

The Hounds of Harujin an epic novel of Mongol conquest

by Jason Shannon

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Also by Jason Shannon

Author's Note

On a list of modern nations, if one were to rank them in terms of their identifiability in Western perception, Mongolia would probably rank somewhere in the neighbourhood of Bhutan, Swaziland, Slovenia or Brunei. About the size of Iran, or the province of Québec, Mongolia has the lowest population density of any fully sovereign nation. It has very little arable land and is mostly steppe (flat plateau grassland that forms in central Eurasia), goes about three quarters of the year with cloudless skies, and can have temperature variances by as much as forty degrees in a matter of about six hours. In winter, it's not uncommon to see temperatures of -60° Celsius (horses have been known to freeze where they stand), and they have their own word – *zud* – for a particularly harsh winter with mass livestock starvation. About a third of its population remains nomadic. Most of Mongolia's exports (coming mainly from the mining sector) go to China. The outside world best knows Mongolia for the discovery of rich fields of dinosaur fossils and the successful reintroduction into the wild of Przewalski's horse¹ – oh, and the largest contiguous empire in history.

In the span of less than ninety years, the Mongols formed an empire of about thirty-three million square kilometres, stretching from Poland to Korea, Syria to Vietnam, with invasion attempts in Palestine, Japan, Burma and the island of Java – an area almost three times the size of the empires of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon combined. They were outnumbered (usually at least three to one) in virtually every fight they ever fought, and yet their first real defeat didn't come until the Battle of Ain Jalut in 1260 where they were finally pushed back by the Mamluks of Egypt – a distance of more than 4,200 kilometres from home and after three generations without defeat.

This was the creation of a lowly, impoverished boy from the barren Mongolian steppe. His name was Temujin, the son of an

1 The last species of wild horse.

abducted wife, the heir of a poisoned chieftain and the would-be messiah of an evolving steppe mythology. It was said he was born clutching a blood clot – a sign from Heaven that he would be a great warrior. He was illiterate until the day he died, always a single stroke away from vanishing into oblivion like so many nameless Mongols before him, and yet nearly every facet of the modern world has been touched by his influence. He developed the first postal system. He revolutionized military thinking. He invented modern forms of genocide and biological warfare. His grandson set up the first system of universal education so that all people might be able to read and write. He established a system of free trade that even modern standards struggle to compete with. He created the modern borders of both Russia and China. He single-handedly developed an elaborate code of law from scratch. He established a right of freedom of religion that many countries can't compete with today. The Japanese *Kamikaze*, which fanatically assailed Allied forces in the Pacific, were inspired by a typhoon that saved Japan from his forces; the largest seaborne invasion in history prior to D-Day. Christopher Columbus set sail looking for the Chinese goods that he had first allowed to flow into Europe. And about eight percent of Asia (or 0.5 percent of the world) can trace their lineage directly back to him.

He is better known by his title, Genghis Khan.

The man revolutionized much of the world, and destroyed much of the rest of it. Although scholars debate it, one such number for the death caused at his hand reaches 40 million, surpassing even Joseph Stalin. He turned entire cities into ghost towns throughout the Middle East, erased from history entire nations, and unleashed upon northern China a destruction unlike any the world had seen before.

Genghis Khan may have been the bloodiest of steppe conquerors, yet he wasn't the first, nor was he the last. Attila the Hun, before whom Rome quivered, was, most likely, part of a horde originating in Mongolia. The Huns are still disputed in their ethnic origin, though a good amount of historical consensus now considers them to be descendants of the Xiongnu Confederacy in Central Asia that founded in BCE 209, and were forced westward by the aggressive Han Dynasty (BCE 206 - CE 220). The Xiongnu founder, Motun,² forged his own empire stretching

2 Also Modu, Maodun.

across an enormous swath of Asia; his people were the reason the Great Wall was built. Tamerlane, the national hero of Uzbekistan, grabbed the reins when the Mongol empire was falling and forged his own dynasty in Genghis' image in the wake of tens of millions dead. Nurhaci, the founding chieftain of China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), led his Manchu armies out of Manchuria and cut through China, leaving a body count near 25 million. Babur, a descendent of Tamerlane, came out of the steppe and conquered the Indian subcontinent, forming the Moghul Dynasty (a variation of the word Mongol), which lasted until the formation of the British Raj in 1858.

What I have created here is a fictional story where another great steppe warlord arises during dynastic decline (in this case, the decline of the modern age). His name is Harujin, a Mongol modelled very much after Genghis Khan, who manages to succeed where Genghis fell (slightly) short – the complete conquest of the world.

I suppose I should mention that this is indeed a work of fiction and Harujin (and his family tree) are only very loosely based on the aforementioned historical figures (Attila, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane), and not based upon anyone alive today. For those of you who may have read into Mongolian history a little, you'll have noticed somewhat of a debate between the traditionalists (that accept and often tout high numbers of bodies and the haunting savagery of the conquests) and the revisionists (that dismiss such tales of atrocity as a case of the losers writing history and Mongol tactics of terrifying their enemies with inflated or fabricated tales of their own horror). Indeed, both camps have interesting things to say. As a non-academic, I feel I can't justifiably add anything to this debate, so I'm instead attempting to thread a line between these camps.

It should be noted that this story that blends together the ethos of many separate cultures – the Xiongnu, Huns, Mongols, Tartars (Timurid) and others. Although there are significant similarities between them – indeed, I believe notable similarities between them – they are nonetheless separate cultures, geographically far-flung from Hungary and Gaul to Mongolia and China, with different languages, customs, religions and motivations, which existed in different periods throughout the course of two millennia. The choice I've made to blend them together (linguistically, culturally, ideologically and somewhat spiritually)

was done for the sake of the ebb and flow of this fictional story.

A note on spelling

There are more than a dozen different methods for the transliteration of Mongolian characters to Latin, and no system can be agreed upon as a standard. For example, the name Genghis Khan can also be transliterated as Chinggis, Chinghis, Chingiz, Jengiz, Jingiz, Djingis, Djchinggis, Jing gis, Zingis, Cengiz, Çingiz and Çiñgiz; and Khaan, Kahn, Han, Haan, Khān, Qan, Qa'an, Qahan, Khagan, Khaghan. Xan and Xaan. For historical personages, I am choosing the most recognizable spelling for simplicity's sake.

Different transliteration systems have different approaches to the Mongolian soft K. Some of these systems simply use a K without the H to imply its softening. Others will use the KH. Some will simply use the H – the Inner Mongolian capital, Hohhot, for example, is most often represented simply with H's, while it would be pronounced something like *Khokh-khot*. The more scholarly will supplant a Q to represent the consonant, which can make for some rather interesting transliterations. I indulge in both the use of the Q and its avoidance, though I have tried to keep things somewhat uniform.

As many of my fictional characters share names with historical figures, I add diacritical marks to many of my characters to differentiate them from their historical namesakes. For example, Hülegü (brother of Qara-Monkhe) is distinguished from Hulegu (brother of Kublai) by the diaereses. I do this merely for differentiation and it's not intended to present a new pronunciation.

In Mongolian history, it's impossible to ignore the contact with China, most predominantly during the time of the Yuan Dynasty. When it comes to Chinese transliterations, I am from a generation that came of age when the newer Pinyin system was fully entrenched, as opposed to older Wade-Giles; for the few Chinese words that do appear in this novel, I have tried to keep things exclusively rendered in Pinyin. Wade-Giles appears only where those translations are unavoidable. In such an arrangement, I expect there might be some confusion regarding the Q, which in Pinyin produces a *ch* sound – contrasted with the Mongolian, which produces a *kh* sound. For example, the Chinese dynasty the

Qing would be pronounced *Ching*, whereas the one-time Mongol capital of Qaraqorum would be pronounced *Kharakhorum*. Blame the scholars for this one.³

3 To make matters even more confusing, Pinyin also reappropriates the X to make a sort of cross between the Western sounds S and SH (for example, the Chinese dynasty of Xi Xia would roughly be pronounced *She Shya*), whereas Mongolian Cyrillic (adopted from Russian) uses the X to represent the KH sound (Qaraqorum as Xapxopым). Some transliterations don't bother changing the X to a Q, K, H or KH (Xarxorum). Again, blame the scholars.

THE HOUNDS OF
HARUJIN

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.

*

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.¹ 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.²

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

"Pasturage Appropriation Bureau," she said, looking over the

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.

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 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 Turliakh, his Mongol concubine. "You speak English, right?"

"Uh..." the courtesan stuttered.

"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.

*

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 weapon³ – 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

3 Bandits were everywhere.

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 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.

1. Tsenden

The rains were torrential.

But she charged on. When she was sent on a mission, she knew it was of the utmost importance. She knew messages needed to be there yesterday. Sometimes quite literally. Sometimes the master could see calamity on the horizon, sometimes it was only over your shoulder as your horse charged from it. Most of the time, he merely saw things on the level plane, linked by time but not place or correspondence. Time was a fickle thing, and whenever she ground up the sacred herbs and lathered her skin in the sacred oils to try and see through it, she only got headaches. Migraines. Sometimes she blacked out. Once she awoke kilometres from her dung fire with a nosebleed that had given her a beard of dried blood and a taste of copper that lasted for days.

So she rode. She didn't dance, she rode. She rode for him. She delivered the messages. She drove her horse hard. She kept herself awake for days bouncing up and down in the saddle. She ate tenderized goat's meat. She kept herself awake as long as it took, with whatever it took. A market in Mareeba sold caffeine pills mostly raided from old stocks. She took so many once she got jittery and started seeing horsemen in the clouds. (The horses were pink.)

She only failed once, on the longest trip, to Lord Hülegü's court in Perth. It was almost three thousand kilometres as the crow flies, well over that with a horse's winding course. It was almost a full moon cycle of straight riding with a good horse. She'd finally passed out after seventeen days in the saddle. Broke her collarbone as she fell. Didn't wake from the pain. Someone later told her that it would have been impossible, that she'd have died before she got to seventeen days.

She knew what the body could take – and she knew what the body could take when channelling the spirits.

She rode in rain and shine, night and day, blistering heat and

hail. Most of the messages were turned away, or scoffed at. Princes spat in her face. Guards spat in her face. Townsfolk on the road spat in her face. Most still disbelieved the power of the message.

She had been riding hard for five days without rest.

Tsenden was only fifteen years old, yet she had a strong spirit, a strong windhorse. The powers of the other side channelled through her like a fjord.

Once, a bandit had picked her off her horse with a rubber arrow. When his blade had ripped through her trousers she'd found the words for a chant. Itugen, the Mother of Fertility, was watching out for her. The bandit had been inverted, all his organs coming out and his skin folding in. He was alive and weeping in agony, a pile of bones and mangled flesh for days afterwards.

No one believed that story either. They say she'd been raped six ways from Sunday by him and invented this tale. That she believed it herself, even.

Now it was pissing rain like Eternal Heaven itself had been torn asunder and the tears of Tengri were crashing down upon them. Thunder roared, and she saw her way only by lightning. Lightning and faith. Her horse charged forward. It was by sheer miracle that he didn't trip and shatter an ankle. The will of the gods.

She was approaching the next yam station. She reached into her saddle bag and grabbed her bell. The clapper was wrapped in sheep's wool to prevent it from clanging all throughout the countryside. She pulled the wool out and stuffed it back into the bag. The saddle held her comfortably on the horse as rain pummelled her scalp like a hail of arrows.

She clanged the bell like a pack of wolves was on her heels. Even the most incompetent drunkard at this station would hear her.

Way stations had their torches lit all through the night. It was a hut, a one-room wood building with stables to the side and a pasture out back for grazing. Four torches along the stables, one at the door of the hut, covered with a bronze cap.

She saw a man scrambling for the stables, his arms above his head to shield him from the rain. The horses were spooked. A second man came running out, laced up in riding gear. They weren't certain if the message she carried would continue with her, or need a new rider as well. The goal was to get the message

in and out in seconds – she'd leap straight from one saddle to the next, her feet wouldn't touch the mud. Hadn't touched the mud since leaving Carrion Point. Yam stations needed to be prepared for such an urgency. It was a decree.

Lightning flashed. It lit the grasslands like a second sun. She was half afraid that it would strike her bell. The second yam attendant, the rider, got a look at her in the flash. She could see him stop in his sprint, see him in the torchlight. She could see the expression on his face, see it in her mind's eye.

She was a forty-or-so kilo girl, charging a horse like a madwoman in darkness like pitch, clanging a bell like wolves were nipping at her ankles. Imperial riders were seldom women. And they certainly weren't girls. And they certainly weren't stupid enough to subject a horse to such reckless peril. She wasn't going to leap from one saddle to the next. She wasn't going to be in and out in fifteen seconds. She was a private rider, for all intents and purposes, and might be able to negotiate a trade of horses if she was lucky – for the right price.

Her horse froze at the stables so fast she was nearly flung off. Both attendants were now paused in their vigour. She continued to clang the bell with a ferocity to show them urgency.

“Shut up already,” the one of them said. It was the rider.

“A horse, now!” she demanded.

The other man hiccoughed. He was older, maybe in his forties. “Calm your crazy ass down,” he said.

“What's the rush?” the rider asked.

“Urgent message,” she retorted.

“You have an imperial seal?” the rider asked.

Of course she didn't have an imperial seal. Her news preceded the seals. Seals would be issued *because* of her message.

“Come inside,” the rider yelled over the clash of raindrops. “Ain't going nowhere in this weather. Break a horse's leg and get yourself killed.” He turned to go back to the hut.

“I have coin,” she said, still in the saddle. All the shamanesses of Carrion Point carried a small amount of coin for reasons like this. To make the necessary trades when yam stations got stringent about banners or seals.

“Come inside,” the rider yelled. He kept walking for the door. The other man was already there with him.

She had no choice. She swung out of the saddle and fell to the ground. Quite literally. She barely had motor control of her legs.

Her trousers were immediately slathered in mud. Pulling herself up, she staggered, fell twice more, then found herself on wobbly legs being chartered to the hut.

She felt like she'd been hamstrung.

Inside, the older of the two was heating some beans on a stove, draped in a blanket. The rider was stripped to his waist. "Girl travelling alone," the rider grunted. "You're liable to get yourself raped."

He was maybe twenty, twenty-two. He had a hard riding body. She was not blind to that, as a woman. When Itugen's spirit flowed through your own, you felt these things, you felt her indomitable lust. Her hunger. But it was forbidden.

She was one of the Virgins, the serving shamanesses of the Red Raven. *Virgin* technically wasn't the right title for what these shamanesses were, but there was no one alive who would dispute it outside of dank taverns or whorehouses. Even then, tongues were said to wither and die. Her body was used in communion with the spirits. But it was hardly for the flesh of men.

"A girl can take care of herself," she said perfunctorily.

Equally as perfunctorily, the man cooking beans at the stove said, "Bandits are everywhere."

"Everywhere," she agreed with a curt nod.

"Not good for a girl to travel alone," the rider said. Soon he was down to his undergarments. She averted her eyes. Itugen was strong in her now, like a caged tiger. The Mother wanted to be fed, wanted his body—

She shut her eyes, drew in a deep breath.

She was on a mission, a sacred mission. She had not the time for this, didn't have the patience for some drunken fool who thought she had a pretty face.

She was under orders not to overtly say she was a shamaness. It was usually obvious, here in the north. A girl riding alone — she would either be mad or would have had her body bent and twisted to divine the other side. But she couldn't actually spell it out, say the words. Shamaness. Virgin. Therefore, she couldn't threaten him with terrors the sight of which would induce blindness if he had his mind set on a little roadside outlawry.

But she knew how to play the game. The quickest version at least. The older of the two took his beans, went to check the horses. Convenient. That left her with the rider in his undergarments.

“I have no money for security,” she said. “Just my blade.”

“At the very least you shouldn’t travel at night. The light of day, you’re usually okay.”

This was the last yam station in this direction until Ikh Khulan. There was nothing here, no inns, no village. Another few hours until she reached the imperial capital. “Well, you’re not going to let me stay here, are you?” she asked, half-rhetorically.

That grin of his – devious.

“Would it be improper to dry my clothes by the fire?” she asked, perhaps just a little too forwardly.

“Of course. You’ll catch your death of cold in those sodden rags.”

She unlaced her deel, peeled it back over her shoulders and let it fall onto the floor behind her, rainwater seeping from it like a wet sponge. Beneath she wore nothing. Her chest shivered in the chill.

He tried to mask his reaction, wasn’t all that successful. She left her trousers on, waited for him to act. He walked over, leaned in, came in close. He brought her head up, kissed him full on the lips. Then she was directing him down. To the chest. He kissed her clavicle, then worked his way down the slope of her breast to the nipple. Kissed it gently as he grabbed her other one with his hand.

