

The Initiation

By Alexander Saxton

When Jufan had lived to see the new sun once for every finger on his hands, and then once more, his father Jozon went to the assembly of the tribe.

“This spring,” he told them, “I will take Jufan with me to the trade.”

It was still winter. Beyond the hide walls of the great tent, father wind was in a fury, and hard shards of ice hissed at anyone who walked outside. Within, low red coals burned in the centre of the tent, sending smoke through a hole in the ceiling. Their dim light flickered against the animals painted on the walls, making them dance, making them run.

“He is strong for his age,” said Fan La, the women’s representative. “The women of the tribe present no complaint.”

All bowed their heads to her. The next person with the right to speak was Shiao-Duun, the shaman. He was the oldest man in the tribe. Ornaments of rare copper hung from his ears, braided hair and neck. His teeth had fallen out, and he wore dentures carved from hyena fangs. One half of his face was painted red, representing life. The other half was painted black.

“He has not been initiated,” said the Shaman. His voice was like no human voice. His eyes saw things no other person saw, and nobody could meet them. Jufan’s father looked away.

“Surely he does not need to be,” Jozon said. “He is still young.”

The Shaman leaned back out of the light, so only the red side of his face, his pale fangs and flashing eyes could be seen in the gloom. He made a deep noise in his throat. A sound of contemplation? One of threat? Jufan’s father did not know, and kept his head bowed.

“Your route this Spring means you will trade with the Jian Sha,” the shaman said. “They are not like us; they are ruled by women; they are not to be trusted.”

“With respect,” said Jufan’s father. “We have traded with the Jian Sha since my father’s father’s time. They have never betrayed us.”

“Yes,” said the Shaman. “The Jian Sha may be trusted, but they may not be *trusted*.”

A deep murmur rose from the assembly. Paradox was one of the shaman’s gifts. They saw wisdom in it.

Shiao-Duun leaned in again. A soft expression had settled on his face, if softness was a word that could ever be applied to such a being.

“You love your boy,” he said. “You think he is strong enough to go trading, but maybe not yet old strong enough for initiation. He is still young for *that*, and you fear it may kill him. This makes you a good father.”

He leaned back. Deep silence reigned, as the assembly waited for him to finish his thought. It was said that he had lived for seven hundred winters.

“*I know what you are thinking,*” said Shiao-Duun. Jufan’s father stiffened. The reading of hearts was one of the Shaman’s most feared gifts. “Since your brother drowned, you need another pair of hands. You are afraid of the hardships you will face with one less body.”

Jozon nodded, pale in the face of this display of supernatural power.

“It is as you say.”

The assembly took in a breath.

Shiao-Duun stroked his coarse beard.

“The same thing can be wise and unwise, depending how it is done,” he said. “Jozon: you have lived, what, twenty-six winters? You are almost an elder now. You know the ways. Bring your son. But guard him well, and heed my warning about the Jian Sha. If they have eyes to see, they will know he is destined to be a valuable hunter. They will steal him for themselves, if they can.”

Relieved, Jozon hung his head, and thanked the shaman. Shiao-Duun threw herbs on the fire, and those gathered felt the smoke carry them up, until they were floating above themselves. At the same time, Shiao-Duun opened his mouth, letting the music of spirits come forth. With this ritual, the assembly came to a close.

It was the first time Jufan had been away from the tribe. He had travelled before – it sometimes seemed his entire life consisted of rolling and unrolling tents – but this was the first time he had been away from the people. As the small group of traders pulled away from the main body of the tribe, Spring was just beginning to thaw the hillsides. The travois each man dragged left dark trails in the thin snow, and these trails dwindled to nothing as they climbed the rolling distance of the steppe.

For the first time, Jufan realized just how huge the world was.

Mother moon danced three times around the sky before they met the main tribe again. In that time, Jufan learned not only how huge the world was, but what other kinds of people lived in it.

First, they came to the great river, where the raft folk let glittering waters bear their heavy weight of goods toward the sea. The raft folk dressed richly, in fine felts and copper jewellery, and Jufan was almost embarrassed by his own appearance, until he saw how his father held the raft folk in contempt.

“Look at their shoulders under that felt,” Jozon said. “The river makes them rich, but weak. They sit all day; they do not know how to pull a travois over the miles.”

And so Jufan, too, learned to hold the raft folk in contempt, and no longer envied them.

Neither did he envy the slow-movers, who lived on the edge of the great forest, growing plants in raised beds, and only moving their wooden tents when the soil went bad, maybe once in ten winters. They, too, seemed weak to him, praying to the spirits of the tree and grain, instead of the wolf and horse.

But then the traders journeyed north again, crossing back into wintry lands. They came to a place where the river ran, freezing, but shallow over white rocks. They heard howling on the wind.

