

# PAST IMPERFECT

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SHAMAN

Then the children realised that what they were looking at was really a mask - an exceptionally ugly and nasty mask, the sort of thing that if you wore at Halloween would frighten the life out of anyone who saw it. They were still very frightened - the figure looked horrible and was very threatening, circling them, dancing about, hissing and rattling his staff at them; the snake on the head must have been hollow and contained beads.

“Stop it at once,” the Khan shouted sharply. “You're frightening them and making me giddy.” The figure in red obeyed, stopping his circling and gyrating but still rattled his staff.

“They do not belong here,” hissed a cracked and hoarse voice from the mask, echoing slightly because of the strange shape of the head. “They are a danger to you! They will bring about your death!” The figure hissed again and drew closer to the Khan. “They will poison you with their tea!”

The Khan looked worried and rather uncertain and Sarah, her voice quivering and her hands shaking said in a voice that sounded more like a squeak, “Let me make you a cup and you can watch me prepare it and then we'll drink it and you can see it is safe.”

The Khan brightened. “Good idea,” he said, and the figure in red hissed loudly in disagreement. The Khan turned to him again, “Oh, and take that silly head off!” he ordered, irritably.

With every sign of reluctance the figure reached up and removed the grotesque mask revealing a scowling, thin, pinched face under a balding head of hair; without the mask he looked a good deal less frightening. In fact he looked rather like a bad tempered bank clerk or librarian now and the children breathed a sigh of relief. Hadrian came round from his faint and looked up groggily but from where he was lying all he saw was a red figure waving a head around in his direction which seemed to have become detached. He promptly passed out again.

“That's better,” said the Khan, once the mask was off. “Now, let me introduce you properly. This is the Shaman. He's a sort of advisor that I'm supposed to consult. He has some strange habits and you'll have to forgive him if he does a few odd things and wears that atrocious mask but it's supposed to be part of the job. It's supposed to frighten off evil spirits - well, you can see why, can't you? After all, if he didn't wear the mask he wouldn't frighten anyone.”

The Shaman grimaced. “I say they will bring danger,” he said, his voice not sounding quite so unpleasant now he wasn't wearing the mask; instead it sounded rather thin and reedy. He went on, “They do not belong here; there have been strange portents in the sky - evil events are foretold. They may be the cause of it all. Give them to me so I may examine them and see where they have come from.” His eyes narrowed and his lips smiled an unpleasant smile. Joe didn't think that an

examination by the Shaman would be a very pleasant experience. His eyes really bored into you still, he thought. It was as if he knew something of their secret.

“Certainly not!” said the Khan. “They’ve brought me a nice present and now they are going to make me a drink. If you are going to stay, be quiet!”

Muttering, the Shaman withdrew to the edge of the chamber while Sarah and Joe pulled out the things they would need from the bags the Mandarin had given them. The Khan watched with great interest as Sarah put the little silver stove together, her hands still shaking from the shock of the first sight of the Shaman, stoked it with the fragrant wood chippings and lit it with a taper from a lamp in the room. Then she asked for some water, which was brought by an attendant in a brass jug. She poured it into the brass kettle which she then placed on the stove, now glowing red, and they sat back while the kettle boiled. Then Joe put some tea into the beautiful china teapot the Mandarin had thoughtfully provided. Hadrian came round again just as the kettle boiled and Sarah poured the water onto the tea.

“You have had a shock,” said the Khan sympathetically to Hadrian. “The sight of our Shaman in full regalia is enough to frighten the willies out of anyone. Perhaps you would all like something to eat to accompany this drink?” He clapped his hands and an attendant appeared, had instructions whispered to him by the Khan and withdrew. He was back very quickly with several small glass pots full of a white stuff, together with some silver spoons. These were offered round and the Khan took one as well. The tea was ready and Sarah poured it into the delicate china bowls and the Khan clapped his hands again. A tall, plump, rather mournful looking man appeared and sighed as the Khan gave him the pot he was holding along with the spoon. Joe and Sarah looked on in surprise as the man took a spoonful of the white stuff, ate, nodded and returned the pot to the Khan with a bow. The Khan studied the man for a minute or two, then seeming satisfied, he tasted the pot himself. Seeing the surprise on the children’s faces, the Khan said, “He’s my taster. There have been so many attempts on my life recently. Someone is trying to get rid of me. I’ve had five tasters in the last two months.”

