

Compilation 1 – Chapter 2’s “Shola Pass to Chamdo – The First White”

Our team strung out, making its way up a huge ridge that marked the way to the pass. Ascending in a zigzag pattern, we were only part of the way up when the wind was broken by a yell from Dakpa, behind me. One of the mules had plunged ten meters to land chest-deep in snow at the bottom of the ravine. Another mule was stuck in a deep trough of snow, unable to move. The snow was deep enough to buoy the loads atop the mule, making its exit doubly impossible. Dorje and Dakpa descended to join Tenzin in calming the animals and slowly digging them out.

One mule had a small gash on its haunch. Dorje promptly fiddled with his gaping fly, then urinated on the wound without a moment of hesitation. This was a trick used by mountain men throughout the region to prevent infection: the urine acts as an antiseptic. Tenzin’s expression had become hard. His fears were no different from those of his ancestors. A good animal was far too valuable to risk, and the Khampas of eastern Tibet, perhaps more than any others in Asia, knew the value of their four-legged companions. The hazards to us two-legged creatures were not yet evident, but the deep snow concealed any number of rock traps that could easily snap the leg of a mule. The weather was intensifying by the minute, and the terrain had taken on a brooding beauty. The snow tried to deceive with its attractive blanket of uniformity, but we knew that the smooth, undulating curves were not to be trusted.

Tenzin moved ahead of our group and tentatively prodded the snow with his stick, gauging its depth and staring upward, grimacing at the risk involved. The mules could navigate the visible, but in the blizzard, many of the hazards remained unseen. Our second horseman, the young Lisu tribesman, put on his gloves and offered us a huge smile that moved the heart. Contained in his youthful smile was the pledge to follow us anywhere, and I sensed his innocent courage.

Dakpa’s face creased as he studied the slopes. Reference points had all but disappeared as successive walls of snow coming down from the sky moved toward us. Dakpa had made the crossing in more temperate seasons only and now told us “this is a different place from the summertime pass that I know. I have never seen it like this.”

Dorje decided to do reconnaissance. After lighting a cigarette, he crawled on his knees and elbows up a slope of white. He was the embodiment of mountain-bred men: unconventional, fearless, and strong. The rest of us gathered to discuss what we should do. We knew that later in the day a yak

caravan was due to travel over the pass but like much in the mountains, there was no guarantee of when, or even that it would show up at all.

Yaks had long been the choice of those requiring both plough and transporter. Slow and steady, they were stubborn behemoths, ideal for brutal conditions and high-altitude crossings, and our horseman had often followed in the wake of a yak team during the winter months. In the snow passes, all moving bodies were allies in the face of danger. This was one of the mountain's beautifully straightforward laws: cooperated or perish.

In the Tea Horse Road's peak years of trade and transport, the summer months were especially busy. While mules journeyed during the day, yak caravans would navigate the higher passes at night, avoiding the daytime rush hour. In my mind's eye, I could picture the patient animals plodding along with their huge cargoes, gently making their way along the precarious trails.

Then Tenzin spoke up, pointing out that if we were to try for the pass, we should leave immediately. Our window of opportunity was closing with each breath. Sonam and I were all for pushing onward, at least until we could better judge the conditions ahead. Sonam had enough knowledge of the mountains to know that the storm was only going to intensify. I recalled Dawa's words about the dangers of turning back. We were committed. No amount of research is as insightful as experience, and within the mountain regions, few could counsel like the old Tibetan mountain men and women.

Dorje returned from his scouting and informed us that conditions were worse up ahead, and that the snow was as "deep as a tree." Asking him how he knew would have been pointless; Dorje just knew. We quickly decided that Sonam, Dakpa, Norbu, and I would continue and make an attempt at the pass for as long as the elements - and our wills - allowed. Nomè, Dorje, the two horsemen, and the mules would wait for the yak caravan or for the weather to subside, whichever came first. Dorje's moustache bristled: he wasn't at all pleased at being told to wait, or with being away from the action. The mules would not be risked in attempting the treacherous pass with me and the other three, and Nomè and Dorje needed to stay behind in case the mules had to be led by hand across the pass, should the yak caravan arrive and plough the trail. Despite Dorje's wish to be everywhere at once, he would, for a time at least, be limited to one place. His untamed energy, crucial as it was to our team, was best used looking after the mules. Also, his infinite strength and keen sense of duty would ensure that nothing happened to our gear. Much like an honor guard, he viewed himself as a buffer between our team and anything unsavory that might happen, and his desire to assist, protect, and clear away obstructions had to at times be funneled into a specific purpose. Now for the first time since I had known him, Dorje wore a serious expression on his face. He clearly wasn't happy about being separated from his pack.

Carrying only the minimum of gear, we moved out. The speed that the light loads allowed should have worked to our advantage, but the wind was intent on bludgeoning us, and we walked straight into a vortex of shrieking air. For a few frenzied minutes, all our effort was spent trying to maintain our orientation and some sort of an upright position; the wind's whirling power abolished any notion of forward momentum. Without warning, our shuddering bodies emerged from the twisting vortex back into the only slightly less potent blizzard. As we trudged ever higher, Sonam's boots proved inadequate; snow had seeped in and soaked them. But since one of his mantras was "Complaining solves nothing," I didn't learn until later that his wet feet had slowly gone numb.