



THE SHAMAN'S TALE

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MONGOLIA, SPRING 1211

The Shaman regarded the prisoner with grim satisfaction. The man sat on the floor of the wooden cage atop a pile of filthy bedding. The stench was almost unbearable, a combination of unwashed body mixed with the pungent stink of urine and faeces. If the man had been scheduled to live beyond the current day, he would have ordered the guards to sluice the area with buckets of water. As it was, the prisoner's execution was planned to coincide with the rising of the full moon that night.

The Shaman drew no pleasure from inflicting suffering, but he was well aware of the need to reinforce the superstitions of the men upon whose beneficence he depended. As the appointed intermediary between the gods and mortals, a spot of human sacrifice never failed to remind his powerful benefactors and their armies that they needed to pay attention to divine matters in addition to the art of war. He had also learned that dressing the act up in a ritual only served to strengthen the impact. Now that he was the chief spiritual advisor to the great warrior, the emperor Temüjin, or Genghis Khan as he would be known to later generations, it was vital that killing the man achieved both the spiritual and the practical goals.

The previous Shaman had personally selected him to be his successor. At the age of eight, the skinny boy was forcibly removed from his family, poor farmers who eked out a living from the dusty soil, and was apprenticed to his predecessor. Over the succeeding years, he was tutored in the rites and the rituals of the profession, all passed down by word of mouth. Three years ago, twenty years after commencing his apprenticeship, his mentor had died leaving him as the emperor's primary conduit to the gods.

When the Shaman had transitioned from apprentice to the main role, the emperor was already powerful, but in the intervening three years his domain had grown. Now he ruled a huge swathe of Mongolia and nurtured ambitions to extend his reach even further. The only barrier to his expansion was the Jin dynasty to the south. The unfortunate wretch sitting in his own filth in the wooden cage was an enemy spy who had been captured three weeks earlier.

The emperor Temüjin had amassed his army at the foot of the pass leading through the mountains to the enemy's position. His own spies informed him that he was outnumbered by four or five to one, so a full frontal attack was out of the question, even if it had been possible to move his troops through the well-defended pass. But the emperor wasn't a man who had risen to his current status without a great deal of cunning and tactical prowess. He planned to send several hundred men over the mountain peaks, bypassing the narrow

chokepoint, and to attack the enemy from the rear. The fear and confusion caused amongst the enemy would drive them onto the main body of his troops waiting in the pass.

The problem was that the jagged peaks were impassable to anything but mountain goats. This was where the Shaman came in; in addition to providing spiritual guidance, he was also adept in the arts of the apothecary. In a private audience, the emperor had asked him to provide a solution to the dilemma. That evening's ceremony would be the first part of the solution.

The Shaman looked towards the sun sinking below the looming mountains and did a mental calculation; five hours remained before the full moon rose and the ceremony began. Absent-mindedly, he fingered the clear orange stone hanging around his neck as his mind wrestled with the planning for the ritual.

The Shaman emerged from his yurt and looked up at the night sky. The moon formed a pearly luminescent disc, floating just above the horizon. By the time the ceremony started, it would have risen higher and would provide a fitting illumination to what followed. He paused for a moment and surveyed the camp. A short distance away stood an immense, garishly decorated yurt. Men carrying torches guarded the exterior, the flickering of the naked flames generating reflections in the luxurious material draped over the dull brown animal skins that formed the walls and roof. This was where the emperor slept, accompanied by several of his wives. A number of yurts of a similar size to the Shaman's own surrounded the building. Typically, the closer a yurt was positioned relative to the emperor's accommodation, the more important the inhabitant who resided within. Amongst his neighbours were the emperor's generals and advisors.

Expanding out from the central area, smaller tents stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see, illuminated in the moon's ghostly glow. A network of paths ran between the tents, lit by the flaming torches held by the men who scurried along between them. Three hundred yards away, in the direction of the mountains looming above the camp, the density of the torches increased. That would be his audience waiting for the show to start.

The babble of voices carried to him on the cold evening breeze. The excitement was building as the troops waited in anticipation. A variety of other sounds intermingled with the low hubbub emanating from the soldiers. The rumble of cart wheels formed an incessant background clamour, as they ferried supplies backwards and forwards throughout the camp. There was the

metallic clink of armour and weapons as the men hurried about. Overlaid above it all was the sound of livestock, the whinnying of the horses ridden by the mounted troops and the bellowing of the oxen that were used both to pull the carts and as a source of food.

