

The Hounds of Harujin
Jason Shannon
(excerpt)

9. Kaidu

He had been riding for two and a half days, at all speed. He took the imperial yam line as far as it went. He told the stable boy at the station at the end of the line that he wanted the best horse they had, because he had some harsh terrain to cover. As it happened, they only had one horse at that station, because no one ever came out that way. He rested for the night at about thirty-six hours' ride from Ikh Khulan, then set out once more before sunrise the next morning.

He was in the desert. The Outback. Alice Springs was about fifteen hundred kilometres due east, he figured. Arid ground stretched for miles. Even the kangaroos were scarce out here. The few he saw stared at him like he didn't belong.

This was Princess Oljei's prefecture; the asshole of the continent. She was out of sight, out of mind – and she would die never rising above this barren wasteland. She'd never get a seat on the Council, never move up to ladder to succeed her brother as prefect of the Imperial Grasslands, never become master of commerce or the imperial stable master.

Kaidu shivered. The khan had once, a long time ago, broached the subject that Kaidu might take her for a wife. This was before her first marriage. But she was all of fourteen then and had much more girl in her than woman, so Kaidu gracefully suggested a more politically appropriate marriage.

That was back when she was seen as a political rising star, a young hero of the rebellion. Now the khanate knew her as the Huntsman. She had a reputation.

Oljei hadn't shown her face at court for years now. Not since her second wedding had anyone in Ikh Khulan seen her. Kaidu figured she knew when to lay low. She must be twenty-six, twenty-seven by now, and probably has much more woman in her at this point than girl.

But he wasn't heading to Alice Springs. He was headed into the backest of the backwoods. The Hamersley Range, low rising mountains in that northwest corner of the continent. There weren't even old roads leading up this way.

This was deep banditry territory. The worst of the worst. A hundred or so kilometres south of here was a black mark on the map. Oljei might not have shown her face in Ikh Khulan in years, but she did still engage in statecraft. Why, a few years back, she'd sent the general a request for a covert ops team of particular skill. Kaidu had not asked,¹ had merely sent on some of his best. Passing into this area was like crossing into enemy territory, and there were a few more stars on a wall in Ikh Khulan now to prove it.

Being out here by himself, it made his skin crawl.

Kaidu had known Tamerlan when the boy had been growing up. And he agreed with the khan that if they were going to find some ghost assassin to lay at Mandukhai's door, Tamerlan was probably the best choice. The boy had a gift for it. Deduction, persistence. He'd have made a good khan, if only...

He didn't know what had happened to drive Tamerlan all the way out here. The boy had been fifteen when he vanished. The khan had found him out here a few months later, but it had taken him fifteen years to dispatch anyone. Kaidu knew well enough not to come out here without the khan's specific orders.

He didn't know if the boy was even still alive. Or if he was still here. It's not as though he sent letters. The empress, bless her soul, had retired to the secluded northern coast with grief. Many people thought it was because of the white whore the khan put on the Council, but those who had been around long enough knew the empress hadn't been the same after Tamerlan disappeared.

Kaidu had been around. He was over sixty years old now. And he could still cut down even the

¹ Didn't need to ask – he *knew* what this was for and didn't want a paper trail. Terms like *extralegal* and *bypassing the judiciary* he didn't need read out to him with disgust by the Council – he was a war dog, and bandits didn't deserve a jury.

finest warrior from the saddle. But he was starting to feel his age. In his joints. And with an arrogant heir being groomed, the khan locking himself away in that damned tower, that manipulative slut on the council, Oljei the Huntsman pursuing her perversities in the desert, and the khan's youngest girl emulating her white step-mother a little too much, now was not the time for bandits to get too ambitious.

The old general wasn't one for the politics. The khan had that kind of mind. The heir had that kind of mind. Tamerlan certainly had that kind of mind. But Kaidu would never fully get it. If he were khan, he'd do things the way Harujin would have done them. He'd smack the perversions out of Oljei, strap a chastity belt on Temülen, tell Qara-Monkhe to get his ass in the saddle and lead a horde, send shamans out to the Mad Queen to aid her affliction, cut the tits off that white bitch and feed her to the dingos, and shake Lord Hülegü's hand for the valiant efforts he made against that seafaring scum.

Alas, the days of conquest are behind them, and men like Kaidu had no place in this world of taxation and prefectures and political nuance.

He arrived at the foot of the mountain, a weather-worn rock in the desert. Carved into the side of it, unevenly winding its way up about five hundred feet or so were chiseled steps, coiling around the south side and disappearing. He tethered his horse and began the climb.

He really didn't have the knees for this anymore.

Once he coiled his way to the south side of the mountain, he was met with the blistering sun. Shading his eyes with his hand, the monastery came into focus.