She waited, her hand on the back of his head.

Finally, he took it in his mouth and—

He pulled away, swallowed. She just looked him in the eye. Drew his head back to her breast. He didn’t resist her pull. He made a show of tenderness once more, took the nipple, suckled gently like a calf at the teat.

Tsenden had only done this once, maybe twice before (her memory sometimes played tricks on her). It was only ever when she was four days of wakefulness or beyond. Some of the other Virgins, the shamanesses of Carrion Point, had reported similar queerness with regards to their sex – though no two stories were quite the same. One girl reported that she’d grown a belly like a rising yeast and birthed a foal to kick the man in his unmentionables. These stories are so dubious, even to the teller, that they are often only mentioned when the moon is high and dark and the fires have dwindled to ashes and bellies are bloated on enough fermented mare’s milk to drown a drunkard.

She pulled the rider off her breast, grabbed him by the

shoulders and spun him to his left, at the same time stepping to her left and further from his line of sight.

Nothing happened. They stood frozen in this mistimed peculiarity for a good five seconds or so. He was looking over his shoulder at her, looking back at him with embarrassment. He had a look of utter bafflement—

His stomach grumbled, and he leaned inwards, his hands on it and groaning like he had a viper in his bowels. The groan became a gasp of pain, then a girlish shriek. And he vomited. It sprayed from him like a geyser, splattering onto the wall.

She picked her deel off the floor. Pulled the sopping thing up over her shoulders once more.

In between the bouts of spray he was wailing. His partner burst back into the hut. By all appearances Tsenden was doing nothing to the man; he was merely in a state of internal imbalance.¹ The man rushed to his partner, put his hand on the sick man's back. The rider's undergarments were nearly torn to tatters when the effluvium found a second exit. The smell was hideous, sent the older man stumbling back.

Tsenden left two coins at the door. She figured that was fair. They got a reliable horse for the trade as well. She took a new horse from the stable, already partially saddled from earlier, whispered a prayer that her legs wouldn't give out on her as she mounted the beast, and was off again, charging headlong into the pitch of night.

This new horse rode just as well as the last. It resisted her at first, then came to trust the guidance of Heaven as she did in the darkness. It reached a charge and abandoned its hesitancy.

Ikh Khulan was only fifty kilometres or so from that yam station. It took her a little over an hour. She was beneath the towering mass of the Black Rock before she could even see it. Lightning flashed and the great black mass loomed above her, its very existence an affront to Heaven above. Beyond the palace, the imperial capital was little more than a mass of white felt gers scattered about randomly in increasingly wider circles.

Surrounding the palace was a perfect circle of wrought iron bars, guarded every fifteen meters by an armed guard, stoic, statuesque. All the guards were female. Only manhoods approved at the highest level could pass the fence that guarded the imperial

1 Severe internal imbalance.

harem. Thousands of women, from every corner of the khanate, stacked like sardines inside their tremendous tower. At the beck and call. Most of them had never met their lords, had never seen him except for the day they were presented. Some of them weren't even afforded that, gifts from sycophant noyans and taijis, seen to a room by an administrator. And not a single man could be on the same side of the fence but the loyalest of the loyal generals and administrators.

(Did the khan think women in isolation with each other would remain virginal and pure?)

Tsenden reached a gate. An Amazon stepped forward. Two more stood at the ready, some distance back. It was pure mud beneath their feet. The two guards in back hadn't grabbed their bows, drawn their swords, but Tsenden knew they could have an arrow drawn and in her during the span of a flash from Heaven.

The guard that had stepped forward was barking a command. Tsenden couldn't hear it over the pounding of the rain and the syrupy echo of the words in her mind. Through her exhaustion, the guard sounded like a wasp. The rain really has a way of taking it out of you. Especially when it's a torrent for the Heavens. That, and five days in the saddle.

"Dismount, rider." Tsenden realized that's what the guard was saying.

"The khan," Tsenden said in a gasp. It was a struggle to speak.

"Dismount."

The shamaness swung her leg over the side of the horse and fell face first from the saddle. She splattered into the mud.

"Heavens," the Amazon spat as she crouched to help the girl up.

"The khan," Tsenden repeated. "I have a message for the khan."

"The khan's been in seclusion for two years, rider. If you have a seal, I can get you the office of the yammaster general."

Tsenden was still lying in the mud, supported in a half-sitting position under the guard's arm. "The khan," she repeated.

"Rider, if the Heavens themselves demanded it, it would be beyond my power—"

Tsenden lurched up towards her horse. She was intimately aware that the other guards had nocked their bows. She grabbed a small sack from the horse's saddle and dropped it at the guard's feet as she fell back into her arm. The guard opened it, slowly,

untying the string and peering gingerly inside. Then she gasped, dropped Tsenden into the mud and stepped back. The other two princess protectors had rushed forward now. Tsenden remained twitching in the mud. One guard drew her scimitar, stepped forward and nudged open the sack. Her eyes went wide.

Inside was a dead raven, as red as fresh blood. But it wasn't blood. The feathers themselves were tinged this bright, unnatural, gleaming colour. It was an omen. It was a message.

Tsenden repeated for the fourth time, "The khan."

2. Courtenay

Yorketown had a bad energy to it. This entire peninsular area did.

It was a small town, peaceful in every regard. The Mongols seldom came here. She had never so much as heard a first-hand account of bandits or slavers. And she'd never seen a pirate, even here. On the water. In South Australia.

But Adelaide was just across the gulf, a black hole on the map, a black hole in the spirit world. No one dared go there. Not even the priests.

The priest at the pulpit was yammering on about praying for the souls of Adelaide again. It was damn near sixteen years since Adelaide. She was a mere infant at the time. If the souls haven't found rest by now, would they ever? Couldn't this priest stop the monotony and maybe mention the call for that particular prayer only, say, once every second month?

But even she knew the darkness just across the water. All of South Australia stank of it.

Her uncle still called it South Australia, even though the priest and the town council had both warned him against it. It was the Ulus of Bolad now. And Lord Belgutei was not a man to anger. But this, the South Australian side of Belgutei's dominion was in the hands of his sister. And Courtenay got a good reading from Princess Khutulun, even though she'd never so much as laid eyes on the secretary. Belgutei, on the other hand... she didn't need to know her history to beware his blackness.

At this point, Khutulun was his heir, the only legitimate child descendent from Lord Bolad. If Courtenay ever believed in the Christian God, she prayed some unfortunate incident befell her lord and Princess Khutulun take the court in Sydney unopposed.

She was not a Christian, didn't use that word when she thought of herself. She still said grace when her uncle asked her to, came here most Sundays, had even signed up to sing for the church choir (she didn't really have a singing voice), but they never really got that off the ground. She had a deep respect for the

priest, was grateful, but she didn't hear anything in his sermons now but hollowness.

Uncle Graham made the sign of the cross as he rose from the hassock. Her cousin Jeremy did likewise. Irbis, her other cousin, hadn't knelt. She was going through her phase. That murky spirituality phase. Courtenay would like to talk to her about that. Irbis was a year younger than Courtenay, and it wasn't too far before that that Courtenay had become disenfranchised by the droning of this old priest.

She didn't kneel either. She usually did, but this time she didn't. Cast a knowing glance at her cousin. Irbis cast the same glance back.

The service ended and the parishioners began filing out in their usual fashion. There was a rugby game that afternoon against Maitland and a few people bounded from the church to beat the rush. They were having a pig roast for lunch on the old Johnson farm up past Minlaton. Courtenay didn't mind a good distraction now and then, but these rugby games were becoming a less and less enjoyable way to spend an afternoon. She was sixteen now, and after enough beer had been downed, too many men started to look her way. She was rapidly growing up, already legal age now, and she wasn't sure she liked being a woman – didn't really think of herself with that word either.

The men in Maitland just made her uncomfortable.

Uncle Graham usually went to these. Jeremy usually tagged along now that Uncle Graham was letting him drink beer openly. Irbis went when she was younger – much younger – but not anymore. Uncle Graham courteously waited at the edge of the aisle for the eager rugby fans to file out in a half jog. He was excited to go today, but in no hurry.

Out on the church lawn, Irbis immediately reached for the elastic in her hair, but her father scolded through gritted teeth, "Not here, Monica."

Irbis scowled at him. Even Jeremy had abandoned calling her by that name. Graham would respect the (as he called it) barbarian bastardization of her middle name when they were on good terms, when she'd arisen extra early to milk the goats or managed to sell some cheese in town. But when she irritated him, she got her first name. "You're as white as sour cream," he'd say. "Why give yourself one of *their* names?"

Courtenay understood why Uncle Graham preferred her with

all those pins and elastics in her hair, but Courtenay still thought the hairstyle was absurd. The girl had light auburn hair, tied back in a ponytail between the nape of her neck and her crown, then flowing forward to be pinned down by a headband at her hairline and falling down in uneven bangs, with pins holding the hair by her temples that she then tucked behind her ears. You can't wear a hat in church, but there had to be a better option than this.

The church organized a waggon taxi on Sundays to help people to and from. Horses were donated by parishioners on a rotating basis, eight of them hauling a long wooden cart that would run up and down the main tracks to the farms. The Amity family found enough space to squeeze in, with their feet dangling off the rear of the waggon, elbows banging into each other as they were all scrunched in. Irbis scratched at her ridiculous reverse-flowing ponytail the entire ride home. She was just taunting her father.

The farmstead was a small house just outside Yorketown proper. They had a half-dozen goats they used for milk, and three horses (alas, two stallions that had no interest in the mare, so no mare's milk for the family). They had had four horses – one for each of them – but the one had died, and that left Courtenay and Irbis to share a saddle when they all went riding together.

Jeremy and Uncle Graham immediately saddled their horses and rode off to the north, eager for the pig roast. Jeremy grabbed a good-sized bag of cheeses to snack on for the ride. She called goodbye, but they didn't wave back.

Irbis had pulled the many pins and elastics from her hair and begun with her braid. She only had a small patch of hair, maybe the size of a silver dollar, on the very peak of her skull, which she kept braided in that upward pointing tail (that swung any which direction). The rest of her head had a peach fuzz which was filling in fairly thick actually. "I need to shave again," she said as she knotted the braid.

It was the Mongol style, that sort of warlord tassel the fiercest of the fierce wear. Her father hated it, what with all the droning in church about the ghosts of Adelaide. The priest saw her round town with it braided up and swaying back and forth as she walked, and never said a word. He was always too kind and understanding to make a scene of a hairstyle, though. Courtenay kind of liked it on her cousin.

Irbis grabbed her straight razor from the leather satchel in her

room. They had a huge cistern of seawater out back they used for cleanups on the farm, washing their faces or hands, and Irbis took advantage of it to wet the skin for a shave.

Courtenay had grabbed some curds to calm her hunger and chewed away as she watched Irbis sluice some saltwater onto the fuzz, flop the braid off to the side and hook her tongue over her upper lip in concentration. That straight razor could take a finger off without a second thought. The girl took her time running it down her scalp, stretching the skin between thumb and fingers on the opposite hand. Courtenay observed the methodical shave from the deck, arms folded.

There was no Mongol culture here, none of their names. They didn't have an appointed governor. Tax collectors rarely came down this way; the ass-end of the peninsula had little to offer them. How Irbis had come across her name, this new cultural identity, was still a mystery to Courtenay. The other night she'd even heard her cousin practising her colours and numbers in Mongolian. Courtenay found this... intriguing, very intriguing indeed.

"What is it?" Irbis asked, hooking her tongue once more over her lip.

She said nothing for a moment, just stared at the girl. Imperial soldiers from Khutulun's camp came through once, a few years back, erected a yak tail standard at town hall in reverence to the Eternal Sky of Mongolian worship. They left the church unmolested and even made a donation of silver to the pulpit in deference to the town's faith. The standard lasted three days before it was vandalized to dust. The local teacher had tried a few times of offer Mongolian as a second language courses for the children. Prepare them for the real world. The tide of history. The programs had been disbanded and Mrs Hornby even received death threats. They hated the Mongols here, and yet this girl spoke a smattering of their words and had adopted their hairstyle despite the scowls that braid got her in town.

"The queue," she said, eventually. "Where do you find the energy for such defiance of... of the town?"

"Mongols are the future, mate. You can hold out in this fantasy world of nostalgia if you want, but you're fighting a rising tide." The girl scraped another strip of fuzz off the nape of her neck.

"Adelaide..."

"The rising tide is not necessarily pleasant," Irbis said, matter-

of-factly. “But it is inevitable. Refusing to learn to swim is not a good idea.”

She continued shaving her head. She was very deliberately gradual with the movement of that razor.

“Come on,” Irbis said. “Don’t pretend like you don’t know what I’m saying when I curse Dad in Mongolian. I know you speak a few words yourself.”

Courtenay felt herself blushing. Of course she spoke a few words. She could actually carry on a conversation in their language. She’d done a few favours for the translator at town hall. He gave her a few lessons under the guise of her training for a steady job and kept it secret for the right price.

(He’d given her the choice of paying with her maidenhead – in so many words – or three days a month doing all the milking, egg collecting and yard work on his farmstead while he relaxed. She kept a blade strapped to her ankle to ensure only the cows were the ones getting their udders manhandled. She relied more heavily on an old book from the school library that Mrs Hornby had let her lease out indefinitely.)

She said, “You pick things up, here and there.”

Irbis said, in garbled Mongolian, “Come, help with me,” and held out the straight razor.

Her scalp was as smooth as a baby’s bottom, except for the queue. And the thinnest ring of fuzz around the base of the queue.

Courtenay wanted to fit in with this family. She’d been with Uncle Graham since she was four or five, but was still an outsider. Maybe she’d done that to herself, closing herself in, learning Mongolian in secret instead of playing bocce with Irbis and Jeremy. Seeking spiritual guidance alone, in complete isolation in the dead of night instead of kneeling at the church.

She said to Irbis, in much more fluent Mongolian, “I think the queue is a good look for you, beautiful yet fierce,” and took the outstretched straight razor.

Irbis smiled at the Mongolian, which was much better than her own. Struggling through her own, she said, “I like. Very good. Teach me must.”

Courtenay wet the razor in the jug of seawater, grabbed hold of the girl’s braid and pulled it back, snaking down the rear of her head, pulling taut the strands in the front. She slowly brought the razor in for the fuzz rimming the braid.

“Careful,” Irbis said in English.

Still in Mongolian, Courtenay replied, "I know. Your braid is precious. I won't cut it." And then she said something she hadn't known she was going to say. The words just kind of came out of her, and there she was, saying it, before she realized. In Mongolian, she'd added, "Dear sister."

They were sometimes called that. Sisters. The Amity sisters, people would sometimes say at school. It was not a word she could remember having ever used herself. But she suddenly wanted, felt it in her bones, that they should be that. Not just cousins.

The razor sliced away the fuzz, leaving not a single strand of the braid harmed.

Courtenay worked her way around the base of the queue. Irbis grabbed a few cheese curds herself and popped them in her mouth. Courtenay finished the shave and sluiced a bit of seawater around the base of the queue. Irbis felt around with her fingers finding no stubble, and smiled. She thanked Courtenay, stammering through it in Mongolian, and then, perhaps just as a parroting of what Courtenay had said earlier, she added, "...dear sister."

Courtenay wondered if her cousin knew what those meant, knew the depth of them.

But before she could cozy up any further, the moment was interrupted by the whinnying of the last horse Graham and Jeremy had left for them. It distracted them from the moment at hand, and they turned to see more horses riding up in the distance.

Two mares trotted up and halted at the back porch of the Amity farm. It was the neighbours from down the way, Eldridge Piven and his twit brother Harcourt. Assholes, the both of them. Eldridge had been a known thief for a time now, pilfering freshwater, salt stores, vegetables. He stole a saddle once. Courtenay had had more than one pair of underwear disappear from the clothesline and had her suspicions. She knew the boy's mother laid a beating into him for that saddle he swiped from Bobby Cahill, but it didn't seem to put the boy in line.

"Well, well, lookey here. It's Little Miss Haru-Gina."

The oaf, Harcourt, snorted in laughter.

"Get lost, Eldridge," Irbis called.

"I'm just kidding," Eldridge replied. He dismounted his horse. Harcourt stayed in the saddle. Eldridge looked taller than the last time Courtenay had seen him. His chest and shoulders had filled

out, too. He had to be close to eighteen by now. She had to crane her neck upwards to meet his eyes. The brother was still young, thirteen, his face still pudgy with baby fat. "I think you should follow suit," Eldridge said to her. "Help the trend catch on. Haru-Gina and Courtnutei. You can be my Mongol princesses."

"I thought you were going to the game," Courtenay said.

"I go to those games to find tail. Well why ride all the way up to Minlaton?"