“Wolves?” Said Jufan. “Hunting at noon?”

“No,” said his father. The older man had gone still, and an apprehension prickled at the base of Jufan’s neck. “Not wolves. It is the Jian Sha.”

They appeared over the summit of a far hill, across the water. At first, the breath caught in Jufan’s throat, for it looked like the people had been overtaken by wolves, and would all be killed. But then he saw that the Jian Sha ran, not in panic, but at the same easy pace his own people used when running long distance. He saw that the wolves ran not behind them, but alongside, and that the wolves carried wooden frames on their backs. Like humans, they were pulling travois laden with goods.

The blood went out of Jufan’s face.

“Do not be afraid,” said his father. “It is a known magic of the Jian Sha. They can command wolves follow their orders.”

“Can they then do the same to people?” Said Jufan.

“No,” said his father.

But then he seemed to think.

“Be careful all the same. All of them can control wolves. It means all of them are shamans.”

An entire tribe of shamans. The thought terrified Jufan: yet his father and the other men stood steady, and so he stood with them.

At the sight of strange people across the river, the wolves began to bark and howl, but the Jian Sha silenced them, forcing them to sit, while they crossed the river to meet Jozon and his people. Unlike Jozon’s group, the Jian Sha were a mix of men and women, and were led by a woman.

The two groups faced each other. A fraught silence hung in the air. Everyone on either side held spears close, knives and hatchets at the ready. Some years ago, the Jian Sha had been betrayed by the Vanda People at just such a river, and it had led to a bloody fight. Such encounters were always uncertain.

Jozon stepped slowly forward. His counterpart, a tall woman his own age, did the same. They came to the middle of the circle, and each held out one hand, empty, but with the other fist clenched, at the ready. After a moment, when no aggressive move was made on either side, each accepted the hand of the other.

Another moment’s tension built, as invisible information was exchanged; each grip was firm, but not aggressive. Neither hand was clammy, or trembled from a hidden sickness.

It seemed safe: each drew closer, to sniff the other’s hair.

And then, confirming by smell that neither was diseased in body or mind, the two leaders relaxed, separated, and began to talk. Around them, their two tribes did the same.

The ritual was completed. It seemed there was to be peaceful trade.

At a gesture from his father, Jufan joined him at the centre of the circle. His father and the head woman of the Jian Sha seemed to have met many times before. Despite the suspicious attitude of the Ritual of Meeting, the two seemed to have an easy rapport.

“...My son, Jufan,” Jozon was saying. “Someday, he will lead this mission for our people.”

The woman’s eyes sparkled as she laid eyes on Jufan.

“You should be proud, Jozon,” she said. “He takes after his father.”

Another figure moved behind the woman.

“In the same vein,” she said. “My daughter will lead this mission for us when I have gone to meet the sky father. This is Shiu Le.”

The girl stepped from behind her mother, and Jufan’s world, as he knew it, ended.

It was only three days that the two groups spent together. Jozon’s party was trading horse-hair, felt, and flint. The Jian Sha brought reindeer products, and the pelts of their small, enslaved wolves.

“What is a horse?” Said Shiu Le.

She had surprised Jufan at the river, skipping stones over its shining surface a little ways down from the camp. Confronted with such an obvious question, he barely knew how to answer. He gave a poor description, and she laughed.

“So it doesn’t have antlers?” She said.

“No,” he said. “Only deer have antlers.”

But for some reason, this made her laugh.

They soon realized there was a hiccup in their communication. Their words were only mostly alike. In his dialect, the word for ‘Reindeer’ meant, ‘The Big Deer’, but in her language, they called it just, ‘The Animal’. Confusingly, her people’s word for horse was ‘The Big Animal,’ which was his people’s word for the wild bull. His word for ‘Deer’ was hers for ‘Antler’. She had laughed, because to her ears, he had said something to the effect of, ‘Only antlers have antlers’.

Because of these misunderstandings, but mostly because they were young and compatible, they fell to laughing and long eye-contact. Wanting to impress her, Jufan had conducted his side of the conversation while balancing on rocks in the river. When a dark figure bounded up along the shore, Jufan yelped and slipped into the freezing current, emerging to find Shiu Le laughing even harder. As he wiped the water from his eyes, he saw that one of the Jian Sha’s wolves was now sitting beside the girl, and she was scratching its head.

“How do you do it?” He said.

“Do what?”

“Force the wolves to obey you. Is it magic?”

She smiled in a way that made the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

"If it was," she said, in a deep voice. "You're wondering, could we also do it to humans?"

