

# Rule from Horseback

By Daniel Lovat Clark

The silence that hung over Khanbulak at night was a heavy thing, more total and fragile than the steppes. It was the silence of a thief with his heart in his throat, of a wayward child sneaking out for mischief in the middle of the night. When Moto Rurame rode the streets, threading her great blue roan stallion past resplendent halls and between merchant's pavilions, it was the silence of a predator on the hunt. Especially tonight.

Hunting a spy was a rare treat. Rurame had greeted the peasant's report of a gaijin still in the city with no small amount of excitement.

The city straddled the border of Rokugan, a border marked by *li* after li of cairns. The Unicorn Clan permitted gaijin to make their encampments outside the city walls, on the far side of the border, and to enter the city during the day to trade. But as the sun set, the great gongs sounded, and the gates closed. Any foreigner caught in the city after nightfall would be put to death, in accordance with the Emperor's law. The White Guard rode the length of that border and the Sand Road beyond. Rurame's Scarlet Banners guarded the city itself, and it was by their hands that rogue gaijin would die.

*A duty as difficult and glorious as mucking out stables.* Rurame had mucked her share of stables as a girl. In some ways, she would prefer that duty to the stewardship of Khanbulak.

Sky whickered beneath her, sensing her tension. Another horse answered somewhere to her left, one of her *minghan* a street away. There was still no sign of the rogue gaijin. *We've covered three-fourths of the city already. If they escape...*

No. That was impossible.

At the next street, she halted Sky with a touch of her hand. The horse stood stock-still, ears forward, watching and listening as intently as his rider. From the left, hoofsteps, and scarred Ariq atop shaggy Khash. "Nothing, *noyan*," he said. "All the gates are secure." Rurame looked to the right where Tani stood in her stirrups. She glanced Rurame's way and shook her head—nothing.

"No matter," Rurame said. "The hunt closes in." She stood in her stirrups and spread her arms so her nearest warriors could see and pass on the orders. She moved both hands forward in an encircling motion and paused long enough to see Sorghaghtani, Ariq, and the next warriors in line repeat the command. They used the same technique in the massive, traditional hunts on the steppe. Nothing would slip through their net.

Rurame leaned forward and Sky surged ahead, galloping past the billowing walls of an Ujik-style tent-manor to her right. She stopped again at the next street and listened...*there!* She let out a whoop, echoed by Ariq and Tani, and drove Sky forward, cutting through a stockyard



piled high with foreign fabrics, carpets, and bales of cotton. With a leap, Sky cleared a small cart and then Rurame was upon her prey.

The man had nearly made it to Khanbulak's white stone walls when he caught sight of Rurame. He cried out and dashed the remaining distance as she eased Sky into a canter. The wall was at least twenty shaku tall. It was unthinkable that he would climb it before she reached him...and yet, he scrambled upward like a spider.

A hidden rope. How long has that been there? She cursed as she reined Sky to a clattering halt beneath the wall. Already the spy was out of reach. *If he escapes, all the world will know my shame. "There goes Moto Rurame, given the simplest task in the clan, and she failed."*

An arrow streaked from the darkness, clattering off the stone a handbreadth from the gaijin's head. Ariq cursed as his shaggy dun mare trotted closer, notching another arrow to his bow. Tani approached from the right, laughing. "If he were a hare you'd not get another shot, Ariq."

"No," barked Rurame. "I want this one to answer questions." Rurame reached behind her saddle and retrieved the lariat coiled there. The gaijin was already halfway up the wall—just at the edge of what she could reach. Rurame spun the lariat above her head, threw, and watched the loop close around the spy's ankle.

"Good throw, noyan!" cheered Ariq. He'd put his bow away and now turned his horse in a tight circle, sword in hand. The gaijin struggled and Rurame felt her grin escape, like a wolf, as she looped her end of the rope around her saddle. *It's possible you're stronger than me, gaijin, but you're not stronger than Sky.* Rurame turned Sky and tapped, once, with her heels. The horse shot forward like Ariq's misaimed arrow, and the hapless gaijin had no chance. He was plucked from his perch as if by a giant and fell to earth as surely as a stone.

