MARCO POLO

Written by

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A WHITE FALCON

Soars in azure sky over--

EXT. WALLED CITY OF XIANGYANG -- MAGIC HOUR

Holding vigil like some monstrous stone and curled-tile dragon that guards the waterways of South China.

CHINESE SOLDIERS man the ramparts with triple-crossbows, tasseled spears, tiger forks, exotic blades, and all manner of Chinese weaponry.

INT. FORTRESS -- DAY

CHANCELLOR Jia Sidao (47) stares with tranquil eyes. The eyes of a warrior-philosopher-sociopath.

CHANCELLOR
(Mandarin;Subtitled)
My general is great. Do you see? He pretends inferiority to encourage his opponent's arrogance...

HE PEERS DOWNWARD ON: a battle between a praying mantis and a cricket, fighting on a table "arena" between the Chancellor and an OFFICER. The two men bet with paper currency.

NEARBY -- IN THE MILITARY GROUNDS

A RED-BROWED GENERAL addresses HUNDREDS OF TROOPS in a voice like damp gravel. THEY RESPOND with regimented, martial spear patterns and a MASS QUAKE:

SONG ARMY
(Mass Chant; Subtitled)
DEFEAT ALL INVADERS! PROTECT SONG DYNASTY!

IN THE MAZE OF THE FORTRESS TOWN

A mysterious figure crawls along the inner walls, drawing a layout on parchment. He wears a Turkish scarf, only his eyes visible. Heavy sword belt. Trousers tucked into knee-high leather boots...

As the NOMAD hurriedly sketches a diagram of the fort in Chinese ink, a cricket skitters over the parchment. TWO CHINESE BOYS come into view, one holding a small bamboo cage. Pursuing the errant cricket, they come face-to-face with the Nomad in the shadows of the wall.

A FROZEN MOMENT: the veiled Nomad holds up an assuring hand, a bid for silence. When THE BOYS take a wary step back, he slowly reaches out a closed fist...opens it...and offers them the cricket they were chasing.

One of the boys cautiously reaches for it. But then, during this movement, the Nomad's scarf comes undone, revealing HIS FACE. He is not a Mongol, he's a white man; a Westerner. Young and exceedingly handsome. He tries to smile disarmingly, put the boys at ease. Instead:

THE BOYS SCREAM like they see a three-headed demon.

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springs to his boots, runs up an alley, only to find it blocked by a SOLDIER with a lance. Forced to cross the city grounds, he runs CRASHING through market baskets and fine porcelain. A BOOMING HORN and MASS MILITARY CHANT; all roaring from within the garrison.

Marco races down another lane, but hits a dead end. No way out, but up. He begins to scale for a balustrade when--

SOLDIER (O.S.)
(Mandarin)
CEASE!

FOUR CHINESE SOLDIERS corner him with broadswords, tiger forks, hook-scythe spears, and weighted rope chains. When they see that he is a "round-eye", they hesitate, like cornering a strange animal.

SOLDIER (CONT'D)
(Mandarin)
What kind of ugly foreign devil is this?

SOLDIER #2
(Mandarin)
Tell the intruder to get on his knees and he will not be harmed. Then cut his head off.

MARCO
(Mandarin)
Long live Song Dynasty...

Marco freezes them with fluent Chinese. He shifts his eyes, backing to the wall, scheming a way out...

MARCO (CONT'D)
(Mandarin)
Peace to your emperor. Blessings to his descendants.

Marco is against the wall now, the Soldiers slowly pressing.

MARCO (CONT'D)
(Italian)
Mother of god, I'm a dead man...

THE SOLDIERS ATTACK!

Marco ducks a weighted rope chain, but gets kicked to the ground. He rolls from the path of a sharp tiger fork. It SLASHES at him again. He rolls again, alarmed. Now the hook-scythe comes at him.

Marco slaps at his leather boots and draws, almost gun-like, two short-swords (butterfly blades) from sheathes on the outside of the boots. He brings the swords up in an 'X' and BLOCKS the attack, spins away.

Another Soldier charges with a brutal five-blossom spin of his sword. He cuts Marco's robe, but the young foreigner "swallows' his opponent's momentum...

SLOW MOTION: Marco spins 180 and impales the attacker with an inverted butterfly stab at the same time he fires a balletic round kick, disabling the Tiger Fork Soldier.

The Fourth Soldier balks for a second, stunned by this unlikely display of Eastern martial art. But not as stunned as Marco; skill aside, the young man is sweat-drenched and unnerved as--

SOLDIERS flood the alley. Marco sweeps a handful of sand at the Fourth Soldier's face. He then grabs the fallen rope chain and pitches it to the lip of an inner wall. He goes up.

The SURGE OF REBEL SOLDIERS turn their brass crossbows toward the high wall. WAR DRUMS ARE DEAFENING NOW...

