

FIRE FROM THE SUN

Book 2

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Chapter 35

Moon Pearl Ventures to the Far West

A Fellow Traveler Hopes for News from India

The bus stopped and the engine cut out. Margaret thought it had broken down. There seemed to be no reason to stop at this place. There was no marker, no crossroads, no house, nothing. The same nothing she had been looking at all day, and much of the day before: a stony plain, relieved only by scattered clumps of gray grass, some featureless rounded hills in the middle distance, rising to high mountains at the horizon all around.

“Missy! Missy!” The driver was calling her. “Arrived! Arrived!” He rose from his seat and began to manhandle her box through the door.

Margaret got up from her seat. This brought a spell of dizziness. Any kind of movement seemed to make her dizzy in this thin air. There were only two other passengers on the bus, peasants from one of the minorities, a man and a woman, who were sitting on the back seat smoking pipes. Their filthy, leathery faces watched her without expression as she gathered her small bags together and staggered down the aisle. The driver had backed down the steps with her box, and was turning to set it down by the roadside. As Margaret stepped out of the bus she felt the wind, cool and dry, refreshing after the peasants’ pipe tobacco.

The driver was standing by her box, watching her with a silly smile on his face. He was a minority, too, and spoke little Chinese. Margaret thought he might be a half-wit. At odd moments during the ten-hour ride he had suddenly burst into a screeching song in his own language, then,

after singing a few lines, had begun hooting with laughter, before lapsing into perfect silence again.

“Are you sure this is the place?” asked Margaret. “I can’t see anybody here. Nor any buildings. How do you know this is the place?” She dressed this up with gestures and grimaces, in the hope he might understand. The driver peered at her for a few seconds, then showed her his four or five mahogany teeth.

“Arrived! Arrived! They find you! Nakri people find you! We go Laptok! Laptok!” He pointed forward down the road. “Laptok! We go Laptok! You go Nakri!” Now he was waving in a direction at right-angles to the road, toward the hills. “Nakri! They people come, Nakri come! Find you! After you go Nakri! Nakri very good! Very good! Factory! Nakri got factory!”

Margaret peered in the direction he was pointing, but could see nothing. There were only gray stones, interspersed with gray grass. Everything seemed to be gray—everything but the sky, which was a deep pellucid blue.

“But where is Nakri? I can’t see anything. Where’s the road?”

The driver waved at the hills again. “Nakri, Nakri! They find you!” He walked a few paces forward of the bus, then turned to beckon her. Setting down her bags, Margaret followed. After twenty yards the driver stopped and began waving at the hills again. Coming up to him, Margaret saw the point. There really was a crossroads. Leading away to the hills was a dusty track, almost free of stones. Its stonelessness was, in fact, the only thing that differentiated it from the surrounding plain; and that differentiation so slight that the track could only be seen at all when you were looking down it. Stand off a few degrees, and it disappeared. How had the driver seen it?

“Nakri!” said the driver, pointing down the track to the moon-hills. “You wait!” He held out his hands horizontally, with the palms pointing down, and pressed down a few times, inviting Margaret to sit. “They come! Nakri people come! They find you!” He nodded, showing her the wreckage of his teeth again.

He seemed to be waiting for something. Well, he had helped with her box. Fishing in her pocket, Margaret produced some change. She handed

the driver a ten-cent note. He smiled at it, but with clear lack of conviction, and made no move back to his bus. She gave him another, and said: "Thank you very much." The driver nodded, made a little bowing movement with his head, murmured something in his own language—a blessing, perhaps, or a curse—and turned away. As the bus left, the minority peasants on the back seat turned to look at Margaret standing at the roadside with her box. Their eyes stayed fixed on her until the bus was out of sight.

Margaret sat down on her box. What now? Did the unit know when she was supposed to be coming? Would they send someone to pick her up? Was that the idea? She didn't know. Some arrangement must have been made, surely.

The wind was slight but continuous. Once the bus had gone, Margaret began to *hear* the wind. It was a low moaning sound, just on the edge of hearing, never quite fading away. She looked at her watch. Three o'clock, yet the sun still high and bright. She remembered being told that here in the far west, people got up in darkness and went to bed in sunlight, because the whole country was kept on Beijing time. She didn't see anything to object to in that, and on present evidence the climate out here was by no means as harsh as she had feared. Yet the sun would certainly decline sooner or later, and she did not want to be alone in this non-place when darkness came. But surely the unit knew she was here, surely someone would come for her.