The Shaman drew in a deep breath and began to head towards the gathering. At the moment, he was glad for the warmth offered by the animal skins that he wore given the chill night air. As the ceremony progressed they would become more of a burden but that couldn't be helped. On his head, he sported an elaborate mask, representing a bird with the tail of a pheasant. The animal skins were decorated with polished metal plates, bells and strips of brightly coloured cloth. As he walked, the clinking of the metal and the tinkling of the bells accompanied his every step. On his feet, he wore plain sandals but those would be discarded once the ritual started.

As the Shaman neared the crowd, heads turned and strained to get a glimpse of him. A path through the men opened up before him as he approached the centre of the area where the prisoner waited, bound to a post. A circular space with a diameter of fifty yards had been left clear around the unfortunate spy. A few feet from the post to which the prisoner was tied, lay a wooden frame, built in the shape of a cube, each side eight feet in length. A large earthenware pot lay on the ground adjacent to the frame. Five men stood guard, surrounding the prisoner, although it was clear there was no chance of escape. The emperor sat in an ornamented chair directly facing the captive, his clothes outdoing the Shaman's for gaudiness. Behind him, a group of about three hundred men, dressed in the uniform of the emperor's bodyguard, stood apprehensively. Each of the men wore a shiny metallic helmet, blue and gold coloured tunic and sturdy boots, with a sheathed sword at his side.

An excited murmur intensified amongst the throng. The Shaman surveyed the prisoner and immediately noticed the wet hair and the improved smell. Somebody had obviously decided to wash the man after all. The prisoner wore only a loin cloth and shivered uncontrollably, partly from the cold and partly from fear. His eyes tracked the Shaman as he strolled slowly backwards and forwards, confirming everything was ready. The Shaman nodded at the five men. Four of the men moved to grab the prisoner's arms, whilst the remaining guard untied the knot binding him to the post. The captive began to struggle, but his custodians restrained him with ease. He babbled something incoherent as his *captors* dragged him to the frame. Once there, two guards held each arm out horizontally, whilst the fifth wrapped the rope around the outstretched

limbs several times, binding him to the wooden struts. Once the arms were tied, they moved on to the legs and affixed those too.

Seeing that the man was securely fastened, the Shaman barked out a command. The prisoner struggled against his bonds and pleaded for mercy as the five men began to tilt the frame. They manoeuvred the wooden contraption through ninety degrees until the man's body was horizontal then repeated the process, leaving the man upside down, two feet off the ground. The Shaman gave another command and one of the men picked up the earthenware pot and placed it beneath the prisoner.

Satisfied, the Shaman turned to the emperor and waited for the signal to begin. Temüjin nodded and the drummers seated at the perimeter of the circle began beating out a slow rhythmic pattern.

Initially the Shaman walked backwards and forwards slowly, raising his hands to the sky. He shook his arms causing the bells and metal strips attached to his clothes to jangle against the insistent rhythm of the drums. His voice took on a deep, sonorous tone as he pleaded with the gods for their blessing and support. The prisoner studied every move, pleading for mercy. The Shaman paid no heed, allowing the pulsing of the drums to guide his mind to a trance-like state.

Almost imperceptibly, the pace of the drums quickened. The Shaman increased the energy of his movements and began to dance back and forth in front of the prisoner. His body jerked in time to the tempo as he swirled and capered before the terror-stricken victim. The excited murmuring of the audience rose above the thunderous drumming as they watched on in fascination, straining to get a better view.

The tempo of the drummers accelerated again. The Shaman's movements became more erratic. His wild gyrations threw back reflections from the torches carried by the onlookers. The high-pitched ringing of the metallic items affixed to his robes formed a continuous accompaniment to his incantations. Perspiration trickled down his body despite the plummeting temperature. The prisoner remained silent, seemingly resigned to his fate.

The Shaman's unquenchable energy seemed to infect the drummers and the pace increased once again. The Shaman jerked and staggered as if he was controlled by strings. He whirled around the prisoner, oblivious to everything but the throbbing of the drums. The hammering rhythm reached a crescendo

and grew more ragged as the exhausted drummers exerted their last reserves of energy.

The Shaman collapsed to the ground and lay still. The drumming stopped abruptly. The expectant crowd held their breaths, the only sound the whinnying of horses rising and falling, carried on the night-time breeze. The Shaman remained motionless, and a low murmur of consternation built amongst the gathering. After what seemed like an impossible amount of time, the Shaman finally stirred and slowly clambered to his feet. The immense crowd let out a collective sigh of relief. He drew himself up, raised his hands skywards to the full moon and uttered a prayer of supplication to the gods.

