The Shadow Walker

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Published by Quercus

Extract

First published in Great Britain in 2006 by Quercus
This paperback edition published in 2007 by

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

A CIP catalogue reference for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 84724 080 1
ISBN-13: 978 1 84724 080 4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

So that was it. Cleaned out again. Right down to the last *tugruk*.

He fell against the wall, nearly lost his footing, then staggered upright again and continued his uncertain way down the empty street.

What time was it? After midnight, for sure. The street-lights were on in the square, but the narrow side-streets were lost in darkness. And it was cold. Bone-chillingly cold, and winter was hardly here. He had tried to bet his coat on the last game – it was the only asset he had left – but thank blue heaven they'd just laughed at him. They usually laughed at him.

He tripped again, stumbling on an uneven paving stone, and felt suddenly nauseous. He should stop this. Stop the drinking. Stop the gambling. Yet again, he had left himself with nothing to live on till the next public handout, days away. But what else was there? Endless empty promises. That was the story of this country; everyone made promises. But nobody kept them. At least the cheap vodka always delivered.

He stopped suddenly, feeling sick, realising that his bladder was painfully full. The city lights swirled around him, a dizzying scatter of neon logos proclaiming a future he had no part in. He took a step back, trying to regain his equilibrium, the freezing cold aching in his limbs.

Where was he? Still a long way from home, a long way to go. He looked around, trying to find somewhere

to relieve himself. There was a cramped side-street to his left, unlit, thick blackness only yards from the main street. He glanced back. The city centre and the main square in the distance were deserted, bleak and wintry in the thin glow of the streetlights.

He turned and began to make his way cautiously down the unlit street. Some lingering sense of propriety made him try to move further into the darkness – he had no desire to get himself arrested, on top of everything else.

He could barely see now, his eyes not yet accustomed to the dark. Tall blank buildings rose up on both sides of him, the lights of the main street lost behind him. He took another step, trying to regain his balance and his bearings, and then he stumbled again, his foot catching on something. Something heavy lying in the middle of the street. Something soft.

He fell headlong, his arm and his shoulder scraping on the rough ground, the impact agonising even in his drunken state. He rolled over, gasping, and lay on his back, trying to catch his breath. Above him, in the narrow gap between the high buildings, he could see a brilliant patterning of stars.

His eyes were adjusting to the darkness now, and he twisted around, trying to see what it was that had tripped him. At first, he couldn't make it out. Just a blank shapeless mound, spread across the frozen ground. And then he thought it looked something like a human figure, but not quite like one. He rolled over, trying to clear his head, trying to work out what was wrong.

And then, suddenly, he realised what it was, and he screamed, the nausea that had been building in his stomach overwhelming him, acid in his throat.

He was still lying there, moaning and retching, when the police patrol arrived fifteen minutes later.

PART ONE

ONE

It was like one of the gates of hell.

They drove at speed away from the airport, northeast towards the city, as the setting sun cast crimson shadows along the road ahead. As night fell and the sky filled with stars, the empty steppe was left behind, replaced by a vast industrial complex dominating both sides of the road. Endless blank buildings stretched into the thickening winter darkness, interspersed by networks of heavy pipe-lines, scatterings of pale orange lights. Somewhere in the centre, there was a single guttering flare.

Nergui followed Drew's gaze. 'Mining. Mainly coal here, though there are gold reserves in the area also. A primitive operation. This would not now be allowed in your country, I think. The ugliness, pollution. But the Soviets were not too bothered about things like that. And neither are we, I suppose, so long as we maintain some kind of industry. We have been through difficult times.' He shrugged, and then smiled. 'But much of the country is unspoiled. I hope you will get the chance to see some of it while you are here.'

'I don't know—'

Nergui nodded. 'Of course, forgive me. Murder is not a trivial matter. Especially in a case like this. We will provide you with every support. This matter is a grave concern to us as well. I merely wish to be hospitable.'

Drew shook his head. 'No, that's fine. I'm keen to see something of the country while I'm here.'

'I will be pleased to be your guide, Chief Inspector.'

'Call me Drew, please.'