In the saddle, Harcourt snorted out, "You two ever practice kissing with each other?"

Courtenay rolled her eyes and tried to ignore him. Harcourt was harmless, just a dill. It was his brother that truly got annoying.

Eldridge said, "My mom's gone up to the game. I got the house all to myself."

"Fuck off, Eldridge," Irbis said from over Courtenay's shoulder.

"Not really inviting you, Haru-Gina. Don't really have a thing for little bald girls." He wasn't taking his eyes from Courtenay's gaze.

Courtenay said, "How's about you go wank off into those panties of mine you stole and leave Irbis alone."

"Oh, come on," Eldridge replied. "Just having a laugh, mates." He looked over her shoulder to Irbis. "I know you're a fierce warrior and whatnot, probably off to rape some fair maiden, but I thought I'd let you know I'll keep an eye on your place with you dad gone. Two girls alone..." he looked back to Courtenay, "don't want any bandits pilfering my future concubine."

"Fuck off, you ass," Irbis said, more fervour in her voice this time.

"Offer's always there, Courtnutei," he said, still with that devilish grin curling his lips.

He walked back to his horse, remounted. Harcourt clumsily turned his horse around. Eldridge swung his round in a arc.

Then he reached out and grabbed the bag of cheese curds, spurned his horse and the brothers galloped off.

Irbis swore something vile in Mongolian. Courtenay just sighed.

"Come on," Irbis said, charging for the Amity horse.

She saw the whole thing happen before its execution. Right there in her mind's eye – *saw* how it would happen. She opened

her mouth, but barely got out the first syllable of her... dear sister's name before...

The horse spooked, hopped forward. It kicked back. The hoof smacked Irbis right in the chest. The girl went down like a house of cards. Courtenay saw her chest compress in ways a person's chest isn't meant to.

The horse galloped off a few meters as Courtenay flew to Irbis' side. The girl was flat on her back, a droplet of blood in her left nostril. Her breathing was shallow and quick, little gasps that couldn't draw in enough air. Sounded like phlegm. Her chest was soft when Courtenay touched it.

And her eyes – Irbis' eyes were stricken with terror.

Irbis couldn't speak, managed only to gurgle out something that might have been the first syllable of Courtenay's name.

Uncle Graham was halfway to Minlaton by now. Dr Ellison would be, too – but she might never get the girl to the doctor even if he was still here. Mrs Hornby, Big Ken – anyone from in town, she couldn't get to any of them. Even Eldridge was long gone by now.

Irbis gasped, trying to draw in breath. Trying, not succeeding.

She did the only thing she could think to. This, too, seemed to choose her instead of she choosing it. She chanted. She took the girl's hand in her own and chanted. She did this in Mongolian. She called out to the spirits, to the ether, to other side. Not now. Please, she's just a girl of fifteen. Not now. It became poetic, her words taking on a rhythm all of their own. She let go, let the ether flow through her, take her. Let herself be a doll for the spirits.

Not now. Her name is Irbis. Now is not her time. The myriad threads of fate cannot lead to this.

Part of this she had learned. She had practised many times, rides to the coast in the dark of night, alone. Probing the other side on her own. But part of it was... something else. It came naturally, flowed through her, the words coming on their own.

Until her voice was hoarse, she pleaded with the Sky that her friend live.

*

Irbis awoke some hours later. She was in her bed. The sun was going down out the window. Courtenay was hunched over in a chair in the corner. Irbis touched her chest. Cringed in pain, but

her ribs were solid. Unbroken. Courtenay looked up. In a croaked voice, she swore, "Itugen's tits, you scared me."

"Courtenay..." Irbis gasped.

"You're okay."

Irbis just laid there and took in short breaths for a minute. "You swore," she said.

Courtenay let out her breath. "Well you really... fucking scared me."

Irbis tried to laugh, came out instead as a cough, a chest-quaking boom of a cough. She relaxed back into her pillow. Courtenay had brought her here, had to drag her for the most part, tucked her into bed. Didn't really remember doing it. Not in the moment, anyway; she had this God's eye view sort of memory of her tucking her sister in.

The room was small in the farmhouse, on the first floor. She remembered when this room had been decorated to the nines with pink and violet, old paintings that had been picked up in flea markets up and down the peninsula. She'd even had a poster from the Tarcoola ghost town, way up north in the Ulus. Today, however, all the pink and brightness was gone, replaced by black, and the paintings from her childhood replaced with Mongol art. You had to go to the Kadina markets to get something like this. Hanging parchments with Mongolian vertical script. A single word hanging on the left wall, a single on the right. *Rebellion. Destiny.*

The only thing left from her childhood was a pencil sketch her mother had drawn. Probably just before she'd died.

"I think I'll live," Irbis groaned. "It feels like I was kicked by a horse." Another attempt at a chuckle. It was clear it reverberated through those bruised ribs. She tried to sit up, got to a half-sitting position and propped herself up uncomfortably on her elbows. She coughed, agony rippling through her; she grit her teeth like she was in labour and squelched the next cough in her throat, where she tried to bury it. Courtenay ached just watching it.

"That mare shattered my ribcage," Irbis managed to say.

"I'm not a doctor," Courtenay said, suddenly trying to downplay what had happened.

Irbis took a raspy breath. "But you are a shaman."

"A shaman?" She was a little taken off guard at the directness of it.

"A shaman," Irbis stated. "You prayed and chanted."

“It was the first thing I could think of...” Courtenay tried to say in a shrug.

“Before the Lord’s prayer?”

She looked away, felt her ears start to warm. Irbis would be the first person that... that knew. Courtenay didn’t talk about this at dinner, didn’t bring it up on lazy Saturday afternoons when she and Jeremy and Irbis played cards. It was a private part of herself, something she’d kept that way.

She was almost beginning to feel claustrophobic.

“It worked,” Irbis said, the words booming over the drumming in Courtenay’s chest.

Courtenay took a deep breath. “You had the wind knocked out of you.”

“She shattered my ribcage. I *heard* the bones break. I remember that, Courtenay. And now,” she rapped her knuckled on the bottom of her ribcage, grimacing unbearably as she did so and trying to stifle a whine, “they’re solid as a rock.”

“The mind can play tricks when the body takes a hit like that,” Courtenay said, her mouth dry.

Irbis blinked, tried to focus. She wasn’t really paying attention to Courtenay’s presence in the room anymore. “I saw...” she said, the words dripping out of her. “I remember you chanting. But that was in the distance, away from where I was.”

Courtenay let her speak, let her work her way through this in her mind.

“Like, when you chant, do you see...?” The queue swung down from behind her ear, dangled in her field of vision. She did nothing to sweep it back. “I was... naked, and it was dark, but there was light – at the end.” Bit her lip, let those words drift out into the world, almost unaware that she’d said them. “It was like a whirlwind...” Irbis finally said, trailing off once more. Furrowed her brow. “I could taste the colours.”

Courtenay didn’t speak, just gazed intently at her... dear sister in the silence of the room.

Irbis narrowed her gaze at the sheets in her lap, confusion and... something else on her face. “I think I saw the moment of my birth.”

When Courtenay spoke, her voice almost didn’t make it out of her throat. “Irbis...”

Her sister looked her dead in the eye, her voice taking on an authority Courtenay had never heard before. “You’re a shaman.”

Courtenay closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths, raked her the fingers of both hands through her hair, pushing it back. She opened her eyes and met the girl's gaze once more. "A Sky Worshipper," she said.

"A Sky Worshipper?"

"A Sky Worshipper."

Irbis added, "And a healer."

"As I say, the mind plays tricks. What I thought I felt when I felt the softness of your chest..."

"Was bone fragments in my lungs." Irbis' stare had an almost demonic look to it. "Your Sky spirits saved me. *You* saved me."

Courtenay swallowed hard. She looked over to the crude painting of the Mongolian vertical script. The word *Destiny* glared back at her. This was a girl who'd long since given up the pretence of kneeling at church, of crossing herself, of eating the wafer. And she was the most Mongol girl in town, even if she was as white as milk. Few people in this little town would like the idea of communing with the Sky spirits. But this girl had taken the Iris¹ her mother had given her instead to a Mongolian name. Snow leopard. She shaved a damned queue into her hair. If there was anyone Courtenay could share this with, it was her.

Courtenay had been alone in this for a while. She wanted someone to share this with, wanted a family – a *real* family.

A sister.

"Are you able to ride?" Courtenay asked, her voice shattering the silence.

"Probably. I might curse the horse to the pit, but, probably."

"You want to see the power of the Sky, of Tengri, the Eternal Sky" – she uttered that in Mongolian – "then there's something I want to show you."

"A ritual?"

"A ritual."

Irbis smiled. "Are you going to want me to dance around a fire naked and drink my own period blood?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Courtenay said, returning the smile. "I'll let you keep your underwear on."

1 Her middle name.

3. Temülen

She was awoken at the crack of dawn by a man she did not recognize. She'd had barely three hours sleep, she reckoned – it felt as though she'd just laid her head down. Who was that? That bloke? Oktai's son? It didn't matter; she shooed him away. Groaned and rolled over on the bearskin.

Soon there was another nudge on her shoulder. Somewhere in the back of her mind were whispered apologies. “Mmm,” she snorted, “Go... ’way.” Now she could taste her teeth. Pinched her eyes tighter together.

But Oktai's son was persistent. More of a nudge on the back of her shoulder. His voice filtered in through a tinny echo. “... humble apologies, my lady.”

Now she could feel the dried sweat on her skin. She felt rough. It wasn't just the sleep. Groaned again–

Then she wrenched her eyes open, felt still more tapping on the back of her shoulder. My lady? Minister Oktai's son never referred to her as *my lady*. Yes, sometimes he playfully called her *princess* – more as a pet name than a title – but not–

“Please my lady, I need you to get up.”

That wasn't his voice.

It was now that she saw Oktai's lad on the other side of the room. He too, it seemed, hadn't made it to the bed, was slouched on the bearskin rug closer to the fireplace, snuggled in with–

Itugen's tits. Had she... been with two blokes last night? Umái's womb, how did she let that happen... again?¹ She couldn't remember. The entire thing was a haze of music and black airag, and some type of mineral that made the braziers burn blue. She had a hangover. Her skull was splitting. Her mouth was dry. Her joints were sore.

The bearskin didn't provide the greatest comfort, she presently realized, feeling her elbow, her hip, the wooden floor beneath pressing heavily against her pampered self. She was used to the finest mattress in the hemisphere, the softest thing you could lay

1 She was pained to add that last.

yourself upon and not drown in, kingfisher feather pillows, with a handmaiden present at all hours of the night just to fan her. Sleeping on a rug on the floor did not mix well with her.

“My lady...” said the voice, still whispering, but with some urgency now.

She screwed up her face. The security chap. Oktai’s head sec man. She was pretty sure.

Now she was irate. This was a paid bloody servant, not even in the imperial employ, and she was princess. She was hungover (still half drunk), her makeup probably smeared everywhere if she had any of it left at all, and she was naked beneath this bearskin. An imperial princess. She could have this man flayed for such breach of protocol.

She roused. Oktai’s son – Umai’s womb, what was his name again – was there, against the far wall, wrapped up in another animal skin. He had his arm wrapped around their third – she did, she realized, feel like she’d ridden two stallions at once last night. The pair fidgeted, and–

Underworld! She pinched her eyes shut, felt her stomach slosh about with green intent. The bloke Oktai’s son had his arm around revealed a rather supple breast as... *he* moved.

The sec man whispered to her again, “Princess, we must go.”

She turned back to him. One of her own breasts slithered out from under the horse pelt. He graciously looked upwards as though Heaven were tearing itself asunder. She belched a growl of a burp at him, foul with black airag that had been resting in her stomach for hours. It left a bad taste in her mouth. He politely ignored it.

“I will have you torn between four horses,” she said, not minding the level of her voice.

“No, you won’t,” came a new voice. She shot her gaze to the door. Another man stood there, well armed. He was not dressed in imperial garb. He didn’t have a military uniform on. He didn’t have imperial colours or a paiza medallion.

Was this a... kidnapping? A... tabloid scandal? Khokh Monkhe Tengri – the imperial (supposed to be virginal) princess of Ikh Khulan caught hungover and in bed with... this could destroy her, she suddenly realized.

“My lady, we must go.” This from the head of Oktai’s security.

“Get dressed,” said the man at the door, dictating to her. Motioned with his head. “Don’t wake them.” He had a

commanding tone. “Now, Princess.”

She stumbled out of the bedroom, found her paparazzo at the glass guardrail of the atrium balcony. The head of Oktai’s security was nowhere to be seen now. She marched straight up to him.

“Urgent news has come from your sister, Princess,” the man was saying. “You’re in danger.”

Without any hesitation, she grabbed hold of the dagger on his belt, wrenched it free, waved it at him.

“Calm down,” he said.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Keep your voice down. We’re in a state of imperial emergency and I can’t have you waking your boy toy.”

Imperial emergency. These words caught her. You’re in danger. These words too, now that they’d settled on her.

“My sister?” she asked, her voice a little quieter this time. “Oljei?”

“There’s been a murder, Princess. Your cousin Chiledu. We don’t know who or why?”

“Chiledu?” she asked, squinting. “He’s in Sydney.”

“He was en route to Ikh Khulan, my lady. The reports suggest some sort of... superhuman assassin.”

She looked the man in the eye. “Who sent you?”

“Princess, we’re under strict orders to—”

“Who sent you?” she demanded.

“Your brother,” he said. “Imperial Lord Qara-Monkhe.”

Heaven above! she swore. Her father’s chosen heir. The prefect of the Imperial Grasslands. The man was practically khan with her father in seclusion. He knew she was here? Knew she was with a minister’s son? Out here in the grasslands without her security detail shagging Oktai’s lad (and, perhaps, his... girlfriend²)? He knew she’d sneaked out last night for... for this?

“How long have you been following me?” she demanded, her voice a little cracked from the black airag resting uneasily in her belly.

“My lady, we’re under strict orders—”

She waved the dagger again, yet he grabbed her hand with his own, powerful fingers closing over hers. He was not amused.

“The better part of six months, my lady,” he said, after a

2 If she’d... with that trollop, why did it still feel like she’d ridden two stallions at once?

moment.

She released the pressure on the blade. “You’ve been following me for six months?”

“Plain clothes. Strictly observe and report. Step in as protection if needed.

“Sweet Tengri,” she muttered.

“Are you quite ready to go?” he asked, impatient.

The onyx palace towers speared into the sky, about an hour’s ride away. There were six horses waiting not a long walk from where they were. Five guards, plus a spare horse for her. Five spies. Following her for months. With a detailed list of every guy she’d bedded.

She marched indignantly to the horses, chose the best one for herself.

Her lovers’ home stood by its lonesome, out here in the boonies. Sheep were penned nearby behind a wire fence. Two horses grazed next to a barn, tethered each on a long rope to a post.

Temülen, like her brothers, had been strapped into the saddle as an infant. She’d learned to ride since before she could walk. Controlling the horse was like controlling her own legs. They rode in silence.

What game was her brother playing, spying on all these interludes?

The towers of the Black Rock grew closer and closer until it looked like they penetrated into the Heavens themselves. She didn’t look up. The sun hurt her eyes too much.

Finally, she asked, “What does my brother want with me?”

It was the same man that woke her that answered. “Protection, Princess. News arrived from Alice Springs last night of your cousin’s death. The court is reeling. There’s an emergency meeting of the Council today.”

“And this happened in Alice Springs?”

“This happened a few hours ride from Brisbane, my lady. In Queensland. Not far from the small town of Oakey.”

She’d never heard of Oakey. But she knew Alice Springs was a long way from Brisbane. “Why did my sister send word, not my aunt?”

Her sister was prefect in Alice Springs, her aunt in Cairns. Queensland was her aunt’s domain. And Chiledu was her aunt’s son. Was she too grief-stricken to send a rider? But then how did

Oljei come to know of it?

“Four concubines survived, my lady. The assailant apparently let them escape. Three of them were found in the far east Outback. This was all reported to Princess Oljei.”

“Do we know who’s responsible?” she asked.

“There are conflicting reports from the concubines, my lady. One says it was a single unarmed man. Another says it was an orchestrated ambush. They were overwhelmed.”

“And what does my brother think?”

There was no answer. She knew then that any steering of the conversation towards her brother would be met with bitter resistance. She tried a different tack, one that suited her hangover better. She said, “Officer, what is your name?”

“Noghai, my lady.”

“Noghai, if you don’t tell me everything you know about my brother right now, I’ll dig my heels into this horse and take off running.”

