

Birthright
2061

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PRESS

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To Guru Rinpoche
and his tertöns

The Guru is the equal of all the Buddhas. To make any connection with him, whether through seeing him, hearing his voice, remembering him, or being touched by his hand, will lead us toward liberation. To have full confidence in him is the sure way to progress toward enlightenment. The warmth of his wisdom and compassion will melt the ore of our being and release the gold of the Buddha-nature within.

—Dilgo Khyentse, *The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel*

Contents

Chronology

Part 1 Past

- 1 Tashi's Trade
- 2 Tara's Grief
- 3 Hope's Joy
- 4 John's Role

Part 2 Present

- 5 Tara's Path
- 6 Hope's Story
- 7 John's Heart
- 8 Tashi's Errand

Part 3 Convergence

- 9 Promise Fulfilled
- 10 Coincidence?
- 11 Planning

Part 4 Journey

- 12 Getting Acquainted
- 13 Yeshe Tsogyal
- 14 A New Friend
- 15 Storytelling

16 A Guide

17 Reunited

Part 5 Destination

18 Arrival

19 A Buddha

20 Homesick

Part 6 Integration

21 New Interests

22 The Root Cellar

23 The Crown Buddha

24 Discoveries

25 At Last!

Part 7 Future

26 Tashi's Hope

27 John's Goal

28 Tara's Secret

29 Hope's Desire

30 Rex's Plan

Chronology

- 2000 Athena born.
- 2020 Athena marries Samuel (b. 1991).
- 2025 Tara born to Athena and Samuel.
- 2028 Earth changes in Asia and the Pacific.
- 2029 Fires, storms, EMP attacks. Samuel leaves.
- 2036 Tashi born.
- 2043 Tara marries Luke (b. 2022). Athena leaves.
- 2045 John born to Tara and Luke.
- 2048 Hope born to Tara and Luke.
- 2049 Plague. Invasion. Luke leaves.
- 2049 Earthquakes. Volcanic eruptions. Famine begins.
- 2056 Famine ends.
- 2061 Tashi arrives.

PART 1

Past

The Golden Mantra

OM AH HUM VAJRA GURU PADMA
SIDDHI HUM

One

Tashi's Trade

I'm only half Tibetan, actually. I wear Tibetan robes, but not saffron-colored like my father's. He came here long ago with a group of monks who settled toward the western edge of the American Rockies. Thirty years ago they were cut off from their monastery in the Himalayas—by earth changes in Asia and the Pacific and the fires and storms and EMP attacks on the U.S.—and their Rocky Mountain settlement became permanent. They soon realized that to carry on their culture and their spiritual traditions, some of the younger monks would have to marry and have children to form an outer community and support the monastery. So my father volunteered to take an American Buddhist wife, and they went about building a family. My father says my mother may not be as Tibetan as he is, but she's every bit as Buddhist. So it's a happy marriage.

My parents eventually had 11 children. A number of other monks of my father's generation also had families. All the children were given a solid background in our spiritual heritage—plus reading, writing, English, Tibetan, Sanskrit, the basics of math and science and history and geography. When we turned 13, the monks assigned each of us to one of two groups—those who would become monks, and those who would marry and raise children. My sisters were given the choice of becoming nuns or householders, and all but one chose the monastic life. Our community's logic was that the men would have to seek wives elsewhere in order to avoid the dangers of inbreeding. There would be no marriage partners for the women inside the community, so having only a few marriageable young women wasn't a problem. The few women who wished to be married would eventually be wed to an outsider.

I was a good enough student, but my father judged rightly that my temperament was less contemplative than that of my brothers. He recommended to the monks that I become a

householder. So my formal schooling ended when I was 13. I and my fellow householders-in-training began working alongside our elders to develop skills in food production and preservation, fishing, building and maintenance, care of our animals—everything that took place outside the walls of our little houses. We also had to learn all about the terrain where we lived and about the distant caves where we could hide in case of danger.

The Chinese invaded the year my schooling ended. They had stuffed aircraft carriers full of soldiers and shipped them across the Pacific, with just enough food and water to get most of them to the west coast of the U.S. alive. Their instructions were to pillage and destroy the coastal areas and to demoralize the people, who were to become slaves of the Chinese state. A group of soldiers were assigned the task of moving inland quickly, terrorizing the people and destroying their culture in preparation for the Chinese culture to come. Much of what was once considered American culture had been destroyed by the EMP long before the Chinese landed—the computers, cell phones, and televisions didn't work anymore. All that was left was the books. So the Chinese soldiers moved swiftly inland and destroyed the libraries and the public buildings, and eventually the books of private citizens. They let the houses stand. We speculated that they intended the houses to be used later by a wave of Chinese immigrants who would take over the country and become the dominant ethnic group, as they had done in Tibet.

