

The Hounds of Harujin  
2017

Prologue

Gerald was a good horse. He was often driven hard, across long distances. He was made to cross the Gibson Desert on more than one occasion. He lost weight when he got dehydrated and there was nothing around to drink. Yet he kept his head down, never bucked, never kicked or whinnied in bad temperament. He was a good horse.

He was a stock horse. Dark brunette, with almost black cufflinks above his hooves. The black on his rear right leg went three inches higher than on the left. That was how Kellan told him apart from the rest in the pen. At least, that's how he could have told him apart, had Gerald not galloped up to him every morning like a six-week-old puppy.

He'd been traded many times, come into the employ of other travellers from all over, been left at stables to rest up while other horses were doled out to keep things moving. Kellan had always gotten him back.

Gerald was an odd name for a horse. Everyone told him that. Bailey, or Dancer, or Whisper – these were names people expected. They weren't pets, they were machines. Luther had told him that, George had told him that. Machines to be used to an end. And machines were expendable. Machines sometimes needed to be sacrificed. But Kellan, who'd cared for this horse since it was a foal, had given him the a proper name. A horse deserves a proper name.

He tugged lightly on Gerald's reins and the horse reared up on a small ridge. The moon was only the thinnest sliver of a sickle tonight. It was cloudless, and a thousand stars shone from that great gash across the sky.

The old A2 Highway was to the north, a pockmarked scar across the landscape. The ruins of Brisbane was about four hours ride to the east. Brisbane was a black mark on any map. He pulled out his looking glass. He dismounted Gerald, walked a little further up the ridge and peered over.

There was no mistaking the procession some kilometres in the distance. He could hear their horses clomping along on the dirt path. It was a slow, stately procession, the horses barely at a trot.

It was him. There was no mistaking it. Kellan sighed, almost in regret, that the intel had been right. It had filtered its way across three timezones, was always weeks, sometimes months, out of date. They had little birds everywhere, picked up tidbits of useful gossip in this town and that.

Chiledu. Heir to Queensland. The Mad Queen's son.

He walked back to Gerald and patted the horse's mane with the palm of his hand. Then he remounted, rode back down the ridge, away from the procession of that fat bastard.

Aaron and Buck were watching this as well. If tonight was successful, they'd split up, go to Cairns and the capital, report back on the fallout. If Kellan failed...

Well, if failure was in the cards tonight, Kellan would be sure to go down in a hail of arrows; nothing would be tortured out of him. Aaron and Buck would report back what had happened; Aaron would pass on a final love note to Kelly on his behalf.

This part of Queensland was grassland. Horses loved it, went through it like locusts. The interior of the continent was largely desert, and the drier shrublands. Kellan himself lived on the edge of the desert, where the children told ghost stories about what was deeper into the sand: mutant dingos the size of buffalo, the khan's six-armed daughter that liked to feast on her husbands' blood, and worms. Death worms, in the deep desert. They made for interesting tall tales told to the children – never mind that you're more likely to see a kraken off the coast of Tassie or flock of mothmen in the ruins of Brisbane than you are to see a death worm.

It was wooded along this part of the Queensland area west of Brisbane. Not heavily, but wooded enough. It was the perfect location. Chiledu was heading back from a visit to the court in Sydney.

Kellan trotted Gerald around the ridge and quietly worked his way to the winding road the carriage was on. Gerald kept quiet as he trotted. A good horse.

Once the party emerged onto the dirt path Chiledu's procession was on, he brought Gerald to a halt, leaned in, clutching the horse's mane and gave the animal a sort of half hug atop the neck. He dismounted. Gerald didn't wander off. Didn't run.

Kellan had to do this. For as much as one can train a horse – they've been trained to dance before – the Mongols know horses. They *know* horses. You can't fake a distress whinny. You can't fake a whinny of pain. They would know. Even this fat idiot drunk off airag being carted around like a woman in the birthing bed would be suspicious, and demand his guards draw their swords, nock their bows.