At four-thirty Margaret began to feel scared. She ate an apple and some rice-flour cake she had brought from Lanzhou in one of the bags. Nobody had come. Nothing had moved in the desert around her. Nothing had moved but the sun, which was now noticeably lower. What if no-one knew where she was? She might just be left here. The bus passed by every day, didn't it? Could she survive through the night? Perhaps she should start walking along the track the bus driver had shown her. But that would mean leaving her box, which was too heavy to carry. If another vehicle came along the road when she was out of sight on the track, of course they would steal her things.

Margaret began a restless walking up and down. She walked from her box to the crossroads and stared down the track to Nakri, hoping to see a

vehicle. Then she walked an equivalent distance beyond the crossroads before turning and walking back to her box. Each time she stopped she could hear the faint, low moaning of the wind. She had a headache. She had had a headache since leaving Lanzhou—another consequence of the altitude, she supposed.

By six o'clock she was desperately frightened. There had been nothing on the road or the track, nothing; and not a living thing to be seen, not a bird in the air, not a rabbit, not an insect. For the dull gray lifelessness of this place, she might really have been on the Moon. How foolish she had been, not to make some definite arrangement with the unit to fetch her! She had not imagined the place would be so unpopulated. A typical urban Chinese, Margaret had never in her life been out of earshot of other human beings. She had not grasped, probably had not been able to grasp, the great emptiness of the western plateau. She had supposed the bus would go direct to Nakri, the place of her assignment; or, if it did not, that she would be able to cover what distance remained on another bus, or at worst by hitching a ride on a truck or peasant wagon. Now she would die in this dreadful place, among these gray stones, among this starved grass.

Sitting on the box, she wept. Far from relieving her feelings, this only made them worse. The more she wept, the more hopeless she felt. From silent weeping she progressed to loud sobbing, then began shouting out her misery across the gray, lifeless plain to the gray, shapeless hills. Why had God given her such misfortune? Why did everything she hoped for turn to dust? Why couldn't her life be straightforward, like other people's? The poor girl howled and sobbed, holding her head in her hands.

At last this display exhausted her. Now she felt she hadn't even the strength to sit. She lay down on the hard, gray grass behind her box—curled up there and passed into a state of inanition, neither sleeping nor waking, neither thinking nor feeling. The earth seemed colder than the air. Its cold seeped up into her. She could hear herself breathing. That, and the soft moaning of the wind.

* * *

By nine o'clock Margaret had descended deep into fatalism. The sun was very low now, the rounded hills to the south almost lost from view. The wind seemed to have increased, and to have acquired the beginnings of a night-time chill. She felt a little light-headed. She was sitting up on her box again, the ground having proved too hard for endurance, and finishing the last of the rice-flour cake. Feeling the oncoming chill of the air, she thought of her voice, and wondered if she should put a scarf round her throat for protection. Professor Shi had taught them to always wear a scarf when the air was cold, showing them on an anatomical diagram how little tissue separated the vocal chords from the outside world, how susceptible the throat was to changes of temperature and humidity. Margaret thought she should get her scarf from the box. Yes, certainly she should . . . but opening the box was troublesome, the three locks small and temperamental, and common sense struggled for a while to overcome the fatalistic torpor that had settled on her.

Art's discipline had won the battle, and she was just fiddling with the first lock, when she heard the truck. Instead of increasing slowly from nothing, the sound seemed to come all at once, and to be quite close. Margaret jumped to her feet, and peered down the road she had come along. The low rays of the sun flashed back at her, reflected from something in the distance. A truck! The misery of those last hours at once forgotten, she began running down the road, waving her arms and shouting. After a hundred yards she remembered her box, and stopped, and stood in the middle of the road waving.

The truck was an ancient ex-army Changchun model, the back open and stacked high with wooden crates and burlap bags. There were four or five people in the cab, and more peered round at her from among the piled cargo in the back. All were men; all were minority, with dark dirty faces.

When the truck had stopped, the doors on each side of the cab opened and two men jumped down. One of them, the driver, was a burly fellow of thirty or so. He called out something to her in a language Margaret didn't understand, his face furrowed with puzzlement and concern.

"Can you speak Chinese?" she asked. "I have to get to Nakri."

The clouds lifted from the driver's brow. He nodded vigorously and

laughed, looking at the other man who had stepped down. The other man laughed with him. Then he turned and said something to the men still in the cab, and they laughed, too. He turned back to Margaret.

“Nakri, hah? Good, Missy, good! We all go Nakri together. Hah!” His Chinese was quite clear, though not very grammatical. “We all Nakri people, all live Nakri. No problem! You come!” He turned back to the truck, and began shouting at the men in the cab. They shouted back.