“No wonder he looks so mournful,” thought Joe.

The tea was now ready and Sarah said, “I know it’s rude for us to drink a cup before you do but if we drink it first, then you can watch us to see if it’s poisoned or not.”

“And it will save you wasting a taster,” added Hadrian.

“Good point,” said the Khan. “It’s difficult to get hold of good replacement tasters. It’s a good job, well paid and you get all you can eat but it’s a bit short on prospects, as you might say.”

The children and Hadrian had a cup each and felt better after their shock at seeing the Shaman. The Khan and the taster watched them closely and after a while Sarah offered a cup to the taster. The children seemed quite unharmed so he took the cup and had a sip. He looked very pleased and nodded enthusiastically to the Khan and passed him the cup. The Khan watched his taster closely for a minute but as he appeared fine, he then tried the tea himself. His eyebrows rose and he too smiled and nodded.

“Very good,” he said enthusiastically. “What do you call it? Tea? Oh, I think this is excellent. A very welcome present. Do you think you could get some more when this runs out?”

“Well, there might be a problem there,” said Joe. “You see it comes from the other side of your fence.”

The Khan looked surprised - and rather thoughtful.

"I do like this white stuff, your Khanship," said Hadrian, who had been tucking into his pot. "It's very good."

Joe and Sarah had also been trying it and they agreed. It reminded Joe of something but the taste was so good that he really couldn't think that he had eaten this before.

"It's called yoghurt," said the Khan. "It's something we eat a lot. I'm glad you like it - it can get a bit boring but it's very nutritious."

Joe could hardly believe it was yoghurt. He had tasted yoghurt from the shops at home before but it had never tasted so good as this.

"Have you thought of adding bits of fruit to it?" suggested Sarah. "It might make it more interesting."

"Do you know, that's a very good idea," said the Khan and several of the soldiers and attendants nodded. "All we've ever had to drink with it before is fermented yak's milk and it's disgusting but your tea goes with it very well. If we can get some more I'll make it available to everyone. It will be very popular, I'm sure."

An idea was taking shape in Joe's mind and he looked at Hadrian who was also thinking hard.

"I was also going to have a word with you about your fence," said Hadrian. "I'm an architect, as I said, and I was going to suggest that a wall might be a better idea - more permanent and less likely to be damaged."

"A good idea," nodded the Khan, "and we'd need your expertise because we aren't really good with building because we live in tents, but the other side wouldn't let you get on and build it - they'd be raiding all over the place and the workers would run away. If you can build one I will reward you very handsomely indeed but I don't think the idea will even get off the ground, as you might say."

"Well, I've got one or two suggestions that might solve the problem," said Hadrian.

"We'll hear them tomorrow," said the Khan. "I'll call a council meeting of the tribal chiefs and you can address them all. It's time for bed. I feel very relaxed and calmed by your tea and look forward to another cup tomorrow when we have our discussion. Do you think there will be enough to go round a group of tribal chiefs?" he asked Sarah. "There'll be about twenty of us."

"I'm sure there will be," answered Sarah, "but I'll need a bigger kettle and teapot to make it in - or a few more smaller stoves and more small kettles and teapots to brew it in."

"I'll see what can be arranged," said the Khan. "Now, we have a guest tent and we will make you comfortable there. Guards, if you could please show them the way. And I wish you a very good night and pleasant dreams."