Or they'd just kill him at the roadside.

And then Gerald would be swept up into their herds, another nameless horse to charge against them and lay cities to waste, rape their women and girls. Another nameless horse to be ridden to death by some eight-year-old in a tournament in Ikh Khulan. Or they'd rename him Saartaalgaareidu, or something else absurdly Mongolian like that, and bark orders in that black magic tongue of theirs. Gerald doesn't understand Mongolian. That's no life for a horse.

Kellan stepped up close to Gerald. As if he knew, Gerald lowered his head. Kellan whispered in his ear. "I'm so sorry, mate."

Then Kellan reached behind him to pull out a hatcheted piece of beefwood pine he'd been carrying, whittled down to the shape of a club. Gerald still didn't balk. But neither did he look away. Kellan couldn't meet his eyes.

Like a batter at the mound, Kellan took a half step forward and swung with his whole torso, swinging the club at Gerald's leg.

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She buried her nose in her book. The cart found another rut in the road and shifted.

“Ah, come girl,” her cousin said, “there are better things in life than comic books.” He plopped a mug down in front of her with some airag in it. She’d tasted it before, but she was still a girl; her father normally only let her drink it during celebrations.

Out of politeness, she picked it up, took a sip. The fermented milk tasted mildly of almonds. Then she put it back down and returned her face to the pages. It was from the Black Fox series (the official series, straight out of the Americas), black and white renderings of life in opulent casinos, with corrupt crime bosses, desert bandits and rebellious lords. And it was a true story – the young life her cousin (a rather distant cousin, she’d admit), who fought corruption and organized crime in the American desert to eventually become khan of that quarter of the world. Yes it was pro... prop... – what word had her tutor used, propaga? – but these were good stories. A suave and debonair prince risking all to expose corruption.

So much unlike another such cousin she could name.

Chiledu downed his own glass of airag in a single gulp, let out a huge burp. Turliakh giggled, though it was the most insincere thing Altalün had ever heard.

Her cousin sat on a bundle of cushions. His four concubines knelt in any direction, their backs against the walls of the carriage, fanning their lord. Not one of them wore a shirt.

Altalün knew what concubines were meant for. She didn’t begrudge her cousin this privilege. He was heir to the prefecture of Queensland, after all. Positions of authority came with perks, and who was she but a young girl to criticize such things. Why, her eldest brother, before his unfortunate passing, had possessed many women for carnal purposes, and she knew that these women enjoyed the company of her brother as much as he had enjoyed theirs. Indeed, her brother’s women had been... what was the term her mother had used, free with their bodies... and Altalün knew full well what a woman’s body should look like, yet she also knew the difference between a courtesan walking from the bath to her suite in her birthday suit, and one entertaining her lord as he held audience with a minor.

The one of them, with carrot hair – Elizabeth was her name – was quite nice, Altalün had discovered, was helping her with her English skills, but when the woman had to disrobe for her lord, the politeness, the jokes, these went away, and she donned her ‘business face’, as the woman had called it.

Altalün took another sip of her drink. The carriage lurched again. It was not a large carriage. It slept four comfortably; six it slept a little less comfortably. It had been a gift from Lord Belgutei, the prince and prefect in Sydney, and, before departing, Belgutei’s first minister had personally taken Altalün aside to apologize that she’d be sharing her sleeping space with four esteemed mistresses of the harem in such tight quarters. Apparently, the minister had explained, a number of delegations had gone out recently, taking some of their larger carriages, and one other was in the shop for retooling. The shop manager, he’d assured her, would be flogged in the street for this. No, no, she’d replied. That was quite all right. The poor man had done an exemplary job with this fine carriage... etcetera, etcetera. She knew how to have such conversations in the language of the court, even at her young age.