“Wait,” said Margaret when she caught a lull in the shouting, “I have a box. Please help me with it.”

The driver turned, and saw her pointing to the box.

“Hah! No problem!” he averred. But he turned back and continued his argument with the men in the cab. This seemed to be getting quite heated. The second man joined in, obviously on the side of the driver. It ended with the inhabitants of the cab piling out, grumbling and stamping, and transferring themselves to the back of the truck. Satisfied, the driver gave Margaret his attention again.

“Good, Missy! Now you come along us! Come Nakri along us! Come!” He motioned toward the cab. “There!”

“My box,” said Margaret, “my box.”

“No problem! No problem, Missy! Go! Go!” He pointed to the cab, then turned and set off in the direction of the box.

Margaret gathered up her small bags and went to the cab, but cumbered with the bags she could not get up the step. She called to the second man. “Help me, please.” The man frowned at this, perhaps not understanding; then he got it, jumped into the cab from the other side, took the bags from her, then reached down an arm to pull her up. By the time she got herself seated the driver had arrived, with her box on one shoulder. Effortlessly he pushed the box—it weighed at least eighty pounds—up to his colleague in the cab, then climbed to his own seat. Margaret was in the passenger seat. The second man was sitting on the coping of the shift mechanism, with the box between them. The driver slammed his door, started up the engine, set a dark thick hand down on the shift stick, and gave her his grin again.

“Now we go Nakri!”

And so they did. It was the most uncomfortable ride of Margaret’s

life. The box would not stay put, and had to be held in place with an effort. There was a circular manhole in the roof of the cab above her head, covered inadequately with a piece of sacking which let in a vile draught. The cross-track, once they were on it, was uneven, and the driver seemed to go much too fast. The light soon failed, and the truck had only one feeble headlight. Her head throbbed. Her two companions both inhabited clouds of rich, rank body odor. Never a good traveler, Margaret began to feel motion sickness.

“Missy go Nakri what place?”

“It’s the Agricultural Research Station, Number Three. Is that where you’re going?”

“Yes! Yes! A-gya-kol Number Three! No problem!”

“Is it far?”

“No! Haven’t far! Soon arrive!”

The driver seemed to be a cheerful soul. His round, open face had a shiny texture. She supposed he had never washed it. It seemed to Margaret that a long time had passed since she had met anyone acquainted with common soap. To keep her mind off the idea of motion sickness, Margaret tried to make conversation.

“Excuse me. You’re minority, aren’t you?”

“Tibet-race. We all here Tibet-race. Nakri many Tibet-race. Many, many!”

Margaret relaxed. She knew, from books and movies, that the Tibetan people felt great gratitude to the Han Chinese for liberating them from a terrible feudal oppression. No doubt that was why they were being so pleasant to her.

The second man said something to the driver in a low voice, using their own language. The driver made no reply.

“I’ve heard there’s a factory in Nakri.”

“Factory. Nakri. No. A-gya-kol Number Three got factory. Bang! Bang! Make the top for bottle.”

“Oh. But Nakri itself is a separate place, isn’t it?”

“Ah, yes. Nakri got town. Trade, do trade. Got army. Got government office. Got the Party, big office.” He looked sideways at her in the light of the head lamp. “Missy you Party member?”

This was not a polite question. But these were rough people, they couldn't be expected to know manners.

"No. No, I'm not a Party member. I'm a singer."

"*Singer?* Hah! Wonderful. You sing-a me, Missy! Sing-a me, I like very much!"

"Oh, no. I can't! I mean . . . I'm a special kind of singer. Foreign languages. I need musicians to accompany me. And . . . to prepare. I need to prepare."

The second man said something. There was a long conversation between him and the driver.

"What's he saying?" ventured Margaret.

"Ask you. He Chinese not so good. Want to know you do what. Why come this place. You why come this place?"

"I was assigned here," said Margaret. "I graduated from college, and they assigned me here."

"Oh. Missy you do bad thing?"

Heaven! Margaret felt as if she had had an electric shock. Here? They even knew about the Conservatory scandal here? Minority peasants, deep in Qinghai Province, in the remote west? No, no. Impossible, surely. But it didn't *seem* impossible.

"No. No, of course not. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Chinese people come here, always army, or Party. If not army, Party, then do some bad thing, so come here."

"Oh. Well, because it's so remote, I guess. People don't want to come here."

"Ah." The driver played this back to the second man. The second man said something brief, with great force, and they both laughed. "Missy, they want you sing Nakri A-gya-kol Number Three? Sing the foreign language?"

"No. I'm to be a schoolteacher there."

"Teach sing?"