He felt his blood run cold. It was exactly what he'd been wondering. She had seen into his mind, just as Shiao-Duun could do. It was true, then: the Jian Sha were an entire tribe of Shamans. Suddenly, she raised wide eyes at him, and they flashed with the light of the steppe sky. He staggered, and fell back into the water. She was still laughing minutes after she helped him from the river.

"It's not true," she said, using her sleeve to dry him off. "It isn't magic. We just feed them and take care of them, and they become our friends. That's all there is to it. See?"

She called to the wolf, and he bounded up. Jufan cringed, but all the animal did was sniff his crotch and lick his hand. Bewildered, he was unsure what to do until she took his hand and ran it over the soft fur on the animal's head.

At that moment, all suspicion washed away: all fear. He realized everything he had been taught was wrong: that people outside the tribe were not strange and dangerous, but the same everywhere. He realized Shiu Le was the most like him of all, and that if he left his tribe to be with her, it would be no bad thing.

And as he realized all this, his father watched from further upstream, and understood that Shiao-Duun had been right.

After that, though his father tried to keep him busy, Jufan saw Shiu-Le every chance he had. On the last night at the river crossing, he crept out of his tent to meet her.

It was a full moon. The river rippled like muscle under its white light. They talked for a while and held hands.

"Father says our people and yours meet up here again, six circles of the moon from now," he said. "If we both get permission from our people, we can marry."

She gripped his hand tightly.

"My mother says your people don't marry outsiders," she said. "What if they say no?"

He clasped his other hand across hers.

"Then when we come back, I'll run away and join the Jian Sha. I'll become one of your wolves."

In the past two days, he had come to understand: the Jian Sha didn't take control of the wolves. The wolves gave themselves to the Jian Sha.

The next day, Jufan's travois carved trails behind him through the soft turf of the springtime steppe.

"The Jian Sha aren't so bad," he said to his father, who hunched along beside him. "At first I was afraid of them, but now..."

Jufan could not read his father's face as the older man stared into the distance.

"No," said Jozon. "They aren't so bad."

"It seems like you've known Shiu Le's mother for a long time," said Jufan.

"Yes. I met Shiu Lon when we were both your age."

The older man answered no questions after that, but after a long time, he said,

"When we get back to the village, it's time you were initiated."

"Initiated!" said Jufan. The thought was lightning. "But I didn't think I was old enough, yet."

"Still," said Jozon. "I think it's best it happened before we leave again in the fall."

Jufan did not argue. He thought only about how impressed Shiu Le would be, when he returned to her a man, inducted into manhood's cult.

They rejoined the tribe, and though Jufan's father told nobody what had happened, Shiao-Duun came to him that night, and immediately read his heart.

"You allowed it to happen," said the shaman. "You allowed him to be bewitched." He peered more closely at Jozon, until the hyena-teeth dentures were inches from the man's face. Then the shaman sighed, leaning back.

"You were distracted, yourself," he said. Jozon said nothing, but the Shaman didn't need him to confess.

“Your son must be initiated,” said Shiao-Duun. “For his sake and yours. Jufan’s initiation will be as a *re*-initiation for Jozon. You are all too young to remember the hard times, the cold times. But Shiao-Duun is not too young. And I tell you, such times will come again. The tribe *will need* its sons. The initiation must come.”

The voice buzzed in Jozon’s ears; the smell that came from those teeth, or from behind them, was overwhelming.

“I understand,” said Jozon. “And as it has before, the tribe will have its sons.”

That night, Jufan was wakened by the pounding of distant drums, drawing nearer.

“Father?” He said. “Mother?”

There came no response. He was alone in the tent. Torches flared beyond the hide walls, so he could see the veins that had once run through them. Shadows lurched around the tent on every side: shadows with horns and teeth; with many arms and legs, taller than a tall man. The walls shook with drumbeats; and a buzzing song crept through the tent, raising the hairs on the back of Jufan’s neck.

It was the music of spirits: that which came from Shiao-Duun’s throat.

He tried to push through the tent flap and run, but found it held shut against him. He was seized by claustrophobia; his were a people of the open Steppe. To be trapped was, for them, the stuff of nightmares.

The tent’s ropes were cut: the ceiling collapsed, and soft walls closed in around him. He panicked and threw himself from side to side, trying to claw his way out, but they only pressed in closer, pinning his arms against his body, compressing his ribs. Almost unable to draw breath, he struggled for a lungful of thick and stuffy air. Then, thrashing, hyperventilating, he was crushed to the ground by the weight of many bodies. He began to suffocate: his mind threatened to snap.

And then the weight lifted. The tent unfurled around him, and he was pulled to his feet in the cold night air. For a moment, the full moon dazzled him. When his eyes adjusted, he found he was encircled by spirits, demons, and monsters.