My community had heard of the approach of the Chinese and knew what to expect. We took everything Tibetan out of our homes and hid our religious artifacts in what was left of the forest, in burned-out logs or uprooted trees or little caves. We had already staged food and other supplies in distant hiding places. Our religious texts we divided into bundles, and every man, woman, and child carried a bundle, whether large or small. Then we formed small groups and scattered, going high into the mountains. The trees had grown back somewhat after the fires, to the height of six or eight feet. They provided some cover, which we were grateful for. Fortunately the Chinese were on foot, like us, and they didn't have dogs or technology that would have enabled them to track us. In our community, everyone escaped, and we saved all our books. It was

some time, though, before we felt it was safe to return to our little village.

The Americans weren't so fortunate—but they didn't always realize the extent of their misfortune. They stayed in their homes in the small cities and towns, while the Chinese burned their libraries and their religious centers. Then the Chinese went door-to-door demanding books to feed bonfires in the streets. They said they would burn down the house of anyone who tried to hide books. Usually they burned one or two houses as soon as they got into a town, to terrorize the rest of the townspeople into complying. So the Americans brought their books to the streets to be burned. We heard that some of the Americans looked at each other and shrugged. What did it matter if the books were burned? It wasn't like losing food or shelter. But they didn't understand the overall plan of the Chinese like we Tibetans did.

When the Chinese came, the plague came too. Some people speculated that there was a cause-and-effect relationship—impossible to know. Many of the Chinese died of the plague within days of landing at the western ports. Those who had pushed inland before the earthquakes sometimes fell sick and died later, and the remainder were often disheartened and afraid. They had guns, but no way to replenish their ammunition, so most of them tossed their guns aside. Their food ran out quickly, and once they left the cities it was hard to find more. They were unprepared for the large swaths of uninhabited land they had to cross on foot. They lived off the land until winter came, but with rural Americans well armed and either in hiding or boarded up in their houses, the Chinese found food and shelter hard to come by. Many died of exposure and starvation. Most of those remaining were shot by the Americans. So the Chinese invasion was much less effective than they had planned.

And mere weeks after the invasion, while most of the Chinese were still battling to take over the cities on the west coast, came the earthquakes. Thousands of miles of the coast simply broke off and fell into the Pacific, causing huge tsunamis. All the Chinese still in the coastal areas were killed, as well as the Americans who had been trapped there or came to fight the Chinese.

The earthquakes changed the west coast forever. Even if the

Chinese wanted to mount another invasion, there is no port to land their troops in. No doubt things have changed on the world scene too. The Chinese never tried to invade again.

We are grateful to be alive. The population in this part of the country was decimated by the invasion and the plague, the earthquakes and the volcanic eruptions. Ash from the volcanoes blocked the sun for seven years, and our community barely managed to eke out enough food to survive. Things are better now that the ash has cleared. We have plenty of food for the children, and they're smiling and happy again.

My responsibility as a householder is to find a wife, start a family, and most important, to support the monks and nuns whose devotions help sustain the world. This isn't as easy as it would have been even 30 years ago. The entire U.S. economy has collapsed. There is virtually no manufacturing, except for a few cottage industries. The economy is based primarily on barter, although salt and cloth function as a kind of currency.

Several of my half-Tibetan brothers and friends who were also householders-in-training became itinerant traders, and I decided to do the same. The nomadic life of the trader comes easily to us—perhaps because we are already so far from our homeland and we are used to traveling light. Some of my brother traders are generalists, stuffing the bags on their pack animals with whatever they can scavenge from deserted buildings, carrying it inland in hopes of trading for something more valuable to people in the west. Eventually they return home with a full load of miscellaneous goods to sell to the bigger traders farther west.

I decided, however, to become a specialist. It was the Chinese invasion that set me on my life course. My father was correct that I'm not overly contemplative, but it's also true that from my childhood I've been a bit of a dreamer—and I've always loved books. So when our books were threatened and when I heard that the books of the Americans had been destroyed, I'd found my niche. This year, on my first solo trip, I'll trade in books.

My logic is that it was easy to search houses in the cities and towns, so most of the books in the larger population centers were burned. Traveling to the less populated regions to the east to look for

books in exchange for trade goods is likely to be a very profitable venture. In particular, I want spiritual books—both for their intrinsic value and because people in the west are as hungry for them as for food.

But I have other reasons for wanting to travel to the east. We know that several other groups of Tibetans established communities farther east in the Rockies, beginning even before the turn of the century. I want to find them, if they still exist. My father is in favor of the idea, since I'm approaching 25 and should be finding a wife soon. I also have a personal promise to fulfill, a secret promise I made 12 years ago, just before the earthquakes. So I loaded up my favorite burro with trade goods, plus food for the journey, and we set off.