Altalün was the youngest child of Lord Temüge, on the Isle of the Tree Kangaroo. Yes, it was true that court in Port Moresby was a bit more... relaxed, as her father liked to say, than in more urbane and refined centres of power, yet she’d been trained in the intricacies of court etiquette since she could first speak – why, she knew how to bow and say ‘my lord’ or ‘my lady’ before she learned to stop drinking cereal milk straight from the bowl. She’d been in Sydney for the better part of a year, living as a guest of Lord Belgutei, along with her brother Kadan before he’d departed for Port Moresby. She was now travelling to the imperial capital of Ikh Khulan, where she was to accept to a position as undersecretary to the minister of the Central Pasturage Appropriation Bureau. She could hardly believe it – a girl of barely twelve rising to such heights.

Of course, this was also a game of the court, she knew. She would hold office and employ staff, and any paperwork she was responsible for would be done by that staff (and not her), and she’d spend most of her time sleeping past noon and going out at night to see this show or that. This is what befit the noble-born daughter of a prefect, even if the prefecture was the Isle of the Tree Kangaroo.

Chiledu, on the other hand... well, he was not getting an undersecretary’s office. He would not even be getting a new concubine in Ikh Khulan.<sup>1</sup> He was not a go-getter. He had not been well liked in Sydney. And, the urgency with which they were trying to send him to the capital was part of the reason she was sharing sleeping space with Mistress Elizabeth and her colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

“So,” belched Chiledu, pouring himself some more airag, “undersecretary to the Central Pasture Something-Something Bureau....”

“Pasturage Appropriation Bureau,” she said, looking over the top of her book.

“We must celebrate when we arrive,” he declared. “That is a fine position indeed. Do you like to gamble? They have the finest casino there – the Platinum Dragon. Why, you could drop ten grand in that place in two minutes.”

That didn’t sound like the best of selling features. Chiledu had been to Ikh Khulan before, whereas Altalün had not. He’d had residence there before departing for Sydney. Perhaps it was his propensity to throw away so much money at casinos that was the reason he’d been sent to another prefecture.

“Elizabeth, dear,” he said, turning to the concubine, “you like to gamble, nay? You were up that one night, weren’t you? How much?”

“Almost eight thousand, my lord,” the courtesan replied mechanically.

“Ah yes, that’s my girl,” he said, leaning in to nuzzle at her breast. He gave her a kiss on the nipple.

“You’re moving up in the world, Altalün,” he said, snatching up his glass and drinking again. “Pasturage... that’s subordinate to Qorin-Üriangkhadai, isn’t it? They figure he’ll retire in the next five years. You play your cards right and maybe... well, you could be the next imperial stable master. A seat on the Council. Second woman to hold such a position! Tell me, have you ever met the empress-concubine? Most beautiful woman to have ever walked the earth! These wenches are nothing compared to her,” he said with a wave of the hand. “Not fit for a dog. Why, any man would tear himself in two if she

1 This little tidbit had come to her through her established court connections in Sydney.

2 It had been expected that Chiledu do the chivalrous thing and sleep outside.

but asked it.”

She picked up her glass, raised it to signify a toast. He took the meaning, brought his own glass to his lips.

“Tell me,” he said, a little less boastfully, setting his glass down, now half empty, “did Minister Altan mention anything about this? Lord Qorin-Üriangkhadai and the Council?”

The airag nearly went down the wrong pipe. Could he be more impolitic? Asking about what the minister had said about her budding career? She thought quickly. Chiledu was a beggar. He had seven years on her and held no official office, had no career prospects, no political allies – indeed, both Ikh Khulan and Sydney seemed determined to ship him away as soon as they could. And now here he was asking about political promises and a Council position.

She cleared her throat. “Um... well–”

A horse whinnied outside. In the distance. Not one of their own horses. Not even a Mongol horse. It was a whinny of pain, a shriek, as though the horse galloped onto a caltrop.

Their carriage rocked back and forth gently as the procession neared the whinnying horse. “What is it?” Chiledu demanded out the silk curtain at the front of the carriage. Altalün stayed where she was, trying not to look at Elizabeth’s boobs.