Their silent assembly closed him. Masks made from horse skulls, hyena skulls, boar skulls stared at him, their gaze black in the white moonlight. He knew the bodies beneath those masks, but not the souls that lived in them that night.

No: the souls of the ancestors had boiled up out of the past, taking control over the bodies of his loved ones. *These* souls did not care about him. *They* did not love him. *They* cared only for the tribe, and what was best for the tribe. If he was strong, then they would deign to let him live. If not, then he would be annulled without regret.

Beneath the masks and cowls of bristling fur, bone shirts began to rattle. Drums pounded in the night, and in the distance, high-pitched singing ululated over the steppe. From underneath their robes, the spirits produced cold-purpled hands that clasped the stocks of whips with many knotted thongs.

From somewhere, whether outside or inside of his head, a voice said, "Run."

And he ran.

The spirits chased him, gurgling an awful song in their throats. Their feet pounded; their whips rattled with animal teeth. They gained on him as they ran, and Jufan knew for certain that his people had been driven from their bodies, for the oldest and frailest frames among them hammered the freezing soil with bare feet, swift and tireless, unnatural, whirling their cruel whips with powerful grace to slash his ribs bare and bloody to the wintry air.

New spirits loomed from the shadow on either side, silent as they struck his chest and arms and face. He was bleeding from everywhere; he wanted to stop, to fall and cry, but if he slowed, the spirits would swarm over him, and he would never rise again. He ran harder, forcing himself to push past agony, terror and exhaustion.

"Please," he begged, but these people did not know him. They had left humanity behind; they would not stop until he had become like them.

A light swam in the darkness ahead; the spirits overtook and threw him to the ground. He was beaten and pinned to the soil. Urine stung his open wounds, and he was dragged by the arms across rough turf, into a bonfire's light.

Framed against the flame, a stilted spirit loomed over him, seeming almost to brush against the moon. For its face, it wore a human skull with hyena's teeth, and vast, dark antlers split the night on either side. Furred shoulders hunched at twice the height of a man, and the spirit sang with a buzzing voice. Jufan was flung down before it, and bound to a granite slab that jutted from the hillside.

The Spirits fell silent. All that could be heard was a distant wind: the low crackle of the fire.

"Spirits..." said the Chief Spirit. "Here is Jufan."

"Jufan, Jufan," they murmured. "Give us Jufan."

“Ancestors... Here is Jufan.”

“Jufan, Jufan. Give us Jufan.”

“By this rite, he joins his forebears and descendants. One people, everlasting.”

“Everlasting, everlasting. One and Everlasting.”

“Jufan...” said the Chief Spirit. “Do you consent to join your tribe?”

Beaten, humiliated, afraid, Jufan pushed himself up onto all fours. If he said no, he would be exiled. He would die on the steppe. He would never join his ancestors. He would have suffered all of this, for naught. It was the way of things. It was for the best. He drew a breath.

He hesitated.

Then he said, “I do.”

The ancestors howled, striking up a chant. He was pushed down again: his ragged clothes torn away, and the Chief Spirit produced a flaked blade: a razor chipped from flint.

“Jufan, Jufan,” chanted the crowd. “Join us, Jufan.”

Two spirits came and lifted the shaman from his stilts. For a moment, he hung in the air, and then descended, with the moon on his knife.

With flint blade, and a cold, hard hand, he began the rite of circumcision.

They came to a place where the river ran, freezing, but shallow over white rocks. They heard howling on the wind, and across the water, over the summit of a far hill, the Jian Sha appeared.

At the sight of strange people across the river, the wolves began to bark and howl, but the Jian Sha silenced them, forcing them to sit, while they crossed the river to meet Jozon and his people. Unlike Jufan’s group, the Jian Sha were a mix of men and women, and were led by a woman.

The two groups formed facing semicircles. A fraught silence hung in the air. Everyone on either side held their spears close, knives and hatchets at the ready. Some years ago, Jufan’s people had been betrayed by the Turga clan at just such a river, and it had led to a bloody fight. Such encounters were always unsure.

As ever, the two leaders stepped into the middle of the circle, and each held out one hand, empty, but with the other fist clenched, at the ready. After a moment, when no aggressive move was made on either side, each took the hand of their counterpart.

Invisible information was exchanged; it seemed safe: each drew closer, to sniff each other's hair.

And then, confirming by smell that neither was diseased in body or mind, the two leaders relaxed, separated, and began to talk. Around them, their two tribes did the same.

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"...My son," his father was saying. "Jozon. Named for my father. He is to be Initiated next year."

The woman's eyes sparkled.

"You should be proud, Jufan" she said. "He takes after his father."

Another figure moved behind the woman.

"And this is my daughter," said Shiu Le.

The girl stepped from behind her mother, and Jozan's world, as he knew it, ended.