“Princess—”

“You’ll catch me, no doubt you will. But you’ll have displeased my brother with the tardiness you’ve caused. You’ll also cause a scene in Ikh Khulan.” Many more gers were around them now, clustered closer together. This was Ikh Khulan, thousands of gers around bustling markets, business and entertainment districts, and the central palace. There was less chattel here, but still most of the gers owned a goat or two for milk. Owners were out milking the animals now, as they rode past.

Noghai swallowed hard. “Your extracurricular activities are well known, my lady. I believe your brother is only concerned for your safety.”

Well known? After she’d taken such care to cover her tracks? Sneaking out after midnight? Elaborate alibis? Body pillows folded in such a way to imitate her shape beneath the sheet should anyone come checking on her in the middle of the night?

The Black Rock complex was surrounded by an iron fence and armed guards. Her plain clothes protection detail issued the proper medallion and the gate was opened. She was wearing a hood at this point, trying to hide herself from the early morning traffic. Upon entering the gate, she bowed her head even further, didn’t want anyone to see her.

Temülen used to think she was quite the skilled escape artist to

be able to get past these Amazons at night. Now she was wondering if her brother had instructed them she'd be on her way out to find a lay and ignore her.

Once inside the fence, Noghai's men quickly tried to make themselves scarce. Noghai himself bowed in the saddle to her, said, "My delicate princess, I wish to convey my most humble apologies for—"

"Get lost," she said. She was inside the fence now, didn't need them. She made her way to the Tower of the Princesses, a sixty-storey spike of onyx designed for all the khan's daughters, nieces, granddaughters and so on. As with the entire complex, it was absurdly overdone. There were a couple dozen taiji daughters living in its suites, along with handmaidens, retainers, scribes and bards (all of whom must be female, by decree), but most of the rooms were now full of courtesans. They were overflowing from this palace.

The Tower of the Princesses was also guarded. By female guards. Muscular, toned women Temülen could hardly tell apart from the men. They stood stoically, hands resting on the hilt of the scimitars as she passed by. (All the guards inside the palace complex were female, actually. Taiji sisters of hers, mostly.)

Her own brother, spying on her. Yes, this was Ikh Khulan, this was the imperial palace, where every courtier was spying on everyone else, ledgers written in code to fool the scribes that would take a pencil to the page beneath, concubines threatened within an inch of their lives to keep their lords' confidences. However, she'd never imagined spies would so thoroughly probe into her. She had no official power, held no offices, was in line for no official posts. And if anyone should be sending goons after her, it should be that imperial wench, not her own brother.

On the second floor was a bath, an Olympic-sized swimming pool about four feet deep with soaps and shampoos at the ready. A half-dozen handmaidens snapped to attention when she entered, rushing to her, yet she waved them off with a scowl. She wasn't here to bathe, she was here to redo her makeup before she stormed into her brother's office and told him what she thought of this little protection detail he'd had assigned on her. She pressed on and went right for the powder room.

Speak of the devil, she thought. The imperial whore was here. The empress-concubine, her lord father's favourite wench. *Empress-concubine*, she thought, the word foul in her mind. Such

a title to give this imperial dick-taker.

This blonde, white woman was in no way, shape or form an empress. Temülen's mother was the only *real* empress, the rightful and righteous supreme female of the continent, the hemisphere. This wench would never be anything of the sort.

Temülen missed her mother. The empress had all but vanished off the face of the Earth when her palace had been completed at Nhulunbuy. A letter came on birthdays. Generic, plain, prewritten. Temülen's mother had made her own decision to leave, but the facts did nothing for the rumours. The khan had sent her away. She was too old. She'd had too many children. Her breasts weren't good enough anymore.

Empress-concubine Viola looked up from the vanity where she sat, looked to the princess as the latter entered. There was a handmaiden painting bronzer onto Viola's chest, contouring the cleavage in that low-cut dress. "Ah, Princess," the empress-concubine said in perfect Mongolian. Everything this woman did was flirtatious. "So good to see you."

Temülen knew all too well her father's fascination with that part of a woman. Everyone did, Auckland to Perth. He went mad for them, they said. Like a newborn, they said. He had not left the upper floor of the Concubines' Tower in two years and still was not sated, they said. This woman here had power in the imperial capital solely because of what she had on her chest.

She shouldn't be here. She had her own tower, the Concubines' Tower. She wasn't a princess. She wasn't of royal blood. Let her stand in line for a mirror in her own tower.

"My apologies, Princess Temülen," she said with a smile, almost as if reading her mind. The handmaiden was smoothing out the bronzer. "It gets so crowded in the Concubines' Tower."

Temülen took the mirror next to the empress-concubine, beckoned to a handmaiden, who began applying her makeup. Her father's slut was wearing a white flowing sundress, suspended from her shoulders, heavy on the cleavage yet leaving her shapeless beneath. It didn't stop Temülen from stealing a glance, seeing if she could see it. But she knew it was there. She'd seen the woman in the bath before, that deformity on her like a badly healed war wound. It still gave Temülen shivers.

Did this slut know about Temülen's... extracurricular activities? Was this a subject for discussion at Council meetings? The title of empress-concubine came with a seat on the Council,

one of seven who directly advised the khan, and governed in his stead. This past while it included a lot more governing and a lot less advising. Temülen damned her father for that. He spent all his time locked away in the Concubines' Tower fondling boobs and getting his dick sucked and left the continent to Council of ninnies, which included this white slut, his conniving son, an old slaughterer from the days of conquest and a pubescent boy who was nearly as obsessed with tits as he was.

Temülen should be on that Council. Or granted a governorship. Or a prefecture of her own. Her sister reigned over the entire Outback – half the continent. She should have a power base as well.

Maybe that was why Qara-Monkhe was having her followed. To keep her out of power and give those governorships to cronies of his own. A city to rule over was a fairly hopeless request when you're known for riding two stallions at once.

Temülen decided to test the waters with her father's toy. "I'm told Lord Chiledu was murdered," she said conversationally.

"Assassinated," the empress-concubine said, the handmaiden applying some eyeliner. "Single hitter on the roadside. Ghost assassin. The entire entourage was slaughtered."

"Chiledu had a reputation for mistreating his concubines," Temülen suggested. "Maybe it's more likely one of them sought revenge? A single assassin against a Mongol convoy sounds unlikely."

The handmaiden started flossing the woman's teeth. Temülen ran her tongue across her own teeth. Her gums tasted like black air and last night's mutton. "Now is not the time for royals to be travelling without adequate protection."

She knew. Dear Heaven, the slut knew. This imperial skank knew – probably had detailed sketches of the princess blowing Oktai's son. She probably had volumes stored of all Temülen's dirty–

Oh, so what? Temülen was tired of this purity nonsense, irate at this invasion of her privacy. Everything she had done, this white whore had done a thousandfold.

With her father, she realized with a start.

Temülen felt like she was going to vomit.

She closed her eyes, drew in a breath. It was the job of a concubine to be an irresistible whore. It was the job of an imperial princess to be pure and subservient to her father and her khan.

This, she knew. This, she also knew, would be told to her in less pleasant terms when she confronted her brother on his spies.

Feeling an ache in her skull, she decided to turn this on its head. Presently she said. “When my father fucks you in the ass, how much olive oil do you use?”

The empress-concubine smirked, shooing away the handmaiden. “Sweetheart, I’m not the one spying on you. Talk to your brother about your protection detail.” She stood up from the stool, smoothed out her dress and smiled at Temülen. “How do I look?”

“The dress is uneven.”

The empress-concubine flirtatiously clicked her tongue against her teeth. “Well, we both know the reason for that, now don’t we?”

She leaned in and gave Temülen a kiss on the cheek, then whisked herself off. Temülen watched her go, shamelessly shaking her ass as she walked. “Freak,” she muttered to herself. Looking back to the mirror, she stared at her reflection for a long time. Just what was her brother going to do with documented evidence that she’d fucked her way through half of Ikh Khulan?

4. Qara-Monkhe

Two stallions at once.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. His sister, his unwed sixteen-year-old sister was....

“We’ve played our hand on that one, my lord,” Zuul said, standing behind him.

Qara-Monkhe leaned his forehead against the glass, looked out at the rising sun. This continent was his. He was going to be the khan that made the natives love him, that ended the dissidence, that ended the insurrection – ended these attacks like the one they’d just found out about on Lord Chiledu – and yet here he was, instead dealing with an insatiable sister that thought she could sneak out past the Amazon Guard without being noticed.

“Now she knows we’re following her,” Zuul added.

He turned back from the window. Zuul, his lieutenant, his adviser, his first minister, stood rigid in the doorway. The man would stand there, rigid, until his ankles burst if Qara-Monkhe didn’t acknowledge him. But the heir was good to those that were good to him. He kept Zuul quite happy with his pick of assignments, and a good share of the khanate’s tribute. Zuul knew everything. He knew where Qara-Monkhe kept his secret cache of blades, where he kept the poison he’d use if there were ever a coup (which concubines he’d see to the afterlife first if futility overran them). He knew the prince’s informants. He managed the network of spies. He knew which of the concubines were keeping tabs on that witch on the Council. He oversaw Temülen’s protection detail and kept the records of all her interludes.

He knew about Qara-Monkhe’s secret residence in the town of Katherine.

The man was a necessary evil. Qara-Monkhe could not reign without keeping at least one man privy to the workings behind the scenes. Zuul was his own little creature, as loyal as loyal could be.

Qara-Monkhe said, “Report.”

Zuul visibly relaxed his posture. “Your sister is safe within the

complex gates, my prince.”

Temülen.

The girl was going to have to be dealt with. He'd indulged her lust thus far because, frankly, he wasn't her father and didn't want to be. But now it was to the point that if her father found out about the obscenity she draped herself in, she was likely to be whipped.

“Does the empress-concubine know about this?”

“My office intercepted a piece of correspondence between her office and...” Zuul checked his notes, “Governess Emuria, my lord – in the South-West. The reason I suggested we secure your sister immediately, apart from the obvious threat vis-à-vis Lord Chiledu, is that it's quite clear by the language in that correspondence that the empress-concubine is aware of the princess' exploits.”

“Godsdamnit,” he grumbled.

“With respect, my lord, I did advise you when we first discovered this—”

“I know, I know,” Qara-Monkhe cut in. “Nip it in the bud, give her a good smack, tell her how a proper princess behaves. She could be a prefect one day; she was not some common wench.”

“I don't believe you've quoted me directly on that one, my lord.”

Qara-Monkhe sighed. So the empress-concubine had a little black book on Temülen's lovers. What to do now? He should punish the girl, give her some bureaucratic nothing job on the ass-end of the continent. Send her away...

He was practically khan now. His father had long disdained the actual day-to-day task of governing. It was well known that the khan was in seclusion, hadn't left the Concubines' Tower in two years. And instead of abdicating, letting Qara-Monkhe take the throne outright, conduct the ceremony and receive his pledges of fealty, the Council now governed in the khan's stead, and arguing with him on every minute piece of legislation was the empress-concubine – beautiful, delicious, elysian, but deadly. She was like a viper, and her fangs were sharpened for him.

“Tell me of Chiledu,” he said.

“Conflicting reports,” Zuul answered immediately. “Princess Oljei intercepted three of the good lord's concubines in the eastern Outback...”

He turned back to the window, looked out onto the grasslands

from the fiftieth floor, tuned his minister out. He already knew all this; he'd read Oljei's letter when it came in this morning and they knew nothing more than that. Three concubines of four, now on their way to Alice Springs, all with different tales. A white woman, a black woman, a Mongol woman. The only thing they agreed upon was that Chiledu was dead.

Qara-Monkhe hated Chiledu. He was the most insufferable sycophant that had ever roamed the halls of the Black Rock. The Queensland lord had been here in the imperial capital for some time before he'd moved on to Sydney, running up gambling debts and consorting with some of the worst of the imperial household. He'd been lazy, stupendously un-self-aware, a degenerate. It had been Qara-Monkhe that had sent him on that useless imperial dispatch to Sydney, secretly in the hopes that Belgutei would slap some sense into him.

But now the lad was dead, lying in a ditch beside another dozen or so corpses. The Mad Queen probably had a rider charging down the yam even as he sat here with some plea for justice, some inane ramblings. Some bandit was toasting a dead royal in a bar somewhere with a ten thousand-dollar scimitar ready to cash in, and rumours abounded about a mad girl with a painted raven and visions of the future.

Visions of the future. Red ravens.

He cut Zuul off. "Would you be so kind as to fetch me some entertainment?"

"Of course, my prince."

Zuul didn't need to be told twice.

"One, my prince? Or..."

"Two," Qara-Monkhe said, his thumb and forefinger rubbing his forehead. "Bring her and... surprise me."

Zuul bowed formally and stepped out.

Qara-Monkhe collapsed into his chair. Prophecy. The Red Raven. Qara-Monkhe had heard rumours, little mutterings from his network. Some girl in the middle of the night. In the storm. A red raven in tow. Babbling about breastmilk and birthing foals. And a prophecy of things to come.

That was a day and a half ago, almost a full six hours before word came from Oljei, out in the desert, that three concubines had turned up with tales of a murder. An ambush. An assault. An assassination.

That's some skill in prophecy; showing up six hours before the

actual word because you sent some delirious girl stupid enough to charge a horse full speed into the pitch of night in a thunderstorm. And you took the time to paint a raven red to make it appear mystical. Heaven forbid you show up weeks before, with enough advanced warning to *prevent* the assassination.

Zuul returned. Two of Qara-Monkhe's concubines followed him in. Ellyn, his favourite, a woman he'd gladly make his empress if only she had a family and that family had some influence behind it, and (if he wasn't mistaken) Felicia. That was the name he was going to go with.

Felicia was obviously jealous of the favouritism he showed Ellyn, so she practically tackled him like a crocodile going after a goose. She was half sitting on his lap before he shooed her away. "You can sing, right?" he asked.

"Of course, my prince."

"Then sing."

She was tone-deaf. But she was trying. And she'd probably been under the impression she wasn't being brought here for her karaoke abilities, so he didn't comment on it. It was a soul pop blend from back in the day. Ellyn started dancing.

"Tell me about this red raven buzz," Qara-Monkhe told Zuul.

Felicia's voice faltered, but he couldn't be sure if it was her lack of talent or the mention of the bird.

Zuul wet his lips. "The empress-concubine is going to play it as the end of the khanate."

That much was to be expected. The woman hated his guts. She was making all her own power plays for the throne. She'd been his chief rival and obstructionist ever since her appointment to the Council. A whore on the Council – it was ludicrous. And she was calculating and manipulative – it was well known at this point that with the political favours she doled out, she commanded the loyalty of a number of governors, noyans and ministers on the imperial level. She was crafting her own voting bloc, and, come the inevitable *quriltai* to elect Qara-Monkhe as khan, she could make her list of demands. A prefecture, perhaps, she might ask for – absurd as that thought may be.

Except that Zuul had tried to warn him she was after something much bigger. Three months back, a plot came to him from three other concubines,¹ claiming they'd overheard one of

1 Which Zuul had bought off with promises of early retirement and waived the

that queen whore's lackeys talking with a visiting governor. The conspiracy, as diabolical as it was out of a bad Peter Henrik novel, plotted to elect the young Qara-Attila to the throne. The boy was a political blank slate, he came with the support of his father and all those generals, admirals and noyans, and he was young and pliable. Viola would seduce him, marry him, and then she'd keep him plied with women and wine, locked away in the Khan's Tower just as the current khan is – only now she'd be an empress in her own right, with no pesky Council to keep her in check.

He didn't take such a plot seriously, but political transitions had a history of being messy in this khanate, so anything that didn't assure his ascendancy made his spine shiver.

Qara-Monkhe looked over to Ellyn, dancing effortlessly in her flowing silk dress. He might not be able to make her empress, but maybe some day he could make her empress-concubine, and have the witch empty her chamber pot.

"She's going to raise a motion that you lead a horde in the southeast to seek justice for Chiledu's death," Zuul went on.

Ah, so that was it, then. The blonde slut would send him away. Put him on a horse to charge a thousand riders down to the southern reaches of Queensland, to meet with the Mad Queen for condolences' sake, meet with Belgutei for all formality's sake, go through the motions interviewing concubines in Alice Springs....

And all the while she'd be here, head of the table in the Council room, de facto empress (or khatun) of the entire khanate.

Felicia hit a particularly bad note in this, her second song. The 'music' wasn't helping him relax. He snapped his fingers and Ellyn dove in, kissing Felicia hard on the mouth, sucking on her lips and silencing the performance. Felicia took like a fish to water, brushed loose strands of Ellyn's hair behind her ear and wrapped her arm around the woman to embrace her tightly.

Zuul continued, "I wouldn't worry too much about being nominated as the arbiter of justice today."

He wasn't. She may have her lackeys on the Council, but so too did he, and his outnumbered hers. There were a dozen flimsy excuses any one of them could spit out if she were to suggest it.