The Mongolian nodded slowly, as though absorbing this request. He had given no indication of his own rank or position. At the airport, Nergui had introduced himself to Drew – one of a handful of Westerners on the in-bound flight – only by the single name. It had appeared, from the phone-calls and e-mails exchanged prior to Drew's arrival, that Nergui was the officer in charge of the investigation, but he had not made this explicit. Instead, he had introduced the younger second officer, Doripalam, as the Head of the Serious Crimes Team.

But there was no doubt that Nergui was at ease in the back of this official car, with Doripalam in the front passenger seat and a silent underling driving them down this featureless road towards the city centre.

And there was no doubt, too, that Drew was a long way from home.

Home was five thousand miles away. Home was the soft chill of late autumn rain, not the harsh grip of approaching winter. It was the grey downpour that had greeted Drew as he crawled from his bed at some godless hour that morning, hearing the steady breathing of his sleeping wife, the softer synchronised breath of the children in the next room. The ceaseless torrent down the windscreen of the taxi thirty minutes later, the rhythmic sweep of the wipers. The overcheerful banter of the driver, on his last run of the night, looking forward to his own bed.

As always, Drew had arrived at the airport too early, with an age to wait after check-in, trying not to think about the hours of travel that lay ahead, about what might wait at the end of the journey. He was still barely awake as he boarded the flight to Heathrow, a compliant automaton, gripping his passport, fumbling for the

hastily arranged visa, juggling his deck of tickets. The flight was, inevitably, late, stacked for long minutes over London, Monday morning congestion already building. He ended up with no time to spare, racing across the terminal for the connecting Lufthansa flight to Berlin, convinced he would be stopped at the gate. As he stumbled up the aisle of the plane, the other passengers had stared at him, no doubt recognising him as the one who had briefly delayed their flight.

This was, supposedly, the easier route to Mongolia. The alternative was a flight to Moscow and an Aeroflot connection to Ulan Baatar. The specialist travel firm that had organised the trip had warned against this, citing the inevitability of delays in Moscow and the notorious unreliability of the Russian carrier. Better to trust German efficiency and the enthusiasm of Mongolia's own state airline, MIAT, to bring tourists and their currency quickly into their country.

The advice proved sound. The Berlin flight was on time, and the transfer at Tegel smooth enough. Two hours later, he was sitting on MIAT's only 737, finally beginning to relax. This flight was also on schedule and the service was efficient, even if the style and catering were, to Western eyes, eccentric. The in-flight meal consisted entirely of a selection of meats – cured, roast, perhaps boiled – accompanied by an apparently unending supply of miniature Mongolian vodkas. Drew drank two of these, enjoying the warmth and pepper taste, with a growing sense of ease that the hardest part of the journey was past. Three vodkas seemed too many for the early afternoon, and he slipped the last small bottle into his pocket as a souvenir. His neighbour, a middle-aged Mongolian man in a smart-looking black business suit, smiled at him and raised his own glass of vodka in silent greeting.

Unexpectedly – to Drew at least – the flight was interrupted for refuelling at Irkutsk, on the far eastern Russian border. The flight circled in over the vast white expanse of Lake Baikal, the dark Siberian forests stretched out ahead. There was more queuing to display passports and visas, the wooden-faced official peering suspiciously at Drew's documents.

'Police?' he had said finally, in heavily accented English.

Drew nodded, drawing a deep breath to launch into some kind of explanation. He had in his pocket the formal letter of invitation from the Mongolian government, though he had no idea how much weight this would carry this side of the border. But, after a lengthy pause, the man had just nodded and smiled faintly. 'Good luck,' he said. Drew suspected that he had used the only English words he knew.

Drew and the other passengers had sat in the empty airport, surrounded by cheap pine veneer and grimy plate-glass windows, drinking strong coffee from the primitive bar. At one point, seeking air, Drew had wandered out to join the cluster of smokers on a small wooden balcony, with views out over the woodlands and lake. Although it was mid-afternoon, it was icy cold, the Russian winter already biting. He stood for as long as he could, the frozen air harsh in his lungs, looking out at the dense Siberian forests, the trees black against the pure blue of the sky, the landscape deathly silent. He had felt then as if he was standing at the edge of the world, with no inkling of what might lie beyond.