After a second, the coach called back in. “Horse has broken its leg,” he said. “Australian’s going mad, raving in that clicking tongue of theirs.” It was impossible now not to notice the man blathering alongside the horse’s cries.

“Is he armed?” Chiledu asked.

“Single scimitar, tossed it to us when he saw the arrows, my lord,” the coach answered. “Has a lantern with him. Alone. No one in the woods.”

“Well put the horse out of its misery,” her cousin said. “Ask the white dog if he’d like us to say a prayer for the horse in the true tongue.”

“I don’t think he speaks Mongolian, my lord.”

Chiledu frowned. He looked to Turliaakh, his Mongol concubine. “You speak English, right?”

“Uh...” the courtesan stammered.

“Who speaks English?”

Altalün did not raise her hand. She was getting pretty good at it, could carry on a conversation for at least a few paragraphs, but didn’t want to act as interpreter for Chiledu. Ellie, the black concubine, spoke not a word of Mongolian; she had a vacant look on her face most of the time, barely understanding a word said around her. Marlene, with dark hair, spoke some of the Mongol tongue, but not a whole lot.

“I could translate, my lord,” said Elizabeth, “if it should please you.”

“Get out there and tell that dog what I just said.”

“Would my lord like me to put on a shirt before parleying with the white dog?”

“No,” Chiledu grunted, irritated now.

The concubine folded up her fan and gingerly set it on the edge of her cushion, hoisted herself up and swung her legs out from under her, made her way gracefully to the door. She exited wearing just her undergarments. She didn’t even put on boots.

Altalün felt really sorry for these ladies. It can’t be easy with a man like Chiledu for your lord.

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Gerald was shrieking. He was hopping about on three legs. He didn’t even try to put weight on it. The club had vanished into the roadside shrubbery – just another piece of wood. Kellan had been armed – a cheap scimitar, you don’t travel the rural routes without at least one weapon<sup>3</sup> – but that blade had vanished when the Mongols approached. This was an imperial delegation; they didn’t say who they were carrying, but they had their gold tablets fresh from the refinery in Sydney. They demanded weapons down, and Kellan had been quick to comply.

There were twelve riders – three in front, three in back, one on either side of the carriage and four scouts. One of the scouts was here now – that one had first discovered Kellan – while the other three were at least five minutes’ ride off, each. They would hold their distance unless distress sounded, which they’d hear as readily as they’d all heard Gerald’s cries. There was also one man as a coach for the carriage, who was armed with sword and bow as well. Chiledu could be expected to have his own weapons inside, and there were probably a handful of concubines in there, too.

The door opened, and a woman came out of the carriage – mostly nude. Had to be one of the concubines. He took that to mean that none of Chiledu’s entourage spoke English. Who in the fuck doesn’t speak English these days? She approached him, barefoot in the mud. This was a trained concubine, spent at least an hour a day in front of a mirror practising various facial expressions, could pull off coy, enamoured, ecstatic, as readily as she could snap her fingers – could cry at the drop of a hat – and yet there was still a touch of genuine shyness about her breasts.

She introduced herself as Elizabeth. Not “the Lord Chiledu’s concubine”, just Elizabeth. She started babbling about shamanic incantations or whatnot about horses, and tried to assure him that the horse needed to be put down, but he just kept acting hysterical. He was travelling alone at night and his horse had stumbled in a pothole.

The nearest rider to Elizabeth kept arguing with her in Mongolian from horseback. Kellan made out some of it. He was being called an Australian dog. The rider said he’d just stab the horse and be done with it, but Elizabeth argued back as politely as she could, trying to converse with Kellan at the same time.

Finally, when that rider set aside his bow and grabbed the hilt of his scimitar – that was the moment Kellan chose.

The lantern in his hand became a fastball. He heard glass shatter as it hit the rider in the face. No time to hear him scream – Kellan was already moving.

Elizabeth shoved to the dirt. Slap the ass of the horse. Grab hold of the scimitar.