It was a small monastery, built against a rock face on the mountain, overlooking the desert to the south. Kaidu didn't trust the Buddhists, but maybe that was just those hippie kids rambling about zen after a little too much of the reefer. He still believed in the old gods, in the Sky Father and the Earth Mother and the Judge of Man. He made his offerings to the shaman every other month.

A monk met him at the door, a wrinkled old prune in a maroon robe a little over a meter in height and thin enough to floss your teeth with. "For fifteen years we've been waiting for them to send someone," the monk said, whistling as he spoke through a gap in his teeth. Kaidu wasn't wearing the traditional Mongol warrior's garb, wasn't carrying any royal banners or insignia. He could have been a mere bandit out to knife this old dwarf and rob the monastery of its statues. He went to speak, but the monk whistled a retort first: "Even slavers and bandits don't come out this far, so you've either had a hunting mishap and are looking for assistance, or you're here for him. Tell me, where did the kangaroo kick you?"

Kaidu fumed. "Listen here, you!"

"Follow me," the monk said, turning to walk inside.

He led the general to an even older, feeble, more shrunken old man, dressed in the same humble maroon robes. This man was completely bald, with only two frail hairs left, constituting his right eyebrow. He was so wrinkled that he was more wrinkle than man. His eyes were almost entirely closed over by the wrinkles, though Kaidu could still see the whites of his eyes – and nothing more, he must have been blind as a bat. He'd fallen from an ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down, and then been buried beneath it in a shallow grave. Kaidu was repulsed by the man. He looked to be about two hundred years old.

"We call him the Oracle," said the first monk.

"This isn't the man I came to see," said Kaidu.

"The Oracle must first judge you worthy. He has the gift. He can read your karma."

The old dwarf – more a gnome, really – took Kaidu's hand in his own wrinkled mitt, scrutinized it, feeling his way over every wrinkle, knuckle and nail.

"Well, old man?" Kaidu asked.

"The Oracle has taken a vow of silence," said the first monk. "He hasn't spoken a word since I've been here."

Kaidu looked at the monk speaking to him; the dwarf looked like he was about eighty, and the general could be forgiven for assuming the man had been here for at least seventy of those years.

The old shrunken gnome continued to comb over Kaidu's hand, feeling his way across the skin

(he'd have been too blind to identify the sun in the sky if he were directly beneath it in the middle of the desert).

"How am I supposed to know if I pass his test or not?"

"We will know," said the monk.

The old man combed his way up the inside of Kaidu's forearm, running his arthritic and gnarled hands along atop the veins. The Oracle let the general's hand fall, craned his neck up and brought his solid white eyes in line with the Kaidu's. His bottom lip moved back and forth, his mouth opened slightly, revealing toothless gums, then closed again. His bottom jaw moved back and forth like he was chewing tobacco in there. Then, in a croaked and faint voice, the Oracle spoke. "Is it true that the khan's concubine has three breasts?"

Kaidu looked over to the first monk, who was wide-eyed. The man eventually said, "Well, I suppose all men have their price."

A new voice came from behind them. "Kaidu."

The general whipped around to see a ghost, a man he thought had vanished long ago and was never to be seen again.

"Tamerlan," he said.

The boy (hardly a boy anymore) was tall, broad shouldered, thin but well built. Kaidu had to look up to him in his stature. He had a shaven head with a light stubble. He wore simpler robes than these elaborate maroon monk's outfits. He no longer had the fresh face of a teenager, but a strong jaw and sharp eyes. He was looking like a younger version of his father.

"Well, is it true?" the old gnome croaked again behind them.

Outside, Tamerlan and Kaidu sat in solitude, overlooking the dry terrain below. A family of kangaroos was drinking at a watering hole far below. Kaidu hadn't said anything since the monk led them out here. What was he to say? How did he begin? He hadn't expected to find the place and had expected less that Tamerlan would be here.

Tamerlan eventually began. "When I left," he said out of nowhere, breaking the silence, "I had a young sister still at the breast." He turned to look at Kaidu. "How is she?"

The general thought it would be impolitic to say that half the officers in the ranks boasted of what a mean dick she sucked. "She looks like your mother," Kaidu settled on. "More of a woman every day."

"How old is she now?"

"Sixteen."

"And my father hasn't betrothed her?"

That was an interesting phrasing. Not *Has she been wed?* but *And my father hasn't betrothed her?* Being out here with these monks didn't give you superhuman abilities of perception, did it? Like that old gnome analyzing his karma? Was he going to be able to get away with half-truths?

"Your father hasn't left the Concubines' Tower in two years," Kaidu said. "Qara-Monkhe and the Council are now in control."

"And my brother Hülegü?"