Minutes later, they were shepherded back on to the plane. As they walked back out across the tarmac, Drew looked around at his fellow travellers. Most were Mongolian, with the distinctive broad features and dark

skin, though there was a scattering of Westerners and some who looked, to Drew's undiscerning eye, to be Chinese. Most were dressed in conventional Western clothes – suits, jeans, sweatshirts – but two older men were dressed in heavy, dark coloured robes, wrapped around with brilliantly-patterned golden sashes.

Later, as they approached Ulan Baatar, the plane banked low over the steppes, turning in sharply towards the airport. The sun was low in the clear sky, casting deep shadows across the endless green plains. Even the shape of the hills was different here – softer, rounder, distinctively Asian. As the plane descended, Drew glimpsed, startlingly close to the runway, scatterings of nomadic camps, round grey tents, figures wrapped in traditional robes, tethered horses, flocks of sheep and herds of horned cattle.

The sight was unexpected, but this was how the people lived here. The population was sparse – little more than one person per square kilometre of land – and half still lived in the traditional *ger* tents. Half of those remained nomadic, tending their herds, moving with the seasons, coping with the extremes of an intense continental climate. It was a basic lifestyle unchanged for a thousand years. And over the past decade, unemployment and poverty had driven increasing numbers back out to the steppes, struggling to eke out an existence from the inhospitable grassland, rediscovering traditional ways of living, the lure and challenges of the endless plains.

Minutes later, the plane landed and, as incongruous as if from another age, there were the strings of landing lights, the formalities of passport and customs, the baggage carousel that, to Drew's mild surprise, rapidly disgorged the luggage he had checked in hours before. All around, there was the anonymous glare and bustle of

a shabby airport terminal that might have been anywhere in the world.

'Drew,' Nergui said. 'Drew McLeish. That is a Scottish name, yes?'

Drew looked across at the heavily built figure beside him. 'My father was from Glasgow. But my family moved to Manchester when I was a boy, so I lost the accent long ago. You know the UK?'

Nergui nodded. 'I spent a year there. Studying.'

'Your English is excellent.'

'Thank you. I also spent some years in the US, so I talk about sidewalks and elevators.' Nergui laughed. 'But I liked England. A beautiful country.'

'We have our own ugliness and pollution,' Drew said. 'But some of it is beautiful.'

'We will show you some of the attractions of our country while you are here.' Nergui paused. 'It is good of you to come. We will need all the help and advice you can give us. You will find us very amateurish, I am afraid.'

This seemed unlikely. The police might be short of resources and experience, but it was clear, even from their brief initial contact with Drew, that Nergui and Doripalam were anything but amateurs. 'I don't know that there's much I'll be able to teach you,' he said. 'But I'll give whatever help and support I can.'

'This kind of crime is new to us, Chief Inspector. Drew.' He said the name as though trying it out, but seemed satisfied with the effect.

Drew shrugged. 'Thankfully,' he said, 'none of us comes across this kind of crime very often.'

That was true enough. Crime wasn't supposed to be like this, not here. Crime here could be violent and sometimes complex – which was when Nergui tended to get involved

these days – but mostly it was trivial stuff. Nergui had read in the newspaper only a few days before that the single most common crime in Mongolia was the theft of cattle. A few months earlier, an English journalist had had his bicycle stolen by a man on a horse, though Nergui had no idea how this could have been done. And there was always the drunkenness, worse when the nights lengthened and the weather became cold, and worst of all among the growing numbers without jobs or prospects. The levels of alcoholism and drug abuse in the capital mounted with every passing month.

But, even in these dark times, crime was not like this.

When they found the first body, nobody was surprised. These things happened from time to time. They had always happened, even in the old days, though then the authorities had made sure they were never reported. In these more liberal times, the privately owned scandal sheets picked up on stories like this and tried to stir up some trouble. But such incidents were usually soon forgotten, either because the police knew immediately who was responsible or because they were never likely to find out.

The body had been found in one of the narrow unlit side-streets near the city centre, in the shadow of a long-abandoned clothing factory. Cocooned in his new role, Nergui had had no reason to be involved. But he felt some frustration that this potentially interesting case had arisen so soon after his detachment to the Ministry. Bored and curious, he had used his new-found authority to request a copy of the scene-of-crime report. To his surprise, it arrived promptly and without question. One of the minor privileges available to those who no longer had to deal with policing on the front line.