The warriors who had bought them in bowed and accompanied Sarah, Joe and Hadrian out of the gold-lined chamber, back along the silk-lined corridor and out into the tent city. It was night now and the soldiers led them down a lane between rows of now dark and silent tents. Joe and Sarah looked up. At first the sky looked beautiful, perfectly clear, the stars glittering and the new moon a slim crescent. Then suddenly the sky tore open as it had before when they had been on the Chinese side of the Fence, vivid colours shot through the great rent, again the stars swirled in a mad dance, and planets whirled soundlessly through the void. Two comets left long trails behind them just above the horizon. The warriors looked up too, fearful and shaking their heads.

"I've not seen it as bad as this before," said Hadrian in a worried tone.

“Something is very wrong,” muttered the leader of the warriors, who was wearing his gold chain and seemed better disposed towards the visitors now, and he turned to Joe and Sarah. “Between you and me,” he said in a low voice, “it’s been like this since that Shaman arrived. He keeps saying it’s because the Khan’s life is threatened and the gods are angry but I don’t know . . . . The Khan seemed safe enough before the Shaman arrived. That Shaman is a very powerful man. You must watch him - he is a bad enemy.”

“Thank you for telling us,” said Hadrian, “although I don’t know what we can do about it.”

“Watch yourselves!” said the soldier. “Be careful what you eat and drink. I don’t believe you are our enemies but there will be many who will believe the Shaman.”

“What is a Shaman, exactly?” asked Joe.

“A holy man who can see the future and who advises you what to do,” replied the leader of the warriors. “He speaks with the gods themselves - or he says he does. This one appeared a few months ago after the old Shaman died.”

They had arrived at the guest tent now. It looked like all the others from the outside, dark coloured and made of course cloth but once the children and Hadrian went in they were pleasantly surprised. For a start it was larger inside than they thought; there was a central open space with three chambers at the sides, separated by heavy brocaded curtains, and in each chamber was a bed with coverings of embroidered silk and fur and scattered with several thick cushions. There were small jade lamps on stands in the middle of the floor and the soldiers arranged the things that the visitors had brought with them around the stands.

“Goodnight,” said the warrior leader, bowing and fingering the heavy gold chain round his neck. “You have made a very good impression on our Khan.” He looked rather shamefaced for a minute then went on, “I’m sorry I wanted to remove your heads. It’s nothing personal - just our custom, you understand. The Khan was right, it’s not a good idea. Who wants stains on their nice clean tent?”

“Quite,” said Hadrian. “Think no more of it.”

The leader bowed and went on, “The Khan rewarded me well for bringing you to him and you have pleased him greatly. I am grateful to you - I am the Captain of the Khan’s Mounted Guards and from now on you may consider me and my men at your service. Goodnight!” and he left, taking all but one of the other guards with him. One was left on sentry duty at the door to the tent. Joe wasn’t too sure if he was supposed to stop them getting out or someone else from getting in. The three looked at each other and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” said Hadrian, “but I think we can sort a few things out now and perhaps even get a wall built.”

“What about getting us home?” asked Sarah, impatiently.

“One thing at a time,” replied Hadrian, suddenly strangely reluctant. “Building a wall could make me - I mean us - a lot of money. In any case, I can’t do much until that Red Indian makes an appearance. Until then we’ll have to survive - and I think we could survive rather well if we play our cards right. We can arrange a wall and a bit of trade between the Chinese and this lot.”

“It will stop all this raiding if we can start them swapping tea for yoghurts,” agreed Joe, who was quite taken with the idea and temporarily had forgotten about going home. The dusty city streets and the library of the morning earlier were a world away now.

“But we need to get home!” said Sarah, exasperated with the pair of them. “Can’t you go into a trance and try to get the Chief back?”

Hadrian shook his head. “Not tonight,” he said, yawning. “I’m far too tired. Look, we can sort all that out later. I told you, time on the Other Side works at a different pace. You’ll be fine here for a while. All we need is a bit of peace and the wall can be started; a careful bit of work by a skilled architect and they could have a really good quality wall that will take years to build - because of course, if a job is to be done, it should be done well.”

“And of course you will be very well paid,” added Sarah pointedly.

“And the longer it takes the more you get,” added Joe. Hadrian looked pained.

“You make it sound like I am dishonest or something,” he said. “We all have to make a living.”