The Shaman slid a hand beneath his robes and drew out an onyx blade. A gasp rose from the audience. The Shaman held the weapon above his head and intoned an incantation. The shiny black blade sparkled as it reflected the light from the numerous torches that illuminated the scene. The Shaman fell silent and an expectant hush descended over the crowd. He turned towards the prisoner and fixed him with a baleful stare.

Realising the end was near, the captive began once again to plead for his life. The Shaman approached until he was standing beside the frame restraining the inverted body. He faced the emperor and waited for the invitation to proceed. An almost imperceptible nod was all the authorisation he needed.

With one hand, the Shaman grasped the prisoner's hair, pulling his head back and exposing his neck.

With the other, he slid the razor sharp blade across the prisoner's throat.

A gout of blood gushed from the slash in the prisoner's neck. A portion landed in the earthenware pot, but a greater amount splashed on the well-trodden ground. The man gurgled, and his eyes rolled up in his head as his consciousness started to fade. His body began to spasm, his brain fighting against the lack of oxygen. Within a few seconds, the man had stopped twitching, and the flow of blood that appeared almost black in the moonlight, slowed to a trickle. The Shaman stood with his arms held towards the heavens, the onyx blade still in his right hand, muttering incantations.

The hubbub from the crowd rose as the expectant soldiers jostled against each other, eager to gain a view of the man's last breath. The spy's eyes remained open, but they stared sightlessly ahead. His lank, damp hair hung down to the ground, partially obscuring his face. The Shaman looked down at

his victim and, seeing that blood no longer dripped from the wound, sank to his knees with a clinking sound from the fragments of metal and bells attached to his robes.

Still kneeling, the Shaman gestured to the five guards. Four of them rushed forwards and began to untie the corpse, whilst the fifth lifted the brown container. The man carrying the pot approached the Shaman with trepidation and held it out for inspection. The Shaman glanced at the contents and gave a nod of approval. There would be more than enough for what he planned next.

The body was dragged off to be disposed of, but the Shaman turned towards the threatening mountains. The crowd parted before him as he limped in the direction of the menacing peaks, the man bearing the pot following a few paces behind, accompanied by two soldiers holding torches. This was the cue for the gathering to disperse. The sound level rose as the troops excitedly chattered about what they had witnessed.

The Shaman continued to walk slowly until the noise from the dispersing crowd was no more than a background buzz. The rivulets of sweat that had flowed down his body were now beginning to chill him, and he shivered in the cold night air. Ahead of him loomed a rocky outcrop. As he drew nearer, the dark entrance of a cave became apparent, soaking up the moonlight that illuminated the surrounding rocks. He had scouted the cave the day before to ensure it was fit for his purposes. The location needed to be remote from the camp and sheltered from the wind. This location was perfect for the next phase of his plan.

The Shaman gestured impatiently towards the two torch bearers, indicating where he wanted the flames positioned. The two men hurried forwards and placed the torches in the appointed spots. He barked a peremptory command at the man holding the pot containing the prisoner's blood and waited for him to deposit it where he had instructed. As the man stood, the Shaman beckoned him closer. The Shaman issued a stream of instructions whilst the man listened carefully.

Satisfied that his requests had been understood, he dismissed all three men and turned to the blood-filled pot.

The Shaman knelt beside the earthenware container and slipped the orange stone that hung from a cord around his neck over his head. Holding the stone with one hand, he retrieved the onyx blade from the folds of his robes with the other. The razor shape edge glittered in the illumination cast by the sputtering

torches. In low tones he muttered a mantra, beseeching the gods for their support. At the same time, he held the knife and the stone over the blood-filled pot and repeatedly slid the blade backwards and forwards along a groove in the stone. The rhythmic grating of the knife acted as a metronome to the incantation.

After ten minutes of scraping, the Shaman rose shakily to his feet, returned the knife to his robes and slid the orange stone back over his head. Stiffly at first, he began to dance in front of the pot, his voice taking on a musical tone as he murmured prayers to the gods accompanied by the clinking of the metallic items attached to his clothes. He allowed his mind to enter a trance-like state as his physical discomforts slowly faded from consciousness.

This was the most dangerous stage. The previous Shaman had warned him many times of the dangers of not being prepared for the mental changes he would experience. The first occasion he had undertaken this ritual, he had come within a whisker of losing control. If that had happened, his life would have been terminated there and then. As it turned out, he had remembered his training and applied the methods he had been taught to maintain his mental discipline.