EXT. FORTRESS -- DAY

Marco lands in river grass, makes a desperate running mount onto his MONGOLIAN HORSE.

THE DOORS of the Fortress Gate WINCH OPEN and ONE HUNDRED CHINESE REBELS ON ARMORED HORSES thunder out, pursuing the intruder across--

THE HAN RIVER PONTOON BRIDGE

Where Marco Polo rides hellbent for the Steppe, his equestrian skills uniquely Mongolian. Turning around in the saddle--*completely* around--he raises a small recurve bow and sets up for a shot. IN SLOW MOTION: he times his breath with the exact half-beat in which all four of his horse's legs leave the ground--and he RELEASES A WHISTLING ARROW.

RED-BROW GENERAL

Takes the arrow (back to REAL TIME) across his cheek, ripping skin away. Not a perfect shot, but infuriating.

The General shouts a COMMAND and the Cavalry prepare triple crossbows. They lift them in precise timing, aim in an arc--and FIRE all at once.

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

MONGOLIAN HORSE HOOVES churn up mud and marsh as ARROWS impale the ground seconds too late, inches too short.

MARCO leans forward, whips his mount over-and-under as ARROWS make a sickening THUD in the marsh behind.

INT. WALLED CITY -- MOMENTS LATER

The Chancellor sits with chilling calm at his cricket table.

CHANCELLOR
(Mandarin)
The Tartar must not cross the river. Who knows what military secrets he has breached, what report he will bring to the Barbarian...

OFFICER
(Mandarin)
Prime Minister. He was no Mongol.

The Chancellor lifts his gaze.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
(Mandarin)
He was a Westerner. A Round-Eye.

The Chancellor reacts.

EXT. OUT ON THE STEPPE -- SHORT TIME LATER

Marco catches his breath as he slows the pace, looks over his shoulder. He unhoods a HUNTING FALCON that rides on his saddle horn.

Lifting the falcon on his left wrist, he sends it airborne, out ahead of him. As it soars INTO SUNSPOTS over the magnificent scenery:

MARCO (V.O.)
I believe it was God's will that I should survive, to one day return from my travels, so that men might know the things that are in this world...

Marco whips his horse; HOOVES POUND EARTH.

CUT TO:

WAVES POUNDING A WOODEN SHIP on a violent sea. THEME SCORE AND BEGIN TITLES:

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--THE SHIP, wooden hulls tied together by mere ropes, is tossed about on rough seas. TWO VENETIAN MERCHANTS with stiletto beards and gentry caps cling fiercely to the railing.

MARCO (V.O.)
We left the canals of Venice in the year 1269, on a ship commissioned by my father Niccolo and my uncle Maffeo, both merchants with an eye toward trade in the fabled East...

--MARCO (17) is sitting recklessly on the ship rail, wild ringlets of hair in the wind. He is gazing dreamily out at a SCHOOL OF DOLPHINS.

MARCO (V.O.)
How do I tell you? I was 17 when I met my father for the first time.

NICCOLO
Marco...!

Marco is lost in the dolphin spectacle.

MARCO (V.O.)
He was away on business in Tabriz when I was born. Away in India when my mother died...

NICCOLO
Marco, the rope...!

MARCO (V.O.)
Perhaps it was mercy, perhaps guilt; but he offered me a job as a clerk. I wanted out of Venice. I wanted to sail beyond the edge of the known world and witness the marvels and mysteries of the Far East...

Marco hears his father calling now. He shouts back and points out the dolphins...and then something even more remarkable--a SEA RAINBOW on the horizon. OCEAN SPRAY wets Marco's young face.

MARCO (V.O.)
And so I begged my way onto the Luna, offering my prodigious skills as a sailor.

NICCOLO
He is *useless*!

Niccolo and Maffeo are trying to rig something; they need the rope. The uncle looks at the day-dreamer on the railing and shakes his head.

MAFFEO
What? What does he see?

NICCOLO
How do I know what he sees. He's a *stunod*. What am I going to do? Ha? Leave him in the canals? Marco! *Andiammo*!

Marco finally scrambles over with the tangle of rope, sliding on the slippery deck.

MARCO
Did you see! One hundred dolphins! Green dolphins--maybe two hundred! Uncle Maffeo! When the sky reflects on their backs they turn blue! *In-credible'*!

Maffeo looks at him disturbed.

NICCOLO
We travel for silk and spice. <u>Gems. Carpets</u>. Not the fucking dolphin! Here--hold tight, hold tight!

Niccolo fastens the rope at the mast and looks away. Then, suddenly, Niccolo's eyes widen because he sees:

A GIANT WAVE taller than the ship. They have to crest it -- they all SCREAM IN ITALIAN -- the WAVE BLOTS OUT THE SUN.

FADE IN:

A SUPERIMPOSED 13th Century MOSAIC MAP detailing the forbidden lands of the Balkh and Kazakh Steppe...