Not for the first time, reading through the turgid account, Nergui wished that the police were able to

demand a higher standard of literacy from their front-line officers. But the basic narrative was clear enough. A local drunk had found the body, while making his way home in the small hours after a night spent gambling in some illegal bar.

Nergui had seen more than enough dead bodies in his career. He could only hope that, when the drunk realised what lay beside him, alcohol had lessened the shock. But he suspected not, given the copious amounts of vomit apparently spread across the body when the police arrived. The pathologist, faced with an already unpleasant task, had expressed outrage at this further disruption of the evidence. On the other hand, as Nergui glanced through the crime-scene photographs he had to admit that, even for a sober person, vomiting would have been an understandable response.

The body was severely mutilated; it had been decapitated and was missing its hands, the neck and wrists savagely chopped as though with a heavy blunt blade. There were multiple lacerations to the chest as if the killer had been unable to stop, slashing savagely at the body, tearing repeatedly through its thin clothing, long after life must have departed. There was no sign of the missing body parts.

The pathologist had concluded that, in fact, all this mutilation had occurred after death. The most likely cause of death itself was strangling or asphyxiation. There was little other visible evidence. The body was dressed in Western-style clothes – cheap trousers, a thin cotton shirt, a rough jacket. Apart from the tearings and blood stains, the clothes were clean and looked new. They were mass-produced items that could have been purchased anywhere although this late in the year, it was difficult to imagine that anyone had willingly gone outside dressed like that. The pockets were empty.

The local police had, characteristically, stumbled into the incident more or less by accident. A passing patrolman, shining his flashlight down the side-street, had been startled by the scene – the twisted body, the prone drunk. His first reaction was to call for back-up, and then to apprehend the still retching drunk who had offered little resistance.

It was a natural assumption. Most deaths and criminal injuries in the city were the result of drunken brawls. But a moment's glance at the corpse had been enough to tell the patrolman that, though the drunk might be a witness, he was unlikely to be the perpetrator. There was little blood surrounding the body, and it was clear that the murder and dismemberment had taken place elsewhere and some time before.

Apart from the additional lacerations, the murder had all the signs of a professional killing. The removal of the head and hands had presumably been intended to conceal the victim's identity, the clothes had been stripped of identifying marks. The body had been dumped here, in the dark but just off the main drag, so there had been no concern about its being found. It might even be that the discovery of the body, and its inevitable reporting in the media, was intended as a warning to someone.

The murder might have been committed for any number of reasons. The drugs trade had made its inroads here as it had in most impoverished Soviet satellites, especially among the younger unemployed. There were the usual networks of organised crime – much of it with its roots over the borders in China and Russia but gaining an ever-stronger foothold in the capital. This was a country with no money but plenty of potential. The perfect buyer's market for anyone looking to get a piece of the future action.

And, of course, there was no shortage of home-grown corruption. It was only a few years since the Mon-Macau Casino scandal had resulted in the trial and imprisonment of a prominent group of politicians on bribery charges. And that case had been just one high-profile example of what was becoming an endemic problem – a seeping corruption evident in all parts of public life. Even, as he knew only too well, among the police themselves.

The police would make a show of investigating, but they would probably make little progress. For all its horror, this was the kind of crime that wouldn't justify much investigative time; the chances of resolving it were too small and it was in nobody's interest to dig too deeply. And even the most honest policemen might think that the victim, whoever he might be, probably deserved his fate. Which, Nergui conceded, could well be the case.

So, after a small flurry in the press, the case aroused little interest. Nergui had the details logged in the Ministry files on the off-chance there was some connection to any of the fraud or other cases they were already investigating, but he didn't seriously expect any link, he had already dismissed the murder as just another manifestation of the criminal underclass that infested this city.

And then, a week later, they found the second body.

'You are something of an expert in this field, I understand?' Nergui said. Outside, the night and guttering lights rolled past them as the car entered the city outskirts. The heavy industrial sites gave way to row after row of featureless low-rise apartment buildings, a familiar testament to ugly Soviet pragmatism. Most looked neglected, paint peeling, the occasional window smashed. But virtually all seemed to be inhabited – there were lights at the windows, occasional lines of washing hanging limply in the cold evening.