The Council was meeting in another hour. An emergency meeting, to deal with this red raven nonsense. Strange thing about that – it hadn't come for him. He'd heard about it. Of course he'd

heard about it. But it hadn't been a missive for him. It hadn't gone to the office of imperial stable master. It was (allegedly) a prophecy of things yet to be. And yet it hadn't made its way to anyone subordinate to him.

He wasn't one for prophecy. He made his offering to the shamans, but he wasn't all that religious. He believed... he believed in something. But swallowing the notion that one man could catch a glimpse of the fate of all things by eating the right mushrooms....

"You have a scheduled execution to go to today, too, my prince," Zuul was saying. "Three slavers, condemned to die."

"And a prince of the blood must say the words," Qara-Monkhe finished. That was a longstanding tradition with slavers. They were so universally hated, and the judicial campaign against them such a publicity piece, that going all the way back to Temür, it had always been a noble of the blood executing slavers. And Qara-Monkhe didn't disagree with this tradition. He hated slavers with a vengeance. Bandits of the worst sort were buying and selling the common people in ways you wouldn't do with a horse.

"I shall reschedule for another day, my prince."

The execution of a slaver was a complicated thing. They had to be starved for number of days. Postponing it now would mean feeding them instead, which would mean they live out another week or so in an Ikh Khulan stockade. No, he couldn't keep them alive, not for one day more.

But the only other prince within two thousand kilometres was his brother, Ganbaatar, a boy of only seven years.

Felicia and Ellyn were still kissing, fumbling around looking for a place to collapse onto one another. They eventually found the chaise longue against the wall and Ellyn took control, found herself on top. She fondled the girl's leg as the silk dress fluttered across her smooth skin.

"Ganbaatar needs to learn what the mantle of prince entails," Qara-Monkhe said.

"My prince," Zuul cautioned, "is that wise? A boy so young.... Perhaps the Princess Temülen...?"

"Not after last night," he declared. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Ganbaatar will do fine."

Felicia's dress found its way to the floor. Ellyn could be quite aggressive. Her own dress was up over her head and strewn across the floor in no time.

“Send him with that shaman,” the heir said. “He’ll feed my brother the words and all he need do is parrot them back. If Ganbaatar’s going to feel any sympathy for slavers, it’s best he get it out of his system now before he’s old enough that the crowd won’t be so forgiving.”

Felicia reached around the undo Ellyn’s bra. Both sets of underwear were already on the floor.

“That can stay,” Qara-Monkhe said. Both concubines froze where they were. Ellyn gently reached up to remove Felicia’s hand from the back of her chest piece.

“My prince,” Zuul said, clearing his throat.

Qara-Monkhe looked back to his adviser. “Have we received word from our friend?”

“We have, my prince.”

Qara-Monkhe rather liked watching these concubines enjoying each other. But he couldn’t be floating state secrets in front of random whores lest the empress-concubine and her own network of spies find something out. He looked up to the clock. He needed to be in this Council meeting soon.

“Felicia,” he said.

The two stopped making out.

“You may go.” She looked instantly disappointed, but he quickly added, “Keep yourself at the ready. I’ll call for you later.”

She gathered up her knickers and her dress and slipped out. Ellyn, nude except for her bra, came over and sat on Qara-Monkhe’s thigh, twirling his hair in between two fingers.

Zuul closed the door behind Felicia. He cleared his throat again and Ellyn just stared at him, half arrogantly. He’d need to remind her his favour did not gain her power. But for now, he said, “She’s to be trusted.”

Zuul hesitated just a half second too long. He said, “Our friend...”

He turned to the courtesan. “Ellyn, my beloved, we need a woman’s perspective on this. Do you think you could seduce my nephew, Qara-Attila?”

Zuul looked like he was about to go red.

Ellyn looked at him. “You don’t honestly think the empress-concubine is plotting to instill a sock puppet khan after your father’s term, do you?”

Zuul was infuriated. You do not share things like this with common whores, he’d been told more than once.

“Just answer the question, would you, love?”

“I’ve never met Qara-Attila,” she said, the perfect amount of modesty. “Not all men respond to a woman the same way.”

“Do you think she could?”

Ellyn smiled. “That woman could practically seduce me.”

He touched her on her button nose. “That’s why I’m cautious.” Turned his gaze back to the minister. “What’s our friend in Perth saying?”

“He reports that young Qara-Attila is still quite feeble. Stunted in height, thin of frame, not even a peach fuzz of a moustache.”

His brother’s heir. Hülegü had long since disavowed any ascendancy to the throne, but that said nothing of his son. Qara-Attila was rapidly coming of age, even if he still had the body of a child. Qara-Attila could prove to be a powerful prince. An unpredictable prince. Adolescents were not the most practised politicians, and if he were to do something stupid like throw his own hat in the ring, it could mean Hülegü’s vote then goes to his son to save face.

“Has Hülegü arranged a marriage for his daughter yet?” Qara-Monkhe asked.

“The Lady Mōnggutsar appears to be quite uninterested in marriage for the time being, we are told.”

The girl was seventeen. It was about damned time she was wed. Hülegü had nominally pledged his support to Qara-Monkhe, and with such, the girl’s marriage could be politically advantageous. Marry her off to someone with a strong military backing. A show of force against the rogues and dissenters.

Zuul continued, “We’re told she retreats into the palace courtyard in strict solitude for hours each day, and makes routine trips out of the city to commune with the spirits.”

Ah, a spiritual awakening in her teens. Qara-Monkhe had never really gone through that. Sure, he’d had his moments of existential pondering once his harem reached triple digits and they all started looking the same, but he’d never felt the need to starve himself and hallucinate with psychedelics to better commune with the forces of fate. A religious life, a life of devotion to the Sky – this sometimes freed women from the duties of the fairer sex.

“This greater issue is Qara-Attila,” the heir said. “What of his marriage?”

“No report,” Zuul said.

“What in the Underworld...?”

“Our source has nothing to report on that front.”

“The boy is fifteen years of age. Betrothal talks should be well under way.”

“Our source claims Lord Hülegü has been meeting with no one on that front. He is instead heavily invested in his navy.”

It was then that Ellyn chimed in. “Lord Hülegü has spent years fighting naval raids on the west coast. Once a week, it seems, insurgency reigns in Albany or Rockingham or Geraldton. Qara-Attila is his only son. Why would he *not* be engaged in betrothal talks? For the sake of his house.”

Zuul stared at her, wide-eyed, as though a bottomless slut with blue in her eyes couldn’t make such an analysis. Qara-Monkhe patted her on the butt. “This is why I keep her around.”

“My prince...”

“Tell our friend in Perth that my brother’s hesitancy with the betrothal of his only son and heir is his new suspicion. Hülegü loves that boy. Find out why the young prince is still a bachelor and a virgin.”

Zuul curtly nodded. Qara-Monkhe looked back to the clock. He was due in Council. Zuul acquiesced. “Tell Ganbaatar,” Qara-Monkhe added as the minister turned to the door, “that today he performs a sacred duty for the family, and the people of the khanate. He has my utmost faith.” He lowered his voice, “And you can reschedule if he isn’t up to the task.”

“Aye, my prince.”

Zuul was out the door and pattering down the hallway. Qara-Monkhe collapsed back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Ellyn nestled herself into his chest and rested with him for a time, the two enjoying each other’s closeness.

In time, she asked, with a certain hesitancy, “What’s all this red raven stuff about?”

“Paint,” he replied. “Spices or minerals to stain the feathers. I don’t know.” He hadn’t even seen the raven, merely heard the buzz. But the buzz was enough to send murmurs through the capital into the ger of the poorest goat herder two hours’ ride from here.

“You called your sister back,” she said. “You played your hand on that one. My lord, when I was sixteen, I had a boyfriend on the other side of town. I’d borrow my father’s horse to see him at night. A girl can put herself in some pretty... compromising

positions when she thinks know one's going to see them.”

Qara-Monkhe sighed. Temülen... the girl's own marriage talks should begin. Get her wed off and send her somewhere out of the public eye.²

He groaned.

“Do you believe in fate, my dear?” he asked the concubine.

She lifted her head from his chest, looked up to meet his dark eyes. “Back to the raven?”

He gave her a lacklustre nod.

She said, “I tend to take a position in rebellion to fate.”

(That had to be one of the most interesting answers he'd ever received.)

“And how does one do that?”

She smiled, that innocent, flirty white girl smile, a smudge of Felicia's lipstick still smudged on her lower lip. “In theory only.”

2 This was technically an issue for the khan to deal with, not the prince regent. He didn't particularly fancy trying to arrange an audience with his father to explain how Temülen was developing a reputation for two stal-

A potential marriage could conceivably go before the Council, and barring an intervention from the khan, could go through, but he wasn't about to put his little sister's future up for a vote in which that wench would participate.

5. Irbis

They still called her by the name Lynch. And maybe that was part of the problem. Courtenay had never really fit into the Amity family. She was a loner and a recluse (and apparently a Sky Worshipper), yet the Amitys had never really opened their home in the truest sense. When Irbis' father adopted her from the church, he should have offered her the name Courtenay Amity.

Irbis' chest didn't hurt. She'd fallen from the saddle once and knew what it was to have the wind knocked out of her. When that horse slammed its hoof into her, she was surprised chunks of rib didn't come gasping out of her. She owed Courtenay her life. The girl wanted to share her faith, and it was the least Irbis could do to go for a ride down past Lake Fowler to the coast. Her father and brother were still up at that rugby game against Maitland – it wasn't uncommon for her father to get too drunk to ride and had to be put up in a hay loft for the night (and Irbis suspected that was the case with the sun nearly set) – so riding into the night to practice a shaman's ritual around a campfire fifteen kilometres away seemed like an altogether good idea. (She didn't really feel like staying alone at the farmstead without her father and brother. She didn't want to be there in the event the Piven boys were plotting another panty raid.)

Courtenay mounted the horse first, then offered her hand to Irbis. Irbis had a newfound uncertainty around this mare, but Courtenay had it under control, and Irbis was able to settle herself just behind her cousin. Courtenay turned the horse to the south, and kicked it into a good gallop. Irbis wrapped her arms around Courtenay's stomach as the older girl guided the horse.

The Amity farmstead was on the northern outskirts of Yorketown, off to the west of the old road up to Minlaton. They were heading for the southern tip of the peninsula. Courtenay guided the horse through groves and darkened dirt roads, down the old cattle road between the Horace estate and Lake Sunday, through the unkempt fields at the abandoned Koumisarjevsky place. She clearly knew where she was going, and how to stay out

of sight.

She held the reins in her right hand, the torch in her left. She approached the old road out to Warooka in the west and slowed and eased the horse up the ridge to cross it. Then it was a matter of guiding past the little lakes and lagoons speckled throughout.

The horse galloped though the field behind the church. It was the closest they'd come to anyone. If Irbis had her geography right, it was a necessary brush with the town. She wondered how Father Lynch would react if he knew they were off to a shamanic communion.

Courtenay had spent a few weeks in that church basement when they first found her. She'd been... what, five at the time? Irbis was a year younger than her cousin and she didn't remember any of it. Didn't remember the town meetings, the church gatherings. She had maybe the vaguest of memories before Courtenay's time with just her brother and her parents. Why did they still consider her an outsider? Why was she not a sister in every sense but the blood?

Because of what the blood might carry. When Irbis looked at her, she didn't see any Mongol in her features, but a small child abandoned in such a remote peninsula across the water from Adelaide... it usually only meant one thing. How could a little girl be abandoned, though, even after that?

Courtenay kicked the horse into a quicker gallop to jump an old stone wall. Irbis flinched and squeezed her sister tighter. Lake Fowler was on the horizon now, a calm lake in a well in the flat grazing lands. A heard of sheep was off to the east, moseying their way back after an evening graze. This was all public land now, so a few riders on a horse aroused no suspicion.

How long had Courtenay been a Sky Worshipper? How long had she been sneaking down to the coast at night for her communions? When had she learned to speak such flawless Mongolian?

Circling around the lake the old roads became less. This was all unincorporated grazing land down here. They reached an old dirt road worn down to almost nothing. Stray shrubbery littered the path. Courtenay followed it. The coast wasn't far, a hundred meters or so. Irbis could hear the waves, smell the saline air, but couldn't see the drop off in the darkness. That final haze of sunset was gone now, and the pitch of the night sky was illuminated only by a speckling of stars becoming apparent and a half moon rising

far off on the other horizon. Courtenay's lamp lit up the immediate pathway before the horse, but little else. She slowed the mare to a trot.

Off the old dirt road, into the patchwork of shrubs and dry grass, Courtenay gravitated towards a twisted wreck of a tree, barren and lifeless, split in two and sprawling into the night sky. They dismounted the horse and tied her to a stone in the brush with a knob enough to loop a knot.

The tree was some meters off. No need to scare the horse, Courtenay explained. Just what could possibly scare the horse? The girl attended to a fire by gathering some dried brush to stack in a crude fire pit. Irbis fostered the flame by blowing on it in its infancy, and when it had a good cackle, she looked up to see a drum in Courtenay's arms. Hidden in the tree, she explained. It was makeshift, a milking bucket with leather stretched tight over the top of it, and a drumstick carved with a knife, a bulbous thing better used for a gong than a Friday night church band.

Now that the fire was going, Irbis could see the tree had nearly been ripped apart, split from the top down as though spliced by a giant axe from the sky, scorched in its wound. "Lightning," Courtenay said, adding another stick to the fire. "Lightning imprints on the natural world a certain spiritual power."

Irbis shivered, only half from the sudden chill of the night air.

Courtenay began disrobing. She'd come in thick strides and a long sleeve hooded shirt. Irbis' freshly shaven scalp prickled in the chilly coastal air. She could do nothing but watch the girl prepare for her spirit dance. She didn't know enough to know what was respectful or not. Courtenay stripped down to a singlet and a thin pair of stubbies.

She said, "I'm not going to make you partake in anything you don't want to."

Irbis said, "How can I help?"

She handed over the drum. In the process, the girl's stomach grumbled, a loud quake begging to be fed. She'd had only a small handful of cheese curds all day, before the damned Piven boys stole them.

"You should have eaten before we came out her," Irbis said.

"Fasting is good for communion," Courtenay replied.

Then she walked past the tree and over the the ridge leading to the small beach – a patch of sand, really – on the coast. Irbis watched in confused fascination. Courtenay strode confidently

into the water, which got quite deep quite quickly. It took one more shiver dancing across Irbis' scalp to snap her out of her hypnosis and leap from her seat. "Courtenay!" she cried, but the girl had already taken a breath and allowed herself to fall into the ocean waters and be submerged.

It must be frigid in there. It was the Great Australian Bight. The Indian Ocean. And at this time of day, in this part of the year, it would be enough to chill even Big Ken Leahy from the town council. Big Ken had more blubber than a walrus, and Courtenay was a scrawny farm girl.

The girl emerged from the water. Her singlet was pasting to her. She walked out of the water and back to small beach cove. She was nearly bow-legged with her arms out to her sides, her shorts and singlet holding the water and reapplying the chill.

"Are you mad, girl?" Irbis asked, wide-eyed.

Courtenay was shivering. "You need the cold."

She didn't cover herself when she sat next to the fire. She couldn't stop the shivering.

Following her lead, Irbis beat on the drum in a rhythm that wouldn't get her any groupies at a church concert, but it was apparently rhythmic enough for the spirits. Courtenay closed her eyes and began chanting. She was speaking in Mongolian, and there were so many spiritual incantations in there that Irbis couldn't follow most of it.

Irbis knew very little about the Mongol religion. She knew that Tengri was the supreme god and master of the Sky (or perhaps even *was* the Sky; she couldn't be sure). She knew that Erlik was devil god of the Underworld, both evil and respected and even worshipped as the judge of human sin. Itugen was the fertility mother who probably had wide hips and huge norks and sometimes took the form of a deer.

As Courtenay chanted, Irbis found herself facing the fire. The breeze was cool and the warmth, such as it was, on her face was welcomed. Courtenay must be freezing. Her voice, in her chants, was starting to stutter, to shutter, to falter as it fluttered from the chill to her core. Her skin was gooseflesh. She was pale.

It was dark out here, and staring into the fire was starting to affect her vision. Scars of light, flashes imprinted in her corneas, were starting to dance across her vision. She saw shapes out in the grass, phantom movements through the stocks in her periphery. And with the methodical *boom boom boom* of the drum and deep,

guttural and shivering Mongolian chanting, she realized this would be a sort of perfect storm for telling ghost stories. If she squinted hard enough, she was sure she could see bunyips out the grass, beyond the lightning-scorched tree.

