It has all become the right thing,” he observed serenely. Nyma’s contribution was the perfect offering for completing their work, made all the more powerful by the reverence she had shown the mountain. She had not taken the vermilion sand, but had waited for the ice to melt, had waited for the mountain to offer it to her.

Shopo lifted the pouch and reverently poured its contents into a clay pot. As he raised the pot toward the sky, a tall man with a narrow, downcast face appeared around the corner of the nearest building, carrying a large leather sack over his shoulder. It was Tenzin, who had been at the hermitage when Shan and Lokesh had arrived, carrying his day’s collection of the yak dung they used for fuel. Tenzin stared woodenly at the clay pot, placing one hand over his *gau*, the silver prayer amulet that hung from his neck, then nodded and continued toward the hut where he stored the fuel.

“Lha gyal lo!” Shopo called toward the heavens in a joyful voice. “Victory to the gods!” He rose from the blanket, both hands cradling the pot, and carried it into the compact stone structure that housed half a dozen meditation cells and the hermitage’s lhakang, Shan and his companions close behind. Silently acknowledging the Buddha on the altar at the rear wall, Shopo set the pot on a cedar plank that held ten similar pots and several long, narrow bronze funnels, then turned toward the multicolored, seven-foot circle that covered the center of the stone floor, a reverent awe filling his face.

It was called the Vajrabhairava, the Diamond Terrifier, one of the rarest forms of the intricate mandala sand paintings that had been part of Tibetan ritual for centuries. It had frightened Shan at first, when he heard Gendun explain that the deity they were invoking was one of the fiercest of all the Tibetan deities, and he watched now as the dropka woman halted and grimaced at the old thangka of the Diamond Terrifier, which Lokesh had hung in the lhakang. Some may have thought it meant Shan and his friends were on a path of demons and destruction but Shan had learned how such severe images were used by the lamas as symbols of higher truths, and he knew now not to see violence in the image, but hope. The Diamond Terrifier was the form wisdom assumed to challenge the Lord of Death when it sought to take humans before they achieved enlightenment.

At first Shan and Nyma had listened for hours every day as Gendun orally painted the complex mandala, describing it inch by inch from memory. Finally, a month earlier, Shopo and Gendun had laid out intricate chalk lines on the stone floor, outlining the foundations of the wheel. It had been thirty years since Gendun had helped create this particular mandala, taught to him by a lama who had been ninety years old at the time, but he recalled its many symbols perfectly. The mandala held dozens of symbols, each made by pouring a few grains of sand at a time with the *chakpa*, thin five-inch-long funnels. Indeed, every image, even every color, was a symbol, and each symbol had a teaching associated with it. Shan gazed upon the grounds of the symbolic palace at the center, divided into intricate quadrants. The white east held the wheel of dharma, the yellow south wish-giving jewels, the red west the lotus of purity, and the green north a flaming sword.

After a quarter hour, buoyed by the joy of the Tibetans, Shan drifted outside to the circle of earth in an outcropping above the buildings where he had passed many hours in

meditation during the past weeks. Gendun would want him to contemplate the lesson of the sands on this final day, but suddenly Shan felt too full of life, too content with the knowledge that he had, after the ordeal that had been his life thus far, finally found a place in the world.

As he watched the clouds, letting his contentment push back the fear he had felt when sitting by the jagged stone, Shan discovered an unfamiliar nervousness. For tonight, instead of filling the chakpa for Gendun as the lama painted the mandala, Gendun would fill the chakpa for him, so Shan could create the cloud and mountain images along the perimeter of the painting.

For hours the lamas had taught him the proper posture of the hands, and mind, in applying the sand, until Shan sensed he was not so much holding an implement for art but offering a prayer with sand. Then together they had practiced the cursive pattern Shan would create with the white sand along the outer perimeter of the circle.

“Follow the curve a lark makes in its flight,” Gendun had explained, referring to the long graceful dip made by the bird between wing beats, and the lama had expressed wonder about the strange blend of excitement and sadness that had appeared on Shan’s face.

“It’s nothing,” Shan had whispered, after floating for a moment on a tide of memory. His father had used almost the same words, almost the same voice, speaking of birds and willows and the wind, drawing patterns with his brush in the air, when he had taught Shan how to create his first Chinese ideograms.