Tani and Ariq had pounced already by the time she got Sky back to the gaijin's side. Blood streaked down his face, and one of his arms bent at an angle that was surely unhealthy, but he lived. *He lives, and I have not failed.*



"I'll have your name, first, gaijin," she said in Ujik. Tani translated into Nehiri for her, but Rurame had no interest in learning a barbarian tongue.

"You may call me Hamid," the gaijin said, also in Ujik. "I am a humble merchant—"

"Lie to me again and I'll remove your tongue," Rurame snapped. "That will slow interrogation considerably, and prolong your suffering for months. Neither of us want that."

“Noyan,” said Ariq. He held a broken cage in his hands, the sort that might keep a bird. “He dropped this when he fell.”

“A messenger pigeon?” Rurame mused. “Empty; he’s already sent it.”

“We can dispatch a hawk after it,” Tani suggested.

“Not at night we can’t.” Rurame shook her head. “Speak, Hamid. To whom did you send this bird?” Hamid began chanting in Nehiri. “Tani?”

“He is praying,” Tani said.

Rurame drew her knife. “He’d better.”

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Later, when it was over, Rurame stood on the tall white walls of Khanbulak and stared at the horizon. Dark as the ocean, the steppe spread before her, its grasses blowing in quiet night waves. *We are meant to hunt and ride free across the steppe, not stay tethered to Khanbulak like an ox on a string. The Shinjo killed us the day they ordered Moto Qaro Khan to build a city here.*

Ariq climbed the stair behind her. She felt him bow, waiting for her attention. She closed her eyes, took a silent breath, and turned. “Speak.”

“It’s confirmed, noyan. He knew which gate Shinjo Shono’s party left by, where they were bound, how many were with him. All his information was correct.”

“I can think of no purpose for sending that information west, save for assassins. Can you, Ariq?”

Ariq shook his scarred head. “We could ride after,” he suggested. “Not that we would be likely to reach Shono in time. It would be such a shame if the Shinjo heir died on the road.”

*He would do it if I asked him.* Rurame turned to stare across the steppe again. A spray of lights clustered close to the wall, torches and firepits and gleaming lanterns from Ujik encampments on the Rokugan side of the city. Nomads, letting themselves be tied down by the pull of Khanbulak. *He would kill the Shinjo heir at a word from me. It would serve Altansarnai Khan right for saddling us with this blight of a town. Or better yet, let him die. Shono was a weak, sullen child when he passed through my city. What hope would he have on the Sand Road?*

She let herself consider it for a brief, brilliant moment. But no. Her duty was clear, and she would not be known as a woman who shirked her duty.

“My Scarlet Banners guard Khanbulak,” Rurame said. “Tonight, we have done so well. You will ride to Ögodei Khan’s a and bring word to my brother of all that has transpired here. I will find Chagatai Noyan and send him after his cousin.”

“As you command.” Ariq bowed again, then ambled down the stairs toward his waiting horse. Rurame stared into the night a while longer. *However, if Chagatai makes a different choice, that is not on me.*

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“No!” cried Chagatai as he fell. “How can this be? How could I, Moto Chagatai, noyan of the White Guard, victor of a dozen battles, heir-apparent to the Moto Khan, how can I be defeated thus!?” He held one arm aloft. Tiny hands grabbed it and a small body dragged it down to the dusty ground.

A small, round, frowning face appeared above him. "Uncle," it said. "Fight properly. You are only playing with us."

"Against such a horde?" Chagatai chuckled as he sat upright, scattering nieces and nephews in all directions as he did. "Even the mighty Chagatai could not hope to defeat such enemies single-handed, Altani."

Screaming, waving sticks in the air like swords, the horde dispersed, racing around to the back of the yurt. The horses, hobbled nearby, pointed their ears and snorted disapproval.