But then something caught her eye for real. In the fire. Shapes moving about, flickers of light moving in a way fire does not. It sent a chill down her spine. And presently she realized the spook had caused her to stop drumming. But the *boom boom boom* remained, pounding away inside her ears.

Courtenay had her eyes closed. She was still chanting, her breath fluttering. Irbis felt the chill of the night air ripple through her as well, and suddenly she knew snow – what it was to be covered in it, buried in it, entombed it – though she'd never seen the stuff a day in her life. A clear blue sky overhead and endless rolling hills of pines as far as could be seen, drenched in snow and littered with deer and elk and bears. And wolves.

She began breathing fast. The world was coming apart at the seams. She could focus on nothing but the fire. The blinding, moving, flowing, dancing fire.

And suddenly, breasts were everywhere, filling her entire field of vision. An endless chest with an echoing human udder. And fire, and heat–

And now she is in the flames. In the vision. Atop a horse cart, with her feet resting high on the back of a woman with rags for underwear. When she looks down she sees herself with a fat belly. Pregnant. Obscenely pregnant, with heavy breasts that sway like wet sandbags even in her tight binding of a bra, enough to make Itugen proud.¹ She can *feel* it – feel the weight and the girth of her belly, feel the heaviness on her chest. And half her field of vision is gone. She reaches for that side of her face – she's wearing an eyepatch, blind in the one eye. Courtenay is here, too, scared and alone, stripped naked to the waist. Small hands are on her stepsister's chest. She sees now a gathering, with signs and angry shouts. A ger is on fire. She is killing people. A rubber arrow and a giant lobster and an Asian woman with four breasts. There is a fox here, a red-haired trickster with a devious smile and piercing blue eyes. It's grinning, licking its lips sultrily. And a wolf, too, a vicious snarl, eyeing her sister. Now she is high atop a rock face,

1 Her hips are still thin as a little boy's, she notes, which ought to make the birth a pain in the ass – and the entire area, really.

looking down into cold water crashing onto rocks below with white-capped waves, violently pounding the face of the rock, and an endless, endless expanse of ocean beyond, with a bite to the air that chills her exposed stomach and rattles her bones. And the weight of all the world settles upon her, heavy on her shoulders. She looks back – Courtenay is gone now, unseen, but a vicious snarl, worse than the wolf, a screeching terror that haunts her very soul sounds, ripping from the earth. And the rock splits open and out comes a gnarled talon and a plume of fire–

Irbis snapped out of it. She found herself gasping for air and struggling backwards, away from the fire, away from the vision. She was frantic, her heart pounding so hard it threatened to break free from her ribcage. The drumming had stopped, except in her temples and her chest.

Itugen's tits.

Courtenay was still shivering and chanting, eyes closed

Was she seeing the same things? Was she in there as well? Being fondled by that youth? The... the breasts, were they meant to be Itugen? Was Courtenay... in communion with these things now?

Her step-sister had never really fit into the Amity family. With the things she'd been through, the condition she'd been found, clutching rags, crusted in mud and (as they say) suckling right from the cow's udder to try and put some meat on bones... Irbis understood her feeling different. There were always whispers around town about her. The orphan girl.

She knew that Dr Ellison had been asked about her – he'd been asked about her a lot. Neal Dawes was even sanctioned by the town for breaking into the good doctor's home to steal a glance at his notes. Dawes hated the Mongols ever since his daughter ran off to join the Concubinage. At least the damned drunken Dawes wanted to make sure there was some Mongol in Courtenay before he did... whatever he'd been planning to do.²

Courtenay's mother was probably dead. It made sense. Everyone with two cents to give quietly concurred on that. A woman, of childbearing age, not long after Adelaide in that general area. Drove of people were on the move, even then, a few years after. Some of Dawes' drinking mates had settled into

2 She never learned if Dr Ellison's charts listed Courtenay as Caucasian or half-Mongol, or if the doctor had overpowered Dawes before the drunk got a chance to read too far.

Yorketown from Tanunda. If the woman wasn't dead she was probably in the Concubinage herself, warming the bed of some Mongol general or another. Coming out here, chanting to the Sky, how long had Courtenay been doing these things alone, in secret?

She wondered if her step-sister had let her mother go.

Courtenay suddenly stopped chanting. Her eyes wrenched open but only the vaguest of stares looked out. Her mouth was agape. Drool was pooling. And her drying shorts were wet again as she pissed herself.

"Courtenay," Irbis said, worried. What was happening in there?

She touched her stepsister on the shoulder, and a whirlwind of voices, shrieks, screams and unholy cackles came from the girl's mouth. Different voices. High-pitched girls' voices. Deep baritone mutterings, neither English nor Mongolian. Screams more haunting than the snarl of that wolf or... Gibberish blathering faster than human voices could speak. Animal sounds.

"Courtenay!" Irbis shouted now, shaking her on the shoulder. Courtenay fell back from the log she was sitting on, hit the ground with a thud and kept blathering in a dozen different voices. This wasn't right. This *couldn't* be right. This couldn't be the ritual Courtenay meant.

"*Courtenay!*"

She shook her sister violently now, grabbing hold of the girl's shoulders and shaking her in the dry grass.

The voices stopped – as quickly as they had started. Courtenay gasped, sucked in a deep gulp of the sweet night air. There was fear in her eyes. Like she'd been... used. Violated. By the spirits.

Irbis hugged her sister, squeezing with all her strength.

"That wasn't supposed to happen, was it?" Irbis asked, helping Courtenay off the ground.

"No," Courtenay said, chilled to the bone, terrified to her core by... whatever she'd seen in there. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Irbis had never seen her friend so scared, so... disturbed. It haunted her.

"Courtenay," she asked, almost afraid of an answer – any answer. "What did you see in there?"

The girl stared into the night sky for a long moment, the breeze playing with her damp hair. That emptiness was back in her eyes, staring half into the distance and half into oblivion as

her soul shuttered to recall whatever it was. She shivered, and not from the cold. And the fire was extinguished with a sudden gust of strong wind, here and gone, unexpected and prophetic. They were left in the dark, dimming embers scattered through the pit and dying fast. The horse was spooked in the distance.

Presently, Courtenay said, "A red raven."

Appendix I:
Dramatis Personae

In the Imperial Grasslands

CHAGATAI— Khan of the Temür Khanate.

The Council

QARA-MONKHE— The khan's third son and heir apparent. A prince.

VIOLA SPADE— Empress-concubine. The khan's favourite concubine.

Kaidu— Orlok, the chief of the imperial military.

BERKE, BIKIJUK, BAIJU and BUJIN— His sons.

TERKAR— His daughter, a maiden of fifteen.

QORIN-ÜRIANGKHADAI— Imperial stable master.

TSAGAAN— Grand secretary of the treasury.

BÜQA— Noyan of the khan's tumen of bodyguards.

NAIMAN-UNEGEN— Master of commerce, a boy of fourteen.

Imperial Secretariat

ZUUL— First minister.

UNEN— Minister of education, a shaman.

SAMÜR— Minister of health.

ELSIE— High commissioner of the Concubinage.

NIC GOODMAN— An administrator in the Concubinage, assigned to Tamerlan's staff.

COLLEEN— Minister of the equestrian.

ASHLEY, called OLGOI-KHORKHOI, called THE AMAZON ASSASSIN— Captain of the Amazon Guard.

CHECHEYIGEN— An Amazon.

SEREETER— Administrator of the taiji.

WALTER— Minister of finance.

ABRAHAM— Minister of agriculture.

KEIRIENNE— Minister of the pharmaceutical.

EMERSON— Minister of public safety.

OKTAI— A minister.

TIMURA— Imperial tax accountant.

In Ikh Khulan

TEMÜLEN— The khan's second daughter, a princess.

GANBAATAR— The khan's fourth son, a prince.

NOGHAI— Captain of Temülen's protection detail.

TABEN— A Christian girl of fourteen, and taiji of the khan.

SHAWNA, BRENDA, AVA and CLAUDE— Taijis of the khan, assigned to Tamerlan's staff.

RAVENNA, ALIMA and VERA— Taijis of the khan, assigned as handmaidens to Tamerlan's concubine.

YESUGEI— Arban commander.

DZUNDAAKHÜÜ— Special military forces.

ARBANGIIN ARIQ, FRANKLIN SPENSER and DALANGIIN ENQ— Slavers.

PETER HENRIK— A popular political thriller novelist.

HENRY DAVONSWORTH— An actor

Concubines

JULIA SPADE— Elder sister to Empress-concubine Viola.

JOROO— Her daughter, a taiji of the khan.

ANGELICA SPADE— Younger sister to Empress-concubine Viola.

SOPHIA— Chiledu's gift to the khan, titled the princess-concubine.

She had a very noticeable third nipple.

PERSEPHONE and ANTIOPE— Two of the khan's concubines.

ELLYN— Qara-Monkhe's favourite concubine.

FELICIA, ELEKTRA, EVELINE and AMELIA— Concubines of Qara-Monkhe.

PEYTON— Ganbaatar's first concubine, a gift from Princess Khutulun.

In Nhulunbuy

HUJA'UR— Empress. In seclusion.

JAHANGIR— Her brother, once a great noyan of Chagatai.

In Darwin

JORIGT— Governor of Darwin, a taiji of the khan.

In Katherine

NOMOLÜN— One of Qara-Monkhe's concubines, retired.

QOJIN— Her daughter.

At Lake Disappointment

NELEAH, called MARAL— A slaver, and former bed slave herself.

BILL, called BILL THE BEDDER, called BILL THE BETTER and STEPHENSON, called BILL THE WORSE— Slavers.

AMBAQAI— A former minister of Ilugei Khan.

At Tennant Creek

IDAKA— Governor of Tennant Creek, a taiji of the khan.

BRADLEY WEINDAUER— Town local with a complaint against the Concubinage.

VIOLA— A whore.

At Mount Isa

ZORIG— Governor of Mount Isa, a taiji of the khan.

At Carrion Point

ULAANKHEREE, called THE RED RAVEN— A particularly devout shaman.

TSENDEN, OYUNA, OKTYABR, SEMBYNYUN and NARANGEREL— Virgins of the Red Raven, mediums.

In Queensland

MANDUKHAI, called THE MAD QUEEN OF QUEENSLAND— The khan's sister, a princess. Prefect of Queensland.

CHILEDU— Her son.

OELUTEI— Her daughter.

SENGGUM— Chief noyan of the prefecture.

KHOJEI— Amazon, captain of Lady Oelutei's private guard.

MARLENE— One of Chiledu's concubines.

In the Ulus of Bolad

BELGUTEI— Prefect of the Ulus, nephew of the khan, son of Prince Bolad. A prince.

MUKHBAYAR— His wife, deceased.

TEMÜJIN— His son and heir, deceased. A prince.

ALTAN— First minister.

In Torrens Coast

KHUTULUN— Belgutei's sister, secretary of South Australia. A princess.

TOGHRUL, called TOGHRUL THE FALCON— Her vizier.

INKHE and AJIQI— Administrators of the Concubinage office in Torrens Coast.

ROBYN, ELYSIAN, CHARLENE and NAOMI— Newly signed mistresses of the Concubinage.

JEANIE— Robyn's sister, back in Ceduna.

MADAM KALASHNIKOV— Madam of a whorehouse.

CHASTITY— A whore.

In Yorketown

TESSYAN PURDY— Mayor.

KENNETH LEAHY, called BIG KEN— Town councillor.

LYNCH— Father of the faith.

GRAHAM AMITY— Patriarch of the Amity family.

JEREMY AMITY— His son.

MONICA IRIS AMITY, called IRBIS— His daughter.

COURTENAY LYNCH— A teenage girl living in the Amity house.
Graham is her legal guardian.

JULIANNE PIVEN— A neighbour to the Amity farm.

ELDRIDGE and HARCOURT PIVEN— Her sons.

JIMMY RAKES— Owner of a local pub.

FALLIN RAKES— His son, a trader.

BOBBY CAHILL— Owner of The Seed, Feed & Manure Shoppe.

CILLIAN HENDERSON— A farmer, allegedly runs a strip show
featuring his daughters.

KILEY and RILEY HENDERSON— His daughters, twins.

NEAL DAWES— A local ruffian, a heavy drinker and very irritable
since his daughter ran off to join the Concubinage.

ANTOINETTE DAWES— His daughter.

LES LORENZANO— Town councillor and the local translator.

CLARA and ERYN HARDING— Cousins, friends of Irbis.

ELLISON— Town doctor.

HORNBY— Schoolhouse teacher.

EARL HOUSTON, RICK HOUSTON, SISSY TURTLEDOVE, ALANA
TURTLEDOVE, LUC RAVENHURST and SAM ARTERTON— Town
locals.

Upper Yorke Peninsula and area

KHASAR and ELJIGIDEI— Headhunters for the Concubinage, in
Moonta.

SELENGE— Manager of Khasar and Eljigidei's office, Moonta.

QUTUCHIN, JOELLE "JOELLE HORSEHUMPER", REY, DESI, HILDEGARD
"HILDIE", QARA "QARA THE BLACK" and FABIA— Newly
signed mistresses of the Concubinage.

TEMPERANCE CUSACK, called KHULAN— Clerk at the inn in
Maitland. A former concubine to Lord Bolad.

ECHO CUSACK— Her daughter.

SAMSON— A printer.

Adelaide and the Limestone Coast

WALLY— A bandit.

HELMSWORTH WAYDE— Security contractor in Bordertown.

LLOYD— One of his contractors.

ALBERTA, ANDY, MISSY and JENNY— Amazon bandits.

In Border Village

MARIO MELVIN— The inn manager and local tax collector.

DON HOMER— A doctor.

XUDU, MAX, KARL and JAVIER— Riders passing through.

IJIMA— A singer.

MARKOS— A bandit leader.

In the South-West

HÜLEGÜ, called THE QUELLER OF REBELLION— The khan's second son, prefect of the South-West. A prince.

VALERIE GOODMAN, called VALERIE THE GOOD— His wife.

MARCELLUS GOODMAN— Her brother, prefectural minister of public safety.

QARA-ATTILA— His son and heir, a prince of fifteen years.

MÖNGGUTSAR— His daughter, a maiden of seventeen.

TÖDE— The Princess Mönggutsar's language coach.

JOEY BLYTHE— His girlfriend.

ALTANI— His ex-girlfriend. They dated only briefly.

KOCHU— Prefectural general.

ERDENEBAATAR— Prefectural admiral.

MOTÜN— Noyan of the Heirison Island defences.

QASHI— Minister of the equestrian.

EBUSKUN— His daughter.

SEBKINE— Hülegü's concubine, a gift from his wife.

SHIREGI— A corrupt yam line administrator, a spy for Qara-Monkhe.

In the greater Perth area

LAURA COBIE— The daughter of Luther Cobie.

FERDINAND JACOBY— Her lawyer.

TÖMÖRBAATAR, called TOM— A bowyer.

ELUCIEN— A smuggler.

WASHBURN— An art dealer with connections to smugglers.

EMBER CARLYLE and AMBER— Whores.

Near Leinster, north of Lake Darlot

LUTHER COBIE— Community leader of the Cobie estate

KELLAN KIRKLAND, called CHAGATAI ANDERSON— An assassin, part of an elite group operating out of the Cobie estate.

KELLY CONLON, called QO'AI-MARAEL HANES— Assassin.

ADAM PINES— Assassin.

EMMANUELLEINE WEIRZEBOWSKI, called WEIRZEBOWSKI THE WET WHELPER— A schoolteacher in Cobie's community.

EMMANUELLEINE PINES, called EMMA— The daughter of Adam

and Emmanuelleine, a girl of six.

AARON “KHUBLAI CARTER” and BUCK “AMÜR ATTERSLEY”– Recon patrol for Cobie’s assassin contingent.

CASEY LENNOX, called CASE, called TEMULEN RHODES– One of Emmanuelleine’s students, sixteen years old, recruited to be an assassin.

LYNNETTE LENNOX– Her mother, a refugee taken into the Cobie estate.

BALTHAZAR HELMUTH, called QAIDAR RHODES– One of Emmanuelleine’s students, fifteen years old, recruited to be an assassin.

ALLEN HELMUTH– His father, the fitness coach at the Cobie’s estate.

KURT ROCKFORD, ABAJI-JEBEI “AJ” BJORKSTRAND, SYDNEY WANG, CATHY KRONE and KORY SCHRAUB– Students of Emmanuelleine’s.

KAREN ROCKFORD– Kurt’s mother.

GEORGE, JESSICA “JESS”, TROY and JOSEPHINE “QONGQOR CAINE” CRAWLEY– Former assassins (George, Jess and Troy retired, Josephine died when she was kicked in the throat by a horse).

OPHELIA WEATHERFORD, ALEXANDRIAN HOOPER, CANDICE BUCKLEY and MADELEINE VUONG– Former residents of the Cobie estate.