“Can’t you just get us home, then?” asked Sarah. “Try getting in touch with the Chief again. I don’t want to be stuck here for years.”

“I will,” promised Hadrian, rather insincerely, Joe thought. “I’ll try tomorrow when I’m rested. Come on, let’s go to bed. We’ve got a hard day in front of us tomorrow talking to that council of chiefs. I can see you two making gallons of tea.”

And off he went to one of the sleeping chambers. Sarah fumed.

“We do the work and he gets lots of money for a wall. Heaven knows what it will turn out like,” she said.

“If it’s anything like the last one, I don’t think Hadrian will be around for long to collect his money,” added Joe. The pair of them looked gloomily at each other.

“Still, perhaps we can persuade him to try a trance tomorrow,” said Joe. “After he’s convinced the chiefs to build his wall. At least we aren’t going to be beheaded by the guards or handed over to the Shaman. It could be worse,” he added to try and comfort both Sarah and himself. He was right of course, it could have been a great deal worse, and after they had washed in beautiful brass bowls of scented water, Sarah and he went off to bed, Sarah choosing the chamber with hangings of pink and Joe the one with blue - quite appropriate, he thought.

If they thought everything seemed to be going well under the circumstances and that there were lights at the end of the tunnel that they had found themselves in, they were soon to be aware that this was most certainly not the case. They had been in bed a few hours and were all sound asleep - they had all fallen asleep almost as soon as their heads had touched the silk pillows - when from the back of the tent came a hissing noise, very low and certainly not loud enough for either the sentry or those inside the tent to hear it. It was the sound of a very sharp knife slicing through the tent wall. Five figures all in black then stole quietly through the big gash in the fabric; three made for the sleeping chambers and two picked up the things that the travellers had brought with them. The three sleeping guests had no chance to struggle or fight; pads of some strange smelling material were clamped over their faces as they slept and all three fell unconscious. They were rapidly muffled up in the rugs and carried out through the rip in the tent.

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They awoke some time later; it was dark and they found themselves lying on hard ground. As their eyes grew used to the dark and their heads gradually cleared from some strange muzziness that

made them feel as if their heads were full of cotton wool, they looked around. They were back in a wooden cage, securely locked up. The cage appeared to be in a large tent and also in the tent, sat on a pile of rugs and watching them, was the Shaman, without his mask, along with two rough-looking men in blue and black striped robes. In front of the Shaman was their pile of things that they had been given by the Mandarin - and the brass box containing the tea was open.

“You are awake at last,” said the Shaman in his thin voice. “You will not have long left in this world. Soon you will be back on the Other Side, where you belong! In your case, permanently,” he hissed to Sarah and Joe.

“What makes you think we are from the Other Side,” said Hadrian, trying to sound as if the idea was completely daft.

“I know!” said the Shaman. “That is enough. But what sort of condition you will be in when you are sent back may mean that you will never be able to travel again on the Other Side. I intend to kill the Khan and most of the other chiefs - and you and the Chinese will get the blame.”

“How - and why?” asked Sarah, her voice shaking.

The Shaman stretched his thin lips into a smile and replied, “The tea he drinks tomorrow will contain a slow acting poison. His taster will be fine after he drinks it. Then the Khan and his chiefs will drink. A few minutes later, all will be dead. I shall tell the people and the guards where you are and you will be found and blamed.”

“But we’ve got to make the tea,” pointed out Joe.

“No one will be able to find you. I shall advise that as the tea was good before, it should be good again and that the attendants can make it as you did. Then, when the Khan dies, I shall go into a trance and discover where you are - you will be found in the tent of the chief of the Khan’s guards, an enemy of mine. You will once again be asleep, drugged by the potion I used to bring you here. You will be condemned to death along with the chief guard. One of the tribal chiefs loyal to me will take over.” One of the rough looking men at his side grinned, showing a mouthful of yellow pointed teeth. The Shaman went on, “Then I shall raise the tribes of the Steppes and demand that the death of the Great Khan be avenged - we shall pour over the Fence and bring destruction to the Chinese Empire!”