Then, unexpectedly, in an open space between the tightly packed apartment blocks, there was another clustering of *gers*, a nomadic camp somehow lost in the urban anonymity. Drew stared out at the neat lines of identical round grey tents, the smoke rising steadily from their central chimneys. There were ranks of old-fashioned, brightly polished Russian motorbikes and a lone tethered horse, its breath clouding the night in the pale orange of the streetlights. As if to compound the incongruity, a group of denim-clad teenagers stood chatting around a single streetlight in the heart of the camp, cigarettes glowing in their hands, as though transported there from some Western inner city.

He looked back at Nergui. The Mongolian was watching him closely, as though his response might be significant. Nergui's face remained expressionless, his flat features and dark skin looking almost as if they might be carved from wood.

'That would be an exaggeration,' Drew said. 'But I've had to deal with a lot of violent crime. Including murder.'

'Serial killings?'

'It depends what you mean. I handled one case where we had a genuine psychopath. He killed twice before we got him, but if we hadn't I don't doubt that he'd have killed more. And I've handled several multiple killings, but those were mostly professional hits.'

Nergui nodded. 'Which may be what we have here.'

'I wouldn't like to speculate,' Drew said. 'From what I've read, the whole thing is just – well, bizarre. It doesn't sound like the random killings of a psychopath, but it's a strange way to organise any kind of professional hit.'

'Yes, indeed,' Nergui said. 'Well, we welcome your help. And we will do all we can to reciprocate. We understand that this matter is a concern to both our countries.'

In truth, it wasn't clear why Drew had been sent here. It

was not unusual, when a serious crime had been committed against a British subject, for an investigating officer to be sent to work with the local police. Often, it was little more than a token gesture, a demonstration to the public that the matter was being taken seriously. This was probably the case here. The brutal murder of a British businessman in a remote and largely unknown country was always going to create a stir in the tabloids, even though the full details of the murder had not been released.

The victim had been a Manchester resident, and Drew, as one of the more experienced investigating officers, had been offered the opportunity to make the trip. It was a difficult offer to refuse, although Drew could see little that he could bring to this particular party. Investigating any crime, even murder – especially murder – was generally a matter of routine, of systematically exploring every avenue, sifting each bit of information, until you began to make the connections. There was little doubt that Nergui and Doripalam would be organising that side of things very efficiently. Drew might facilitate some contacts in the UK, if there turned out to be any significance in the last victim's identity, but that was probably about it.

They had now entered the city centre. The road widened into a brightly lit avenue, lined with a mix of official-looking buildings, many studded with communist emblems, and newer commercial offices, some with Korean, Japanese or even American business names that Drew recognised. This could be any Eastern European city struggling to come to grips with life after the Soviet Union – the first shoots of Western capitalism alongside drab weathered concrete, poorly maintained roads and streetlights, shabby squares and inner-city parks. Familiar logos, neon-lit on the summits of office buildings, competed with stylised images of soldiers and stars

– the fading murals of communism. And then, off to the right, there was a sudden glimpse of a very different building, the monastery of Choijin Lama, palely illuminated against the dark sky – a jumble of curving gilded rooflines, copper and crimson colourings, towers and short golden spires.

It was not late, but the streets were largely deserted, except for an occasional passing truck or car – mostly old-fashioned former Soviet or Eastern European models. Nergui pointed to an imposing building on the right. 'The British Embassy,' he said.

Drew nodded. 'The ambassador wants to see me. I've an appointment for tomorrow.'

'For lunch?'

Drew laughed. 'I don't think so. I'm due there at ten. I'm probably not important enough to merit lunch.'

'A pity,' Nergui said, as if he really meant it. 'He gives a good lunch.'

Drew was vaguely wondering how often this senior policeman had cause to lunch with the British ambassador when the car pulled to a halt outside the hotel Chinggis Khaan.

Nergui gestured towards the extraordinary towering pink and black glass monolith, set incongruously among the featureless Soviet-style architecture that otherwise dominated much of the city centre. 'I hope you don't mind staying here,' he said. 'I was unsure whether it was tactful to place you so near the scene of the crime.'

Drew shrugged. 'At least I'll be on hand for the next one,' he said. Even as he spoke, he felt that his words were glib and inappropriate.

But Nergui gazed at him impassively, as if taking his statement seriously. 'Let us hope,' he said, 'that your help will not be needed.'