Altani remained, staring up at her uncle through narrowed eyes. "Do you really think I could beat you someday?"

"Little Eagle, I only know this: when the day comes, I'd rather fight at your side than against you, hey?" He stood and dusted off his pants as Altani nodded. She lifted her stick over her shoulder and followed after her brothers and sisters.

"I am lucky to have such fierce protectors!" The laughter and the voice were as familiar and comfortable as his saddle. Its owner stepped forward and clasped his hand, then pulled him close and sniffed his cheek. "What brings the heir to the Khan to my little ordu?"

"What reason do I need beyond visiting my sister?" He sniffed her cheek and stepped back. Khojin was some ten years his senior, and already threads of grey were working their way through her dark hair, but she had the same smile that crinkled her eyes, as she had in their youth. "You look well, Elder Sister. Your children are healthy and..."

She laughed again. "And numerous?"

"It's a larger family than ours," he admitted. Aside from himself and Khojin, their father had only two other children they knew about. Chagatai had lost count of Khojin's brood somewhere around six.

"Eight children, so far." Khojin leaned back against the wall of her yurt, looking smug. There were a dozen other yurts in a straight line, east and west, smaller and humbler than hers, all the doors facing south. Together, they made up the ordu, a village that could be placed on carts and hauled away at a moment's notice. "And my herd does well this year. Fifty horses, two hundred sheep."



Chagatai's eyebrows rose. As the Ujik measure things, Khojin's wealth approached his own, for all that her clothes were the plain wool and leathers of a herder. "It seems this life agrees with you, sister." He thought back to their youth, to Khojin whispering in his ear as she taught him to bend his bow, pulling him out of the dirt as she taught him to ride. "If you'd—"

"Enough, Chagatai." She raised her hands, fending off an old argument. "You are the heir, with the Shinjo mother. I am a herder. If the Khan calls, my ordu can supply a dozen warriors; I've no desire to be a noyan, to gain glory on the battlefield. I have my horses, my sheep, two husbands, a wife, and eight children. I am happy." She smiled at his expression. "Not enough for the mighty Chagatai, perhaps, but enough for me."

He nodded and let the matter drop. *An accident of birth makes me my father's heir. Khojin is as capable as anyone I know, but she lacks the ambition to seize what should be hers.* He walked Khojin back to where his warriors were gathered, ruminating as she greeted them and saw to the necessities of getting them and their horses fed and stabled. She did it with quick efficiency and authority, as only the mistress of an ordu and mother of eight could. The Shinjo could not ask for a better Khan. Efficient, reliable, unambitious. He found himself grinning. *Bad luck for them they're getting me, instead.*

He turned to enter Khojin's yurt, belly already rumbling at the thought of the feast she would assemble in his honor, and from the corner of his eye saw a corpse staring at him from between the two closest tents.

An omen from the Lords of Death. A specter come to claim him. *So I die?* But it was only a moment, and then she turned and stalked away, and Chagatai saw she was not a corpse after all. He followed, and found another yurt, smaller, its walls of black felt, its door facing north. Two poles adorned with skulls, bones, and white horse-tail banners stood before it. The horde of children, dimly heard running among the carts far to the left, gave this yurt a wide berth. Chagatai stepped through the door.

The apparition sat across the circular tent from him, poking at the manure fire with a stick. Her stringy hair adorned with bones and feathers, and her face nearly hidden under layers of white paint, like a skull. "Is this outfit for my benefit, Auntie?" Chagatai asked. Not his real aunt, but it was the appropriate form of address for his sister's mother.

"I serve the Lords of Death," she snapped. "Nothing I do is for your benefit, Moto Chagatai." The family name was a reminder: Khojin's mother was no Moto, no kin to him. Ujin Hogelun came from one of the lesser Ujik families. They were nominal vassals to the Moto, although in the free-spirited Unicorn Clan, such bonds of vassalage were mainly theoretical. As a witch, none could order around Hogelun, even her sometime-husband Ögodei Khan. "Sit, boy. I will cast the bones."