The children and Hadrian were silent, contemplating the plot that the Shaman had unfolded to them. It seemed all worked out - and what would happen to them had also been worked out, and it appeared that there was nothing that they could do about it. They watched as the Shaman added some powder to the brass box of tea; the two men with him then picked up the box and the other things and carried them out of the tent. The Shaman rose and came close to the cage.

“Soon my men will come for you to take you to the tent of the chief of the Khan’s guards,” he said, “Until then, contemplate your imminent deaths! I shall devise something suitably awful for you all and will take great care to make it as painful as possible!”

With those cheery words he left, and the three prisoners looked at each other in horror.

“What are we going to do,” wailed Hadrian. “Why didn’t I try to summon the Chief before this? Me and my big mouth!”

Sarah and Joe looked at each other and thought hard.

“If we can get that cloud . . . .,” said Joe.

“And try and reach help . . . .,” continued Sarah.

“We might have a chance,” finished Joe.

They sat the shaking and gibbering Hadrian down, shut him up and told him their plan - go into a trance, summon the cloud, get out the cage and either try to contact Thunder Head or go and get help. It sounded good. They thought about trying to get the cloud to take them as far away as fast as possible but the thought of the Khan and his chiefs being poisoned and their new friend the chief guard being blamed made them want to help in some way and stop the plot - and save the Chinese too.

“But I can’t go into trances when I’m nervous,” wailed Hadrian, “and right now I’m nervous! The prospect of being killed makes me nervous!”

“All right, all right,” soothed Sarah. “Just calm down and try to blank your mind.”

“That shouldn’t be difficult,” muttered Joe. Sarah dug an elbow in his ribs.

“Shut up!” she hissed and turned back to Hadrian, saying as persuasively as she could, “Just try. We’ll help.”

“Yes, we’ll hold hands again and try to think cloud,” said Joe. “I’ll try singing like the monks if you like but my mum says the cat sounds better than me when I sing.”

“I think we’ll forget that bit, then,” said Sarah. “Just think cloud, all right?”

Hadrian nodded miserably and sat down, Joe one side of him and Sarah on the other. Hadrian was still shaking like a leaf; he held hands with the other two and closed his eyes. Joe could feel Hadrian’s hand trembling and so could Sarah; Joe wondered if his own hands were shaking as well - they should have been, because he felt very frightened. They all tried desperately to blank their minds and think cloud. Joe breathed deeply to calm himself and so did Sarah, eyes closed, minds slowly emptying of the whirling thoughts going round and round - and then Sarah hissed “It’s working, look!”

Joe opened an eye and noticed wisps of white swirling round the cage. He closed his eyes again and thought cloud harder and harder. When he opened his eyes again there was quite a lot of white around them but not as much as they had seen before; they could still see the bars of the cage through the swirling mist. They nudged Hadrian, who opened his eyes.

“I didn’t feel I was getting anywhere,” he said in surprise. “Still there it is. Only a little cloud though. I’m not sure it’s enough.”

“Will it get us out?” asked Joe.

“Let’s try,” said Hadrian and closed his eyes. The cloud seemed to lurch a bit and jump about but they didn’t move. “Too heavy!” said Hadrian. “There’s too many of us. I think it will only carry one of us - one of you, probably. I’m too heavy.”

Joe and Sarah looked at each other. “One of us will have to go for help,” said Joe, “but how do we control the cloud?”

“Just try to think hard about going somewhere,” said Hadrian. “I’ll try to help by thinking about it from here. Quick, choose one of you before it disappears!”

“I’ll go,” said Joe, “I’m smaller and lighter.” Sarah snorted, but she agreed - Joe was the smaller of them and probably weighed less. Hadrian and Sarah stepped to one side, close to the bars of the cage, and Joe sat in the middle of the little cloud and thought hard about moving - but where was he to go? Sarah and Hadrian saw the cloud slowly vanish, taking Joe with it. Now they were on their own and they could only wait and hope.