Suddenly Shan became aware of someone sitting beside him. He turned from the clouds and looked into Gendun’s serene face.

“We will have mountains to climb,” the lama observed abruptly. He was sitting beside Shan in the lotus fashion, his legs crossed, as if he had been spirited there from a meditation cell. The words were Gendun’s way of asking if

Shan was ready, not for the mandala, but for the journey they would begin afterwards, for it was because of that journey they had undertaken the mandala. Just as others might methodically assemble supplies and study maps to prepare for arduous travel, the lamas had been methodically strengthening Shan, Lokesh, and Nyma with images of the Diamond Terrifier. Or perhaps, as Lokesh had chillingly suggested, preparing Shan to do the work of the Diamond Terrifier.

“I am ready for mountains, Rinpoche,” Shan said, using the term of address for a revered teacher.

Gendun’s eyes twinkled as he studied Shan’s face. More often than not the two did not need words to communicate. “And there will be more than just yak chips to watch for,” the old lama added.

Shan studied his teacher in confusion. “I thought Tenzin would stay here, Rinpoche,” Shan said. Tenzin had not spoken a word during the two months Shan had known him, but Shan had recognized the man’s sad, broken nature, and the way the dropka warned him away from roads. He was an escapee from the gulag, Shan had realized, another fugitive trying to revive himself, to discover the spark inside after having had so many, for so long, try to extinguish it.

“He is going north. Someone died.”

The remnants of Shan’s grin vanished.

“No,” Gendun added quickly. “Not that way,” he said, meaning not one of the violent mysteries the old Shan had been obsessed with solving. “Nothing to do with the stone or any of us. He’s just going north and I worry about him.”

Although Tenzin usually ate with them and shared their chores, he had stayed away from Shan, denying Shan the chance of knowing him better. Despite all their weeks together, Tenzin was as great an enigma as ever. At first Shan had taken his manner for an aloofness tied to the oddly aristocratic air he projected, even when carrying his

dung sack. More than once Shan had wondered if Gendun or Shopo had given the man penance, in punishment for something. Sometimes such men committed violence in making good their escape. Gendun might not condemn him for killing a jailer, but would worry about the damage such an act would cause to his inner deity. The tall, silent Tibetan left at dawn each day with his leather sack and returned at dusk, having filled it with yak dung, a meager haul for a day's work. But even with a single sack a day he had filled one of the smaller huts to the ceiling with fuel for the hermitage.

"I will help him if I see how, Rinpoche."

Gendun nodded. "I worry sometimes that he goes beyond seeing." The lama was not referring to Tenzin leaving their sight, but to the dangers of drifting into deep meditation and losing awareness of one's immediate surroundings while moving about the treacherous landscape. Monks sometimes broke legs, even necks, when traveling alone in the mountains.

Shan studied his teacher. Gendun knew something about the melancholy man that Shan did not, or at least sensed something that Shan had not seen. Tenzin had never helped with the mandala, but watched its creation with a child-like fascination, steadfastly attending Gendun and Shopo with tea and replenishing all the lamps when the dropka brought skins of butter. Although Shan had never seen him meditate, never seen him show interest in what the Tibetans might call the Buddha within him, he remembered the single sack of dung brought back each day. The sack could be filled in two or three hours time. Did Tenzin spend the rest of his day sitting on the high ridges in meditation? Once, Shan remembered, after Shopo had carefully described how to commune with the river nagas, Tenzin had come back with black sand for the mandala and reverently presented it to Gendun. Another time Shan had discovered him alone, in the middle of the night, hovering

at the edge of the mandala with his eyes full of tears, his hand cupped in the air over the image of a hermit monk.

"When he grows his tongue," the lama said, "it will be better. A few more months perhaps."

It was how Gendun described the silence of such broken men, how Gendun had referred to Shan's own dark silence in the weeks after he left the gulag. When the man finally found the spark that had been Tenzin before imprisonment, before the torture of the gulag, the fire of his spirit would reach his tongue and he would be ready to speak with the world. Perhaps, Shan thought, it was why Gendun was asking him to watch over Tenzin, because before he met the lamas Shan, too, had once consisted only of mute, confused fragments.