ELISE BUCKLEY– Candice’s daughter, a girl of sixteen.

EUNICE DILLASHAW, HUXLEY PARKER, HAWK STAINS, EMILY ST CROIX, EMLYN “EMIKO” ZAKARIAN, PETRA HOWLETT, JULIAN and MARC– Former students of Emmanuelleine’s.

In Leinster

AL GUILLERMO– Mayor.

BETHEL, called BETHEL BANDITKILLER– Town councillor, a former tribute runner with a reputation for slaying bandits.

DAMON CLINT– Town treasurer.

TIM EXINGTON and NELLY WINGROVE– Employees at the pub A Kangaroo’s Kick in the Teeth.

IBAQA, called IBAQA WITH A Q– A patron.

JACKIE FREEMAN– Proprietor of a betting house.

HEATHER CLEMENTS, and PENELOPE HUMBERTON “PENELOPE PIRATE’S LASS”– Town locals.

In Leonora

VIC TOOMEY, called VIC TOMBS– Town local.

At Lake Barlee

SPEEDICUTT and BANDICUTT, called THE CUTS— High end merchandise dealers.

In Geraldton

MOXIE CARVER, called MOXIE BREASTBIND, called THE BREASTBINDER, called SELENGE SMITH— A former assassin of the Cobie estate.

PINK— The madam of a whorehouse.

URUK— A manager for a camel train security company.

YASA'UR— A beggar boy.

OLIVE— A girl of eleven.

OCTAVIENNE— A smuggler.

In Kalgoorlie

LINWOOD SUTTON— A former member of Cobie's community, now running trade centred around Kalgoorlie.

BRIAR SUTTON— His daughter.

WELLIVER— A doctor.

JOHN HEAMES, called JOHNNY— Local strongman and loan shark.

STRADIVARIUS HALE— Stable mogul.

SHELLEY— The owner of an inn.

In Norseman

MÖNGGUTSAR— A whore in a local prostitution ring.

In Esperance

AIDEN ASH, called AIDEN'S ASS— A popular singer guitarist.

In Albany

ABE SEAVER— The owner of a wool warehouse.

In Jurien Bay

JURIEN JOHN— The main artist associated with Moxie Breastbind comic books, a pseudonym that acts as a brand.

In the Outback

OLJEI, called THE HUNTSMAN— Eldest daughter of the khan, a princess. Prefect of the Outback.

TEGUDAR and BUIJIR— Her late husbands.

TAMERLAN— The khan's eldest son, estranged and in seclusion. A prince.

MANDUKHAI, called MANDIE— A handmaiden of Princess Oljei's.

ELIZABETH, ELLIE and TURLIAKH— Chiledu's concubines.

LENNY EDMONDS— Alice Springs businessman.

SÜREN and THE ORACLE— Buddhist monks.

ADDY, JARRAH, MARLBORO, CALLAN and STRIKER— Bandits.

RAYFORD JONSTON, called RAY— Mayor.

CINDY, MADDY and LUELLEN ASHFORD— His girlfriends.

THERESA ASHFORD— Owner of a security firm.

In the Kiwi Kingdoms

QAIDAR— The khan's elder brother, prefect of the Kiwi Kingdoms.
A prince.

AMÜR— His eldest son, secretary of the North Island.

UUHAAN— His second son, the prefectural admiral.

TUUL and TOKHTAMYSH— His other sons. Princes.

QONGQOR— His daughter, a princess.

GANBOLD— Qaidar's chief prefectural general.

In Tasmania

OCHIR— Secretary of Tasmania. The only surviving issue from
Lord Ilugei, a prince.

IDIGU, UNGERNBAATAR, KHEER, BORGOJU, KHIALKHA, DAMBYN and
ZÖÖLÖNKHÖKHNI— Slavers.

SHEY, KOREY— Slaves.

On the Isle of the Tree Kangaroo

TEMÜGE— Prefect of the island. One of Temür Khan's taiji.

ALTALÜN— His daughter.

Off the Coast

BRANDON PINKERTON— Magistrate of *The Arthur Phillip* (New
South Wales) and serving Magistrate-consul of the
Continental Coalition.

CAELA HOOD— Undersecretary to the Magistrate-consul. A New
Zealander.

HOWARD— Administrator in the office of the undersecretary.

CHARLESTON CHANG, called CHARLIE— Magistrate of *The
Seadragon* (Victoria).

APPLE MCAVOY— Plenipotentiary of *The Seadragon*.

ULYSSES PENCHENKO— Magistrate of *The King George* (Western
Australia).

NATALIENNE PENCHENKO— His daughter, a maiden of fourteen.

ZELDA SEBALD— Magistrate of *The Tasmanian Tiger* (Tasmania).

MARCUSE— Captain of *Culver's Curse*.

NIEVES— Captain of *The King's Shark*.

LANCASTER— Captain of *The Daughter's Vengeance*.

On The Bane of the Black Horse

ZEALAND CLAVELL— Captain.

ANTONY GARETH— First mate.

DELANEY ROTHBORN, called DELANEY COOK— Second mate.

Daughter of Captain Wolfgang Rothborn.

FOWLER— Quartermaster.

BRYCE, PHILLIP, HOARCHER, JOHNNY, KEAGAN and BRUCE— Pirates.

AUBREA, MAGGIE, LEOLA, TYLER, LYDIAN, VALERIE "VAL", EVAN,

ALYSSIAN and GAREBADIAN— Captives from the mainland.

On The Gang Plank

WOLFGANG ROTHBORN— Captain.

XAVIER HORNE, called EXAVE— First mate.

JOHNSON, called JOHNSON THE JOHNSON— Second mate.

ORSON— Sea artist.

On The Even More Vicious Dog

VIKTOR CARNEGIE, called CARNEGIE BLOOD AXE— Captain.

ILLYAN IVAR, called THE ALBINO, called THE WHITE WITCH— First mate.

INDRAS, called INDRAS THE PRZEWALSKI— Former pirate, retired.

Elsewhere

MUUNOKHOI— Khaghan.

KEUKEN— His granddaughter, a princess of seventeen years.

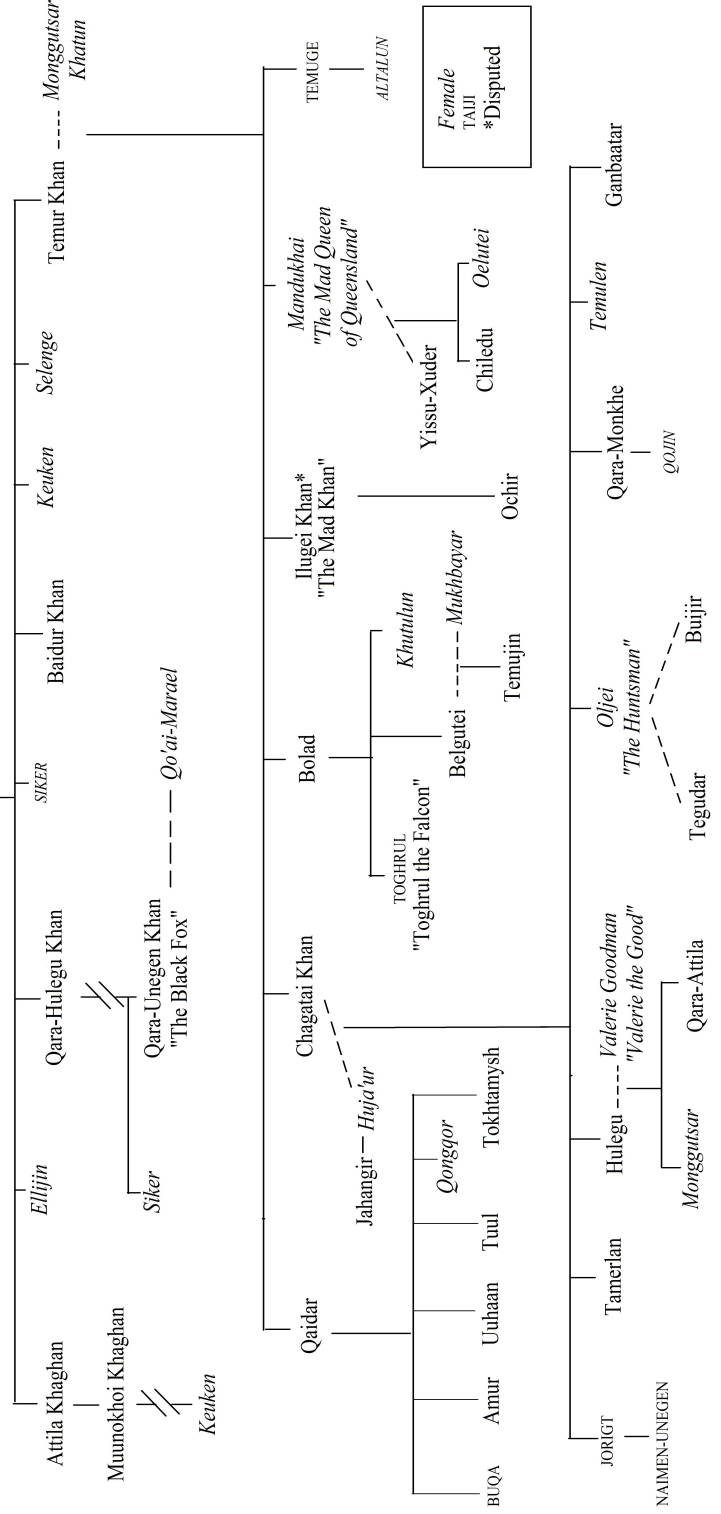
QUJULEN, called QUJULEN THE CARNAGE— Her personal Amazon.

QARA-UNEGEN, called THE BLACK FOX— Khan of the Americas.

QO'AI-MARAEL— His empress.

SIKER— His sister.

Harujin



Appendix II: Glossary

(All non-Mongolian words are labelled with an *asterisk)

- AARUUL– A dried cheese curd, often very bitter in taste and hard as a rock, compressed with a high caloric value, used by horsemen on long rides to stave off hunger. It can be made from the milk of cattle, horses, yaks or camels.
- AIRAG– Traditional Mongolian alcohol, often called QUMISS outside Mongolia. It is a horse milk wine, produced from the fermentation of sugar in mare's milk. It often has an alcohol content of two to three percent, and leaves an almond aftertaste. It is said to be good in staving off diseases, including tuberculosis.
- AMAZON*– A woman warrior serving as a guard for a highborn woman. Usually a taiji, women are used to avoid interference with their charge's modesty.
- AMI– One of three parts of the Tengriist concept of the soul, a part that can reincarnate.
- ANDA– A brotherhood made through a blood oath.
- APPANAGE*– land, an official position, or money given to nobles to provide for their maintenance.
- AQA (Mongolian), or AGHA (Persian)– An honorific title, literally means elder.
- ARBAN– Ten, usually used in a military context; ten soldiers.
- ARZ– Twice fermented black airag or qara-qumiss.
- BAATAR– Hero
- BAILLAN*– Refers to the teachings, practices or adherents of the White Lotus religion. The term comes from the Chinese name for the religion, *BAILIAN JIAO* (White Lotus sect, or, alternately,

White Lotus teachings).

BANDIDAKH— Sodomy, buggery.

BARS— Tiger.

BEG— Prince.

BEKI— Princess.

BLACK AIRAG— Also called QARA-QUMISS. When airag sits, it separates into a cloudy “milk” and a clear fermented sugar fluid. The latter is black airag, and often has an alcohol content of around twelve percent.

BLACK ROCK, THE*— The name for the seven spired towers of the imperial palace, located in Ikh Khulan. The towers consist of (ranging from tallest to least): The Khan’s Tower, Concubines’ Tower, Tower of the Hounds, Tower of the Princesses, Princes’ Tower, Tower of the Taiji and Tower of the Horse.

BOAL— Mongolian honey wine.

BORTS— Dried goat’s meat, shrunken with a high caloric value, often used for long treks on a horse.

BOSJOGO— Rebellion, insurrection, uprising.

CAMEL TRAIN*— A procession of camels hauling carts, including but not limited to drinking water, that runs into the desert. Common in the South-West.

CHAN*— A school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism that became popular from the sixth century onwards. In Japan, it took on the pronunciation ZEN, for which it’s best known in the West.

CHONO— Wolf.

COMPOSITE BOW*— Also called a RECURVED BOW*, it’s the bow used in Mongolia, made of wood and yak’s horn, bent backwards against the natural curve for a greater shot.

CONCUBINAGE*— A bureau of the state, responsible for the recruitment, management and appropriation of concubines.

DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS*— Pretty much exactly what it sounds like.

DEEL— The traditional dress of Mongols, a robe with a sash around the abdomen.

DISEMBOWELMENT*— A method of execution used against slavers, usually involving a makeshift crucifixion, followed by

disemboweling, then having the intestines torn out by starved feral dogs.

EVREN– Dragon.

EXILE*– Anyone sentenced as such, to the Isle of the Tree Kangaroo.

GER– Called a YURT in the West, the traditional tent Mongol nomads dwell in.

GER-TEREG– A giant oxcart with a ger on top, more than ten meters across, pulled by a team of twenty-two oxen. It's a form of luxury travel for nobles.

GOVERNOR/GOVERNESS*– An appointed regional authority.

HEADHUNTER(S)*– Private businessmen, under contract with the Concubinage to recruit concubines.

HÜLEGÜ– Warrior.

HULI JING*– A mythical fox spirit seductress in Chinese folklore. These spirits can shapeshift between their fox form and the form of a beautiful woman, impossibly alluring and rapturously seductive. They have been known to destroy men with their lust.

HUNYUAN*– Mandarin: Primal Chaos, a sect of the White Lotus tradition of Pure Land Buddhism.

IARUDI– Eagle.

IKH– Great.

IMPALEMENT*– A method of execution used in the case of sedition. Most infamously associated with Vlad the Impaler, it involves the insertion of a large pole up the rectum, avoiding the major internal organs, until it comes out just behind one shoulder. Death can take three to four days.

IRBIS– Snow leopard.

JAGUN– One hundred, usually used in a military context– one hundred soldiers.

KALPA [*adj*, KALPIC]*– The concept of an aeon or an age within Buddhist cosmology.

KAMA*: Sanskrit for desire, often expressed in sensual terms in a Buddhist context.

KAMIKAZE*– Japanese for Divine Wind, first used to describe the

typhoon that drowned Kublai Khan's second invasion attempt of Japan, 1281.

KHAGHAN: Khan of khans— the official title of the ruling global monarch in Ulaanbaatar – sometimes also **KHAAN**.

KHAN— Leader.

KHANATE— A “province” within the empire. There are only four khanates: Attila (Eurasia), Qara-Hülegü (Americas), Baidür (Africa), and Temür (Australasia).

KHATUN— Feminine form of khan.

KHILENTSET KHORKOI— Scorpion.

KHOKH— Blue

KHOKH MONKHE TENGRI— Eternal Blue Heaven.

KHÖKHNI— Breasts.

KHULAN— Wild horse.

KHURAL— Assembly.

KUNOICHI*— A female ninja.

LINGCHI*— The Chinese name for death by a thousand cuts, or slow slicing. This was a Chinese imperial execution technique that existed from about 900 to 1905. It's possible the Chinese adapted this from an Inner Asian (i.e. Mongolic, nomadic) execution technique.

MANTY— A traditional Mongolian dish; finely cut mutton, sheep's fat, sheep's tail, onions and mandarin orange peel finely sliced, stuffed into a tomato, eggplant or wrapped in dough, steam cooked and coated in basil, yoghurt and garlic.

MEEM— Boobs.

MINGGHAN— One thousand, usually used in a military context; one thousand soldiers.

MISTRESS (OF THE CONCUBINAGE)*— The official title of concubines.

MONKHE— Eternity.

MORIN KHUUR— A traditional Mongolian two-stringed instrument, the sound of which is similar to a violin or a cello.

NIRVANA*— In Buddhist philosophy, the highest transcendent state of harmony— one completely free of suffering.

NOYAN— Non-specific term for a military commander.

OLGOI-KHORKHOI– The Mongolian death worm.

ORLOK– The supreme general. Equivalent to a joint chief or secretary of defence.

PAIZA– A tablet, about the size of a baseball card, usually worn on a chain and made from gold, silver, or some other precious metal. It acts as a government clearance card, and can be issued to anyone from soldiers to headhunters to concubines and state employees.

*PAX MONGOLICA**– Latin: The Mongolian Peace. Both a trade agreement and an agreement of just governance. For example, travellers are protected from banditry under the *Pax Mongolica*.

PREFECT*– The supreme authority of a prefecture.

PREFECTURE*– A sub-national division within a khanate.