He sat, lifting his swords from his belt and placing them behind him. Hogelun stood and walked around the tent, dropping a wooden ladle into a clay jug of mare's milk. As she reached each *ongghot*, the felt ancestor idols on the yurt's walls, she lifted the ladle and sprinkled it with



milk. "Drink, o Lords of Death," she chanted, "and be sated. Let the wisdom of my ancestors guide me."

After she finished, she plucked a bag from where it dangled from her belt, opened it and in one quick gesture threw the ankle bones within to the floor. Her brow furrowed as she read the *shagai*. "Horse, sheep, camel, goat." She stared intently at Chagatai. "Some good, some bad. Your fate is yours to make, boy."

"What of the clan, Auntie?" He nodded to the bones, their polished white shapes gleaming in the firelight. "Does Altansarnai Khan lead us to glory, or disaster?"

"Are those the only options?" Hogelun snapped. "An empire won on the back of the horse must be ruled from the back of a horse. The Shinjo Khan nearly forgot, nearly let herself be traded away like chattel. But she chose to cleave to our traditions, our beliefs, rather than bow to the Walking Clans. Do you now worry that the war will go poorly, or do you worry that the glory will pass you by, will rain down on Shinjo shoulders and leave you just another noyan guarding a border no one cares to attack?" She jabbed at the fire again. "Draw your sword, boy."

Chagatai took his sword from where it lay and pulled it from its sheath. The curved blade shone in the flickering light of the fire, now red with blood, now gold with glory. "Altansarnai has chosen strength," he said. "But will the next great khan?" He thought of Shono, his cousin, the empty stare he'd worn on his ride west. "Or the one after? The cities, the court, Rokugan itself pulls at us, makes us weak. Is our destiny to become just another servant of a throne that cares little for us?"

"Destiny?" Hogelun snorted and nodded to his sword. "That is your fate, Chagatai. That is your destiny. Your future is at the edge of this blade. That is your clan's strength. With a sword in your hand, you make your own future. The bones don't control what is to come, boy, you do.

The Lords of Death come for us all, in the end. Death lies ahead of you." She jabbed at the fire once more. "Hold fast to your sword and cut your own path to the future, boy. Leave me; you are needed."

In a daze, he stumbled from the yurt. There was a commotion at the front of the ordu, and he picked his way forward to find his actual aunt dismounting from her bay mare. "Chagatai," Rurame said, tucking her helm under her arm and stepping forward to clasp his hand. "I bring news."



“Stay a while, Auntie,” said Khojin. “I’m preparing a feast for Chagatai’s warriors; it’s no trouble to add you to the party.”

“Chagatai’s men will be leaving shortly,” Rurame said. She led Chagatai into the midst of the horses, their bulk and quiet murmuring providing privacy for the news she shared, and told him of the spy and the assassins sent after Shinjo Shono. “The Sand Road is beyond the duty of my Scarlet Banners,” she said. “You must ride west and do what must be done.”

“What must be done?” Chagatai reached up to touch Daichin’s neck, stilling the horse as he shifted and snorted. “Speak plainly, Auntie.”

“*Che*,” Rurame spat. “What would you have me say? The Shinjo Khan rules over us. She ties us to that blasted city. She marries our fine strong youths away to never ride the steppes again, and she gifts us gold and poison.” She settled her helm back over her long black braid. “Whether Shono lives or dies makes no difference to me, but the Moto must be seen at least attempting to save the fool’s life.” She climbed upon her horse and vanished into the night.

Chagatai stared at the sword, still in his hand. *Your future is at the edge of this blade.* If Shono were to die on the Sand Road, who would be Great Khan then?

Güyük approached, wiping *airag* from his mouth. “Well, noyan? What do we do?”

Chagatai sheathed his sword and pulled himself onto his great black stallion. “Mount up. We ride west!”