"No. Teach Chinese and English."

"But you tell me you singer. Why no teach sing?"

"Because that's my assignment, that's why. We have to go where the Party sends us."

Margaret wished she had never mentioned being a singer. It just sounded so nice. *Me? I'm a singer.* And true, after all, at any rate on paper. In spite of everything the Conservatory had allowed her to graduate. Then they had assigned her to this Nakri place, a place so small and remote she had been unable to locate it in Father's atlas.

The driver had become grave. "Missy I guess you do something bad, something very bad. You don't want tell me, is okay. Never mind." He took one hand from the wheel and pressed a finger to his lips. "I no ask you, I no say any thing."

The second man spoke. The driver answered him.

"He say you very pretty. Skin so white. Must be princess."

"Margaret laughed. No, I'm not a princess. There are no princesses in New China."

The second man spoke again.

"He say, you speak the foreign language, must be visited foreign country? He wants know, you been India?"

"What a strange question! No, I've never been to India. Why does he ask that?"

No answer came, and Margaret thought he hadn't heard her. She repeated the question.

"He father live India."

"Really?" She looked at the man. He was looking at the road. "That's interesting. But I'm afraid I've never been to India."

"Never mind. He just want know that."

* * *

Nakri Agricultural Research Station Number Three was a heavy wooden gate in a rough stone wall. Above the gate was a semicircular metal framework with a quotation from Chairman Mao fixed to it in red letters: IN AGRICULTURE, FOLLOW DAZHAI. Dazhai had been a model commune during the Cultural Revolution. The quotation was surmounted by a red star. Nothing else could be seen in the ellipse of the headlight's beam.

The driver leaned on his horn. This had no effect. He clambered

down and began kicking on the gate and shouting. After a few minutes the gate was dragged open by two ancient Tibetans. The driver went to the back of the truck and returned with a small cloth bundle, which he gave to one of the gatekeepers. Then he climbed back into his cab and drove into the compound. "A-gya-kol Number Three!" he announced, and cut the engine.

Margaret climbed down gratefully, and her box was taken down and set beside her. The night was dark, with no moon. The air was now cold, and she regretted not having put her scarf on. In front of her was a large two-story house of peculiar architecture. It had a wide entrance door. Light showed at one of the windows at the side of the door. The driver had gone inside and could be heard shouting. When he came back out there was an old man with him, rubbing his eyes. He carried a flashlight in one hand.

"I'm the new teacher," Margaret introduced herself.

"New teacher? Your mother's!"

The man, who seemed to be Chinese, did a long clearing of his nose and throat, sucking mucus from the innermost recesses of his skull, and spat twice.

"I suppose I'd better take you to the dormitory. Ai, your mother's, what a nuisance!" He turned away from her and set off into the darkness.

"Wait! Wait! My box!"

With the driver carrying her box, and sleepy dark faces peering out at them from the back of the truck, they set off behind the wavering flashlight. After crossing some open space they reached a brick building with a closed wooden door. The two men kicked and banged at the door for a full ten minutes. At last an old woman appeared.

"The new teacher's arrived."

"New teacher? Her mother's! Why can't she come in the daytime?" The crone peered at Margaret. "Damn nuisance! All right."

The little party entered. There was a long corridor, lit by feeble electric light. They followed the old woman to a door at the far end. "Here. Got one free bed. Yes. Here." She switched on a light. Figures moved on bunks. Three women's face blinked at them. "Put the box here."

Margaret's companions left. Two of the faces had disappeared under

their quilts again; the other, on the upper bunk opposite, watched her. It was a dark-skinned, plain girl of twenty or so.

“Hello,” said Margaret. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“You the new teacher, from Beijing?”

“Yes. Oh, you were expecting me.”

“Yes.” The girl giggled and disappeared into her quilts.

Something about the giggle aroused the same irrational fear Margaret had felt in the truck. They knew about her—about the reason for her banishment! And at once she realized that here, in the unit she had been assigned to, the fear was not at all irrational. Her file—of course!

Like every other Chinese citizen, Margaret had a file, kept in the office of one of the Party Secretaries at her unit. But now, this was her unit, and her file would have been sent here. Any of the Party secretaries here could have read it, and gossiped. Since everyone at the Conservatory seemed to think she had been giving intimate favors to Mr Powell, presumably that would be what was written in her file. But no, surely the file wouldn’t have arrived so soon. People sometimes waited months for their file to catch up with them. Surely not, surely not.

The door opened. The old woman came in and flung some bedding onto the empty bunk. “Washroom at the other end, round the corner,” she said, and slammed the door.