"Still in Perth. The South-West is still hounded by pirates. We don't know where they're coming from. We've sent dispatches to Ulaanbaatar on the chance they may be operating from a land base in the Attila Khanate, but they've fallen on deaf ears. There are... rebellion problems in Southeast Asia at the moment. Your brother has sent parties after them by sea, but they either return empty-handed or... they don't return. He has a son now, your brother. Qara-Attila, his pride and joy. I saw the boy when last I was in Perth. Takes more after his mother, I'm afraid."

"But he isn't challenging Qara-Monkhe's ascendancy?"

Kaidu hadn't said Qara-Monkhe was the heir, the general noted, just that he was on the Council. What had that monk said? Not even bandits or slavers come out this way? So Tamerlan was making a lot of correct assumptions based on the limited tidbits of information Kaidu was giving him just now.

He decided to test the waters. "Ganbaatar seems quite happy. The concubines love him, think he's cute as a button, and Temülen takes enough time out of her busy days to practice archery with

him.”

“And that would be my youngest brother?” Tamerlan asked, taking the information as though it were a commentary on the weather. Ganbaatar was all of seven years old, a shy boy who was pretty much on his own in Ikh Khulan. His father was a degenerate whoremonger and his mother in seclusion. Temülen had acted as a sort of surrogate mother these past few years, but she was still a child herself, and the adult parts of her had less interest in children and more in trying to make them. “So my mother has either passed or is in seclusion. Remote north coast?”

“Tamerlan...”

“You didn’t fuck my sister, did you?”

The general gaped.

“I know half your men have, and you probably had a half dozen whipped until you realized the futility of it, but please tell me you didn’t.”

The boy was a monk savant.

Kaidu had to do a double take. He had to shake his head to get that dumb look off his face.

Okay, enough with the half-truths.

“Your mother’s in seclusion near Nhulunbuy, and the missives we get from there are such that she could well be dead and the servants are faking it for empress’ allowance. Your father is addicted to sucking nipples like they’re opium pipes. Qara-Monkhe wears collared shirts and his bards sing Australian pop songs. Oljei has killed two husbands in the desert. Your aunt is alleged to bathe in the blood of virgins and has demanded all women bring their afterbirths to the palace for the stew. Your cousin Khutulun has forsworn marriage, she binds her breasts, cuts her hair and is said to have grown a Fu Manchu moustache. The Council is in the hands of a white whore in desperate need of a shaman. And yes, Temülen is hornier than a bull moose in mating season... on speed.”

Tamerlan didn’t react, just absorbed.

“And your cousin Chiledu was murdered earlier this month by bandits. Or, as the story goes, *one* bandit, unarmed, and Chiledu’s entire entourage was slain in minutes.”

“Now that sounds like an interesting tale.”

Kaidu raised his eyebrows. “More interesting than your sister taking it in the ass like she’s one of Harujin’s daughters?”²

“Temülen takes it in the ass?”

“You don’t care about any of this, do you?”

Tamerlan shrugged. “By what right may I judge her?”

As the heir, Kaidu wanted to say.

The general began, “If Chiledu was hit by pirates—”

“Where did it happen?”

“South Queensland, a couple hours west of Brisbane.”

“It wasn’t pirates,” Tamerlan said.

“So some roadside bandit,” Kaidu said. “A slaver.”

“That killed a convoy single-handed in minutes?” Tamerlan retorted. “Where’s your source?”

“Source?”

“Your witness? Your testimonial?”

“Oh,” said Kaidu, “the concubines. Four of them. Of Chiledu’s. The killer seems to have let them go. A patrol of Oljei’s found them. Three of them, anyway.”

“You’re dealing with a targeted hit,” said Tamerlan.

Kaidu sighed. “That’s what the empress-concubine seems to think.”

“Where’s the fourth?”

“Hmm?”

“The fourth concubine,” Tamerlan said. “Chiledu’s fourth concubine. You said three of them turned up in Alice Springs. Was the fourth killed by your hitter? Taken?”

2 It was the Chinese that started that rumour; that Harujin was so bloodthirsty that he violated his own daughters. Kaidu had served in southern China at the very outset of his career, had found that rumour everywhere – it didn’t help that the conqueror had encouraged the telling of the tale so that fear might decimate the land before his horsemen arrived.

It was an unfortunate aftereffect that even now half the history books reported this as fact.

Kaidu grunted, shook his head. “No. The others were adamant about that. She got away. Oljei’s note didn’t specify where she is or where she went. Had a fight as they wandered and headed out on her own? Ravaged by a dingo? Wound up the property of bandits? I do not know.”

Tamerlan scratched at his chin. “South Queensland is a hotbed of organized crime. A royal is assassinated there and yet the concubines walk?”