The horse reared and took off running, throwing the agonized rider to the path, where he found his own scimitar buried to

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3 Bandits were everywhere.

the hilt in his back.

The bow and the quiver had come off before the man's weight impaled him on the scimitar, and the next Bowman caught an arrow before he could nock.

The second arrow was reserved for Gerald, who was gracefully put out of his misery with a clean arrow up the base of the skull.

It was a stupid move. Completely against strategy. Atrociously poor waste of time. And a waste of an arrow. Enemies first, then a scimitar on the horse. But he owed Gerald that.

He spun back around, loosed four more arrows in the next split second and heard four armed riders thump to the dirt. Elizabeth was screaming now.

He spun, took cover behind the nearest horse. There were four more out there, plus the coach, and time was ticking as the scouts galloped back. He was pretty sure one of the fallen was that first scout. They were the more dangerous ones.

Stepped out, an arrow into the chest of a rider, another into the forehead of the coach.

He'd spent hours upon hours – really, years upon years – training with a bow. He could nock and fire in his sleep. He had dreams about targets. His sweat and blood and tears were in this.

He reached into the quiver. Empty. Dove for the first man, rolled him over, reefed the sword from his back and turned, still on his knees, just in time to come face to face with a swinging scimitar from horseback.

Ducked, rolling backwards, missing the sword as it sliced above him. Stuck out his own to slice through the lower legs of the charging horse. Another scream of a whinny as the horse came crashing down. The rider might have survived that, but he was low priority now.

He heard the gallop of another horse, turned, dove, rolled. Horse swooping by. An arrow embedded itself in the dirt as he rolled. On his feet, leaping–

Scimitar buried deep.

He took the man's bow – couldn't get to the quiver, but pulled single arrows from it – and fired on the last rider, just as the man was nocking his bow.

Heavy breathing and more screams from his right. He turned just in time to see three more topless women scattering (Elizabeth was long gone by now) and a chubby Mongol in expensive silks charging with a fine-looking (decorative) scimitar–

He loosed an arrow.

Chiledu went down without so much as a gurgling last breath.

The concubines scattered. Good. Let them go. They were innocents in this.

Leaping up the carriage, climbing over the dead coach, Kellan threw himself onto the roof, giving him the vantage point. The first scout came from behind the carriage. The second not long after down the same path. The third from the left, through the woods. He made his arrows count. He *had* to make his arrows count.

One of them took two arrows, but the first had put him on the ground, so it neutralized him long enough. Kellan gave him a second.

Hopping down, he surveyed the scene, sent an arrow into the Mongol who'd ploughed face first off his dismembered horse. The horse appeared dead, but Kellan gave it a scimitar in the brainstem to make sure.

His heart was pounding harder than the hooves of a horse in flight. His veins felt like they were about to burst. The adrenaline surging through him nearly blew out his eyeballs. The entire thing, since Elizabeth had started talking, had taken maybe six minutes (and he only estimated that by the time it took the scouts to show up), yet it felt like it had been going on for an hour, all night.

He hoped the recon saw at least some of that. He'd probably need to be convinced later that it actually happened.

He heard a noise.

He spun on his heels and nocked an arrow in the same instant. Came to be poised, one foot in front of the other, left arm extended, right at his cheek with his right eye looking down the shaft of an arrow. A girl stood in his sights. She was maybe eleven or twelve, Mongol, standing in the open doorway of the carriage. She was unarmed. She was part shocked, part aghast, and part remarkably calm.

He tried to calm his breathing. It wasn't working.

He released the tension on the arrow by only an inch or so before he saw her eyes. The shape of her jaw.

She had Harujin in her blood. She was a royal, a taiji.

This girl...

She made to say something, moved her lower lip–

He released the arrow in the next split second. It hit her square in the chest. It may have come piercing a good eight inches out the other side of her, but he couldn't tell the way her whole body catapulted back into the carriage.

Kellan collapsed to his knees, and wept. For the horse.

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