PURE LAND*– A school of Mahayana Buddhism that focuses on Amitābha Buddha. Meditation often involves the continuous repetition of his name. Popular throughout East Asia, it posits a “pure land” of unimaginable beauty that is analogous to the attainment of enlightenment.

*QADAR**– The Islamic concept of divine predestination.

QARA– Black.

QO’AI– Beautiful.

QURILTAI– An official meeting of nobles, leaders or military captains. These can be called for something roughly resembling a council of war, though the term is often used to denote the election of a new khan.

*RUFANG**– Mandarin: breasts.

SAIN BAINUU– Hello.

*SAOHUO**– Mandarin: dirty thing(s), used against promiscuous women; i.e. dirty slut(s).

SCIMITAR*– A curved sword.

SECRETARY*– A supraregional territorial authority; beneath a prefect but above a governor.

SKY WORSHIPPER*– Another word for a Tengriist.

SULD– One of three parts of the Tengriist concept of the soul, the part that resides in nature upon death.

- SUNS— One of three parts of the Tengriist concept of the soul, a part that can reincarnate.
- SUZERAINTY*— A form of governance wherein a region is tributary, while maintaining a certain amount of autonomy as a vassal.
- TAX COLLECTOR*— The highest form of prefectural authority under a soldier. Through local tax offices, they are responsible for prefectural revenue, and are a stand-in substitute for the lack of a civilian police force.
- TAIJI— A “bastard” noble. Any descendent of Harujin that is not considered a prince, or that is born to a noble by a woman other than his official wife.
- TAKHI— Also called PRZEWALSKI’S HORSE* or DZUNGARIAN HORSE*. The last wild species of horse, more endangered than giant pandas. For a time these last, undomesticated horses were extinct in the wild, and on the brink of extinction itself. By 1945, there were only thirty-one individuals left, preserved in zoos, each of them descendent from a group of fifteen captured in 1900. Through conservation efforts, populations increased to about 1,500 individuals at the time of their reintroduction to the wild in the 1990s, all of whom are descendent from nine of those thirty-one in 1945 (two of whom being hybrids). Today, wild populations exist in both Mongolia and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China.
- TEMEE— Camel.
- TEMÜR, also TIMUR, TÖMÖR— Iron.
- TENGRIISM*— The traditional Mongol shamanic religion.
- TENGER— A term for both the Sky, and Sky spirits.
- TOGHRUL— Falcon
- TRIBUTE*— Often a synonym for taxes.
- TSAGAAN— White.
- TUMEN— Ten thousand, usually used in a military context; ten thousand soldiers.
- ULAAN— Red.
- ULUS— A word roughly translating to lands or territory, used in the context of a claim on those lands (i.e. the Ulus of Bolad—

Bolad's prefecture).

UNEGEN– Fox.

*WEIQI**– The Chinese name for the game of Go. The game arose in China more than 2,500 years ago during the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE-256 BCE). It was exported to Korea and then Japan, where it eventually disseminated to the rest of the world under the Japanese name, Go.

WINDHORSE*– A Tengriist term to describe how receptive an individual is to spiritual communion.

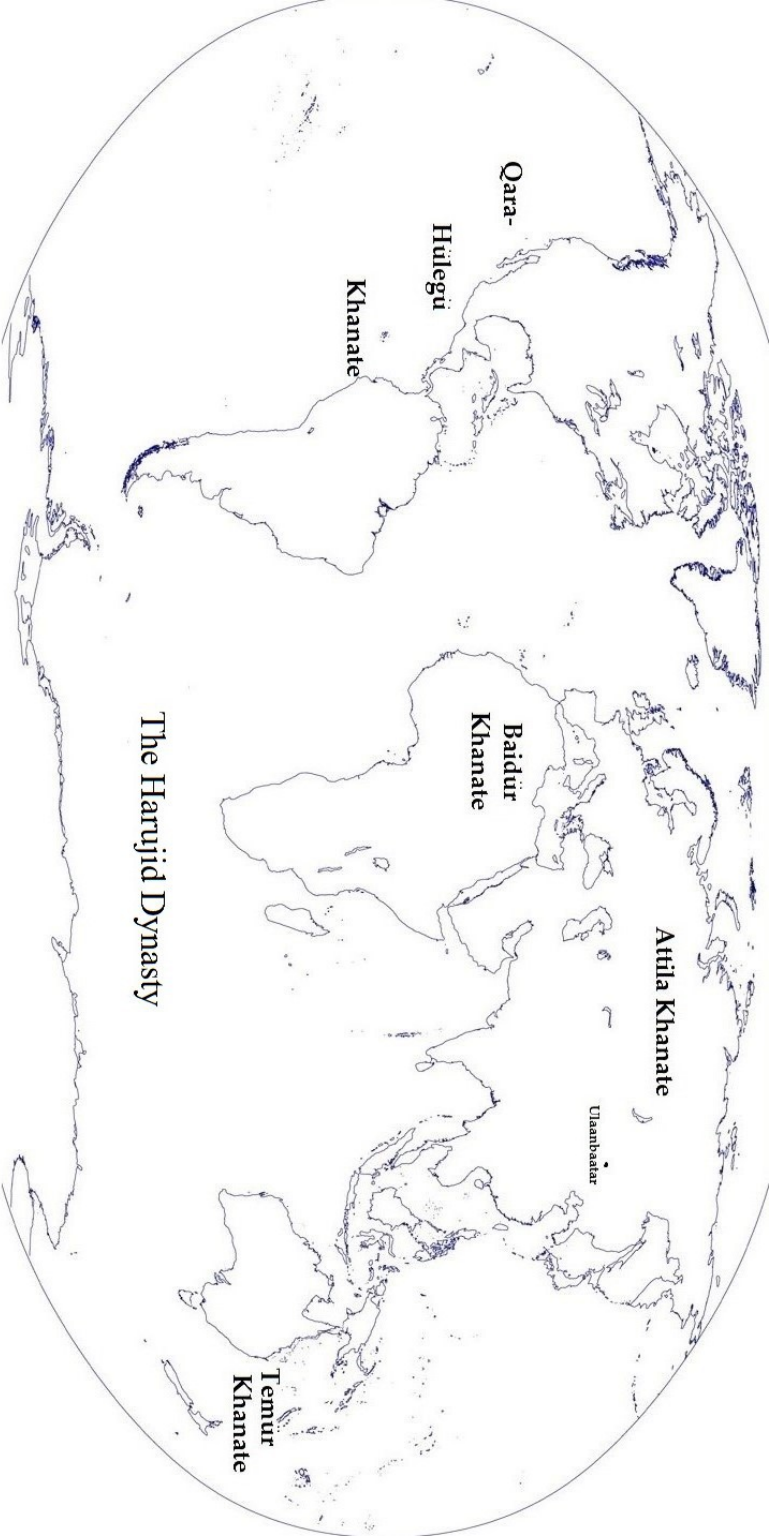
YAM– The pony express postal system.

YANKHAN– Slut, whore, prostitute.

YASA– The khan's law.

ZEN*– See CHAN.

Appendix III:
Maps



Qara-

Hulegu

Khanate

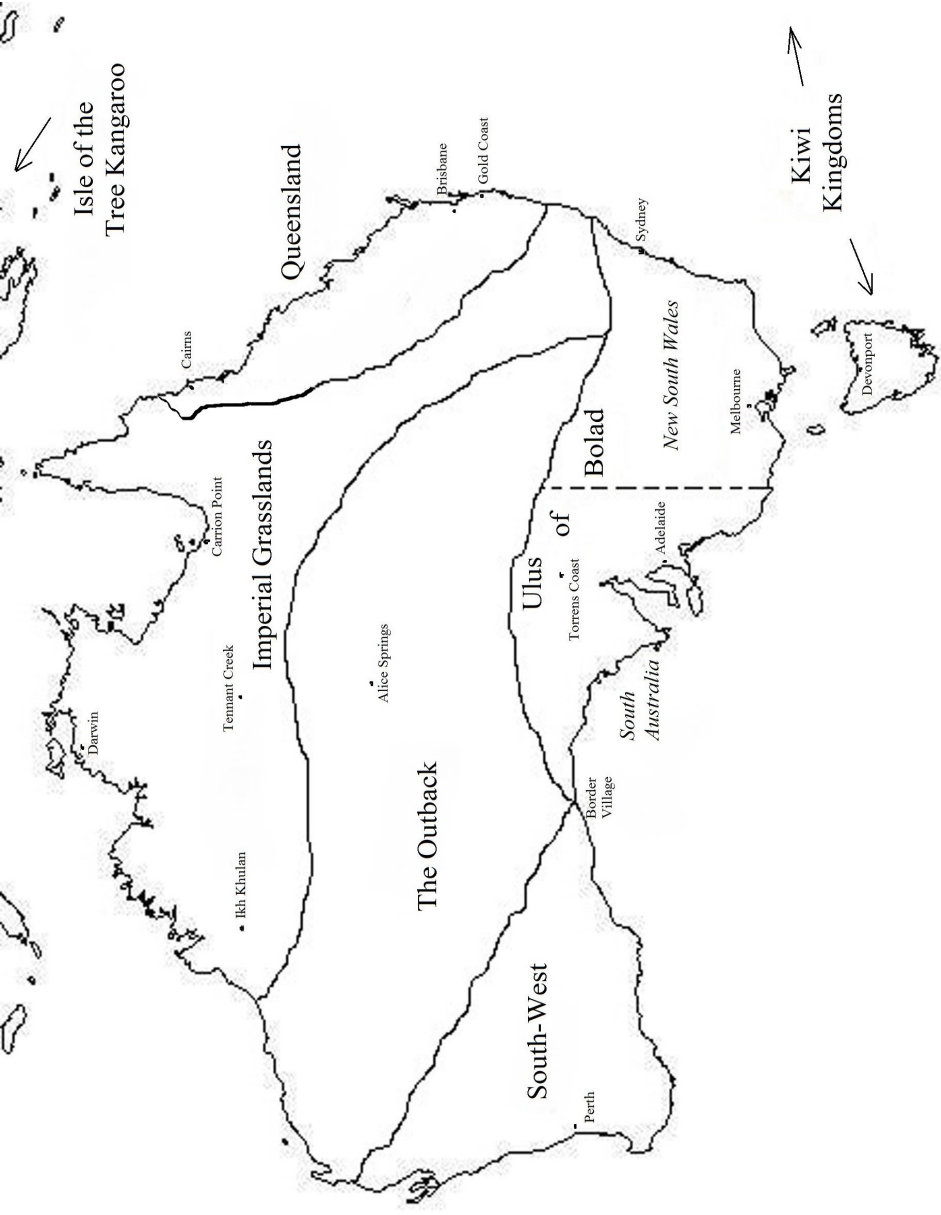
Baidur
Khanate

Atila Khanate

Ulaanbaatar

Temur
Khanate

The Harujid Dynasty



Isle of the
Tree Kangaroo

Queensland

Imperial Grasslands

The Outback

South-West

Ulus of

Bolad

New South Wales

Kiwi
Kingdoms

Cairns

Brisbane

Gold Coast

Sydney

Melbourne

Devonport

Carrion Point

Tennant Creek

Alice Springs

Torrens Coast

Adelaide

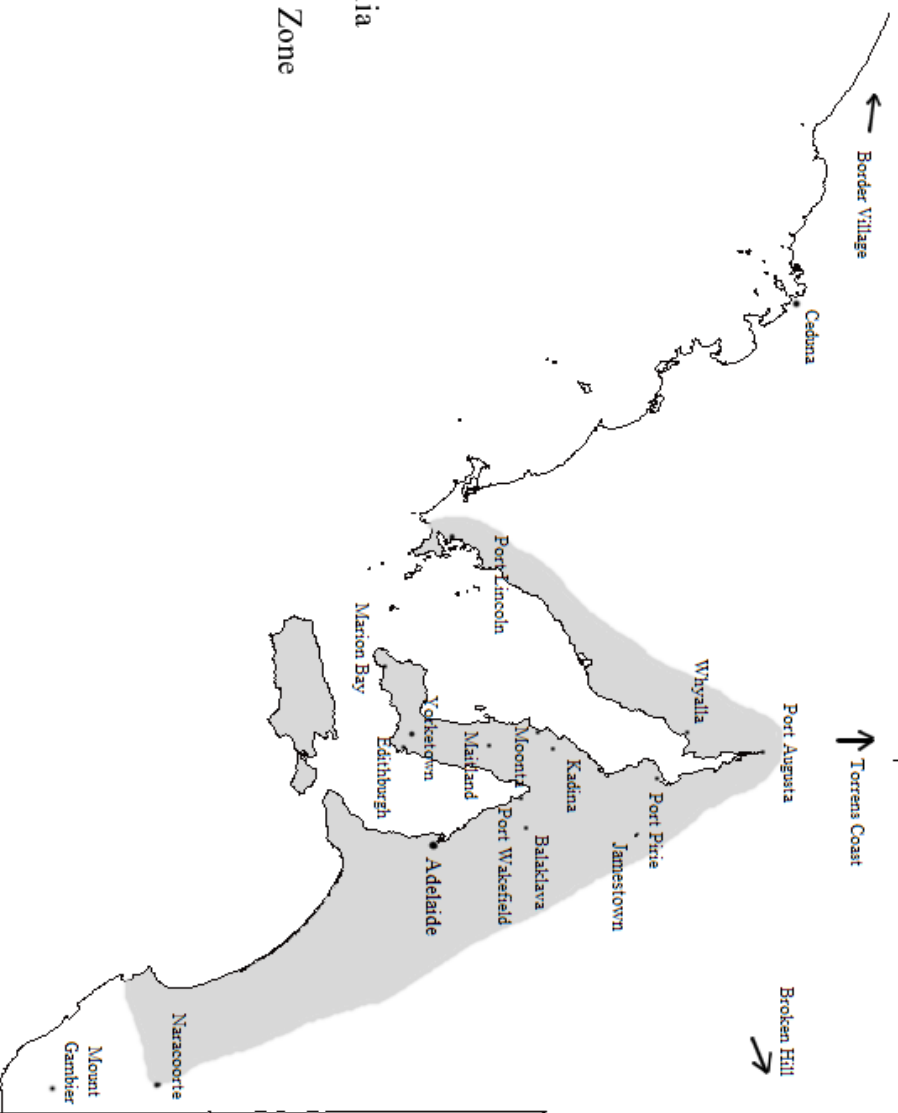
South
Australia

Border
Village

Darwin

Ikh Khulian

Perth



Border Village

Cadema

Torrens Coast

Port Augusta

Whyalla

Port Pirie

Jamestown

Balaklava

Port Wakefield

Adelaide

Yoketown

Edinburgh

Marion Bay

Port Lincoln

Mount Lofty

Marlband

Kadina

Naracoorte

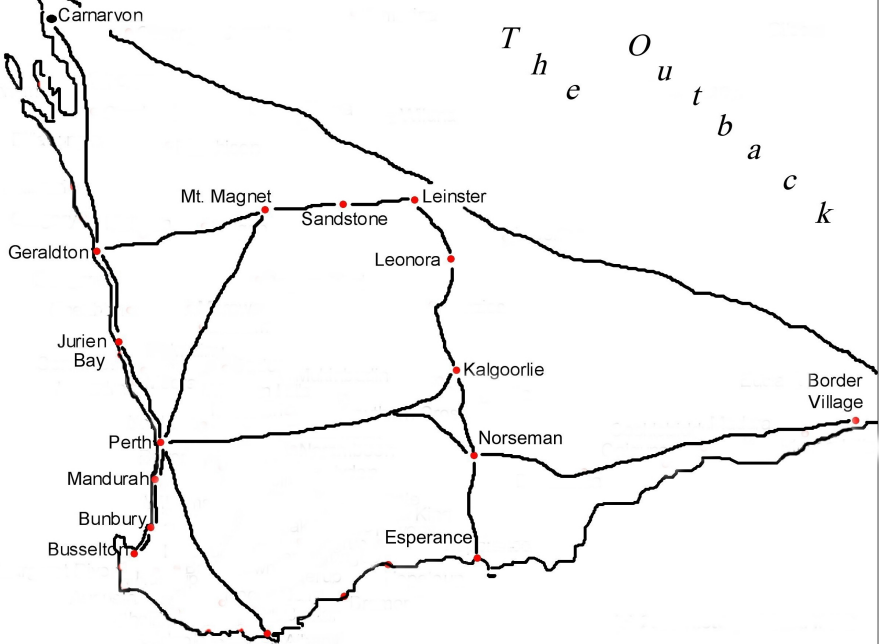
Mount Gambier

Broken Hill

South Australia
&
Belgutei's Black Zone

The South-West

T h e O u t b a c k



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