“It does seem rather... peculiar,” said Kaidu, “that the prohibitions on touching courtesans held steadfast.”

“Indeed. And what is it you wish from me? Find your hitman?”

Ah, the meat of the issue. Now how in the Underworld was he going to convince Tamerlan to do this? The man couldn’t be more isolated on this continent unless he fled to Norfolk Island. Why had the khan sent *him* out here for this? Qara-Monkhe would be the choice to persuade his brother. Or the khan could have sent his whore. She could have convinced Harujin of a life of celibacy.³

“Your aunt demands justice,” Kaidu said. Tamerlan turned to look him in the eye. The general said, “She needs a head. And more importantly she needs a story.”

“So she needs a genuine head?”

“A genuine head,” Kaidu agreed.

“Is your sword arm not what it used to be?” Tamerlan asked, looking back to the southern panorama.

“I said a *genuine* head.”

“So the trouble isn’t the head, it’s the right head?”

“*Finding* the right head.”

“And you can’t do it?”

“Find one random bandit with a good bow arm three weeks after a killing from a half a continent away? The man could be anywhere by now. And we can trust he isn’t some dumb fuck drowned in airag at the local tavern in Oakey. We’re looking for a white guy in Australia. And that’s according to a whore’s judgement. The second concubine says it was a small army. The third says Erlik himself. And as you just said, we don’t have the fourth. And all this relayed through a madwoman that gets her kicks off aiming for the apple on her husband’s head and occasionally missing.”

That comment about Oljei got to him – just a bit, but there was a slight change in his posture. A tensing of the shoulders. Whatever he might shrug off about Qara-Monkhe’s pretentiousness or Temülen’s looseness, he wasn’t completely divorced from his family. Not even after fifteen years in the desert.

“What we need is a name,” Kaidu said. “Not *his* name. Not some bandit’s name. *Your* name. On the case. You’re a descendant of Harujin. You’re a prince. Princess Mandukhaikhai will accept nothing less. It’s either you, or it goes to your cousin Belgutei down in Sydney. We can swing that because Chiledu was departing from Sydney. Mandukhai will probably accept it. But it means Belgutei gets a position on the Council as a bribe for it.”

Tamerlan frowned. “And what of Sydney?”

“It would likely go to Khutulun. She’d take the entire Ulus of Bolad. And then we’d have two mad queens. At least Mandukhai didn’t forswear children!”

“Two mad queens....” Tamerlan muttered in a whisper, staring out into the harsh shrubbery at nothing in particular.

“I promised your father I’d come out here,” Kaidu said. “I told him it would be fruitless. You’re not going to come back after fifteen years of karma and zen and robes and chai tea for a dead-end thankless task of kissing your crazy aunt’s ass—”

“Have you heard from Lord Temüge yet?” Tamerlan interrupted.

“Lord Temüge?”

“Yes,” Tamerlan said. That mind of his was working. The gears were turning. Kaidu could see it. “Isle of the Tree Kangaroo. His daughter was slain too, right? Alta-something. Eleven or twelve.”

“How did you...?” Kaidu wasn’t sure if he’d mentioned that little detail.

“Have you heard?”

3 Though, somewhat paradoxically.

“Not as of the time I left, no. What are you...?”

Tamerlan waved his hand and the general went silent. The gears were turning.

“Tamerlan...”

“Buddhism teaches the path to enlightenment through knowledge,” Tamerlan sermonized.

“I’ll bet you fit right in here.”

“I’ve devoted my studies to chaos,” he said.

“I see...” the general replied, filling the void of silence.

There was an awkward stretch of silence. Presently, the prince said, “Do I need to ask, or are you going to tell me?”

The general quirked an eyebrow. He wasn’t... no couldn’t be talking about....

“It’s hokum,” Kaidu said. “Charlatanism.”

“I’ll do it,” Tamerlan said.

“Tamerlan, my prince...”

“I’ll find you your killer.”

Kaidu scrambled to his feet, bowed reverently to the prince. He wasn’t about to argue with it, even though he had no idea what Tamerlan was thinking. Maybe all this time with the monks drove men mad. Or maybe madness just ran in the family.

Tamerlan stood, bowed in return. “We shall leave immediately,” he said.

“Of course, my prince.” The Council will wish to see him as soon as the yam can get him there. Kaidu bit his lip, quirked an eyebrow. “May I ask, my prince,” he asked hesitantly, “how did you know the state of affairs in Ikh Khulan?”

“You think we grow our own food out here? Süren rides to a market town a hundred kilometres south of here once a month.”

*

Copyright 2022 by Jason Shannon.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.

No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without prior written permission by the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or locales is purely coincidental.