The Shaman lost track of time. Suddenly he sensed a presence behind him. He whirled around and recognised the man he had sent away earlier. The man hovered nervously by the entrance. Behind him, the moonlight glistened off the helmets of the emperor's bodyguards. The Shaman walked past the man without acknowledging him and stood to face the armed men standing before him. He beckoned two of the commanders towards him and spoke to them in a low voice. The officers nodded in agreement and moved to stand just inside the entrance to the cave, one on either side.

The Shaman addressed the anxiously waiting men. All had been trained in the self-control that would be required to undergo this ritual since an early age, but few had experienced it before. The Shaman exhorted them to put all thoughts of anger and fear out of their minds and to focus on their inner core. He instructed them to place their weapons on the ground and to remove their helmets. This was a necessary precaution; the two officers he had spoken to first were under strict instructions to execute any of the men who showed signs of losing control. It wouldn't do to permit the soldiers to defend themselves against their executioners.

The Shaman ordered the men to form up in a queue and to follow him into the cave three at a time. Leading the first group past the two officers who now stood guard with drawn weapons, he re-entered the gloomy interior. He

walked to the brown, earthenware pot and glanced inside. Under the flickering torch light, a wispy layer of white material coated the surface of the blood. The three soldiers tentatively approached the pot and, one at a time, knelt and drew in a deep breath.

The first two men returned to their feet without incident. The third man coughed and stared around in confusion. The two officers took a step forwards, but the man shook his head and regained control. The three men strode out of the cave, their apprehension supplanted by an aggressive determination.

Over the next few minutes, all the men filed inside. They had clearly been well trained; despite one or two close calls, the services of the officers were not required. Once the last group of three had been processed, the two officers took their turn.

As they emerged into the cold night air, they were greeted by the sight of three hundred soldiers, all rearmed and wearing their helmets. Gone were the looks of apprehension to be replaced by ferocious scowls and aggressive stares. One of the officers shouted an order to the men, and they set off at a brisk trot in the direction of the mountain peaks that had until a few moments earlier been unscalable.

Historians would record that Genghis Khan's forces routed an army numbering five times as many troops. A select band of men scaled the peaks surrounding the pass and, as the main body of the emperor's force attacked the front of the Jin line, this highly trained cadre of warriors simultaneously crushed the Jin cavalry from behind. After destroying one of the enemy's most potent instruments of war, the small group descended upon the supply camps to the rear of the Jin army and slaughtered many of their resting adversaries. In the confusion caused by the encircling attacks, hundreds of thousands of Jin soldiers died that day at the hands of Genghis Khan's men.

It was said afterwards that the bodies lay five deep throughout the pass. What history would not recount was the role played by the Shaman and the mysterious orange stone.

Author's Notes

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading this short story. If you did, you might enjoy *The Rage*, where the true secret of the mysterious orange stone is revealed.

You might also like my second novel, *Decimation: The Girl Who Survived*. You can buy it on the Amazon website through this link: <http://mybook.to/Decimation>

Thanks for reading.

Richard T. Burke
May 2017

To read the author's blog and to see news of upcoming books, please visit www.rjne.uk or follow him on Twitter @RTBurkeAuthor.

The Rage

It will make you see red. Blood-red.

The worst crime that ever happens in the picturesque village of Netherwell is the occasional burglary, but that is all about to change.

Dennis Dean takes his dog for a walk, unaware of the danger lurking in the woods. When he fails to answer his mobile phone, his wife, Alice, becomes concerned. Her fears are exacerbated after their dog returns home without its master.

Over the course of the next two days, the once peaceful location is rocked by a series of horrific murders and descends into a spiral of escalating violence.

But the ancient evil hiding beneath the trees may not be the only source of danger. As the residents battle to stay alive, they begin to question the motives of those whose duty it is to protect them.

Buy it at: <http://mybook.to/TheRage>

Decimation

How far would you go to save the human race?

In 2017 a virus sweeps across the world and infects every living person. It lies dormant until a woman gives birth. Then she dies.

Fifteen years later, nobody has survived childbirth since the outbreak began. Teenage wheelchair athlete, Antimone Lessing, thought she would be competing at the Delhi 2032 Paralympics. Instead, she is nine months pregnant and commencing labour. When she unexpectedly survives, she becomes a vital clue in the race to develop a cure before the global population declines beyond the point of no return.

But survival comes at a price. As her doctors try to understand why she is still alive, she must choose between preserving humanity's future and protecting the life of her newborn child.

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