Sift the sand to find the seeds of the universe. The words echoed in Shan's mind as he sat by the mandala four hours later with the pot of white sand by his feet. The sun had set, their last night of work on the mandala begun. A fingertip touched his arm, light as a feather.

"It is time," Gendun said, and from a sleeve of his red robe he produced a chakpa, extending it toward Shan.

Shan hesitated. From the darkened corridor that led to the chamber he heard the moan of the wind as it played with the crumbling stonework of the hermitage, creating an eerie harmony with the mantra murmured by Lokesh, who sat beside Tenzin at the wall behind them. He slowly raised his hand to accept the narrow chakpa from Gendun, filled with the white sand. The lama handed him a second, empty chakpa, to be used to tap the sand out of the first. Shan's gaze drifted toward the small wooden altar, toward the jagged eye, then he glanced back at Gendun with a fleeting sense of guilt. The eye was there, always watching. But part of the discipline Gendun had imposed on Shan was not to think about the mysterious eye, to immerse himself

instead in the mandala. Not since the first day at the hermitage had anyone spoken about the eye, except Lokesh, who had soberly whispered to him one night that Shan need not worry, because wherever Gendun and the stone traveled, that place would be a sanctuary. Lokesh seemed to think of the upcoming journey as a pilgrimage, in which holy men would return a holy stone, and that the world would part to offer a peaceful path for such pilgrims.

Shan watched Nyma finish a flame shape along the outer ring, then he leaned forward to begin outlining the image of a cloud with a tiny line of white sand. He lowered first the sand-filled chakpa, then the empty funnel, but quickly lifted them away. His hands were trembling. No one spoke. He collected his awareness for a moment by gazing upon the palace at the center of the circle, where wisdom and compassion reigned. His hands steadier, he began to tap the white sand chakpa, loosing a white thread onto the outer rim of the mandala. The tapping of his metal funnels became a tiny muffled bell, a sound that had become part of the nightly ritual, each ring announcing the planting of a few more seeds into the little universe the lamas had created.

As Shan finished the image, he nodded to Nyma, who would continue the pattern by applying vermilion sand in the shape of a tree, then stood and stepped away from the circle, wary of breathing deeply across the delicate sand images. As he turned he saw a stranger squatting by Lokesh, arguing in a low voice. The man wore a heavily stained fleece hat and a *chuba*, the heavy sheepskin coat favored by the nomads who inhabited the sparse landscape, but he was not one of those from the dropka encampment above the hermitage.

The man’s eyes widened as he stood and stabbed an accusing finger toward Shan. His chuba opened with the movement, revealing a long knife at his belt. Lokesh, marking his rosary in the tight grip of two fingers, rose and

used his free hand to push down the man's arm as Shan approached.

"You're crazy," the stranger muttered, and as he twisted away from Lokesh his fleece cap fell away, revealing a head shaved completely bald. Shan was wrong, he realized, as he studied the man's strong, boney features, his smooth scalp and long thin moustache. The stranger was not one of the local herders, he was a Golok, from the far northeast of Tibet, perhaps the most untamed of all the Tibetan peoples. "He's Chinese!" the Golok barked loudly.

Shan glanced uneasily toward the mandala. Nyma and the lamas were ignoring the man.

"It's Shan," Lokesh countered, still holding the man's arm as if he thought the Golok would attack Shan. "He's the one."

The intruder cut his eyes toward Lokesh, then examined Shan. His anger faded, replaced by scorn. "I don't think so. The one that's going to patch the god? He's a criminal. Hard as nails they say. All the other Chinese hate him."

Lokesh glanced apologetically at Shan. "Not a criminal, a prisoner. Four years *lao gai*," he added, referring to the hard labor gulag camps run by Beijing. Until the year before, Shan and Lokesh had both served in the 404th People's Construction Brigade, one of the most notorious camps in China's slave system.

"This one," the Golok said as he surveyed Shan's heavily patched coat, his tattered work boots and the cracked, frayed end of the vinyl belt that jutted from his waist, "he looks like a shopkeeper. A failed shopkeeper," he added, fixing Shan with a sneer, then surveying the others in the chamber with a frown. "There are supposed to be purbas, supposed to be warriors. No chance you'll make it. You have no idea," he said haughtily, turning back to Shan. "You could die a hundred ways. Better men than you have tried and died."