MARCO (V.O.)
By the year 1271 we had crossed Persia and gone over the Pamirs-- The Roof of the World--the air too thin to breathe...

--SILHOUETTES AGAINST A RAGING SNOW STORM: hooded, frost-bitten men and an ARMED ESCORT on donkeys lead Bactrian camels 14,000 feet above sea level. Niccolo looks back at young Marco, wrapped in layers, high on a camel. Keeping on...

MARCO (V.O.)
We crossed the Hindu Kush, beneath Mount Everest...We followed the Silk Road....across the Gobi and Taklimakan...

--A SAND STORM morphs into something wondrous and beautiful...

MARCO (V.O.)
After three years and eight-thousand miles...we emerged onto the Golden Lotus Plain.

--INNER MONGOLIAN GREEN, exploding in buttercups and purple flowers. In a procession of yaks and horses a stern MONGOL DETACHMENT (fierce warriors in leather armor) leads the three Polo's forward.

MARCO, 20 now, raw-boned and handsome. Long curls ride his shoulders; a hint of a beard threatens at his chin. His eyes widen:

MARCO (V.O.)
Like a dream, it finally appeared: *Shang-du*.

--XANADU (an epic vision in sumptuous Zhang Yimou colors): beyond a sea of round felt tents lies a vast rectangular parkland of marble palaces and temples, fountains and courtyards; a royal zoo, herds of ALBINO HORSES, and a royal pavilion constructed entirely of red varnished bamboo cane with carved golden dragons wrapping their tails around each magnificent pillar.

MARCO (V.O.)
The summer palace of the richest, most powerful ruler the world had ever known. Kublai Khan...grandson of Genghis.

--THE POLOS are swarmed by a CROWD OF VENDORS and LAUGHING CHILDREN who have never seen a European; MARCO is swallowed by a shouting swell of CHINESE, MONGOLS, TIBETANS, TURKS, and SIBERIAN SHAMANS.

--THREE BOY HORSEMEN, gallop past; BEAUTIFUL YOUNG CONCUBINES gaze up at Marco; A DRUNKEN UIGHER hurls insults at the Europeans-- and a MONGOL SOLDIER strikes him brutally to the grass with the butt-end of a lance.

--A MONGOL FOOT GUARD stops the procession short of a square where some ceremony with KETTLE DRUMS is in progress. Marco edges his horse closer to glimpse:

--IN THE SQUARE:

What sounded like a woman's laughter is actually the desperate SCREAMING of a TAJIKISTANI MAN being dragged behind a horse, up and down, all through the dust. Begging for his life he is dragged to a central stone. Where SIX OTHER MEN kneel.

INTERCUT: with MARCO as A GUARD hefts a sword. The captive man's head comes clean off. A second head rolls. And a third. MARCO sits motionless. Stunned. Just to his left, Uncle Maffeo closes his eyes and discreetly crosses himself as they are now led...

--THROUGH THE IMPERIAL CITY WALLS, ushered into a vast cane and bamboo paradise....down a maze of ornate hallways and gilded chambers where--

HUNDREDS OF SILK-ROBED SERVANTS and MILITARY OFFICIALS look on in silence. They bow in unison as the exhausted foreigners are led up to a robed EUNUCH. He barks at them in fierce, high-pitched MONGOLIAN TONGUE.

The Polo's are handed white slippers which they obediently put on. Now, they are each handed a small, ornate vessel.

MARCO
What is the vase for?

NICCOLO
Quiet.

EUNUCH
Speak softly. Do not look him in the eye. Wear the slippers so you do not soil his domain. If you must spit, use the vase.

Niccolo has Marco by the arm and speaks urgently into his ear--

NICCOLO
Eyes down, *down*...

Uncle Maffeo looks particularly unnerved.

INTO THE ROYAL CHAMBER

Niccolo, Maffeo, and Marco crawl on their hands and knees, heads bowed, through a royal gantlet of WARRIOR NOBLES, BARONS, ruby-lipped CONCUBINES, and the FIVE EMPRESSES.

Niccolo and Maffeo prostrate themselves, touch their heads to the carpet three times. Marco follows suit. On his third bow, he <u>covertly lifts his eyes</u>, steals a glance upward.

IN SHADOW AND CANDLE LIGHT: an imposing figure sits on his throne, a TAMED LION near his feet. KUBLAI KHAN dressed in gold and silk. His face is distinctly Mongol; fierce eyes, thick jowls, and cheek bones that could slice a plum. His beard hangs in a sage-like wisp, his long hair braided into loops behind each ear. HIS EYES contain a mischievous gleam, but also something barbaric. Dangerous.

At a signal, Niccolo hands a leather-wrapped European vessel to an OFFICER who hands it to A BARON who, in turn, brings it up to--

KUBLAI KHAN

Who does not speak. He makes a sharp, guttural intake of breath, one that is echoed by his Baron, like two cats coughing. Strange as it is, they are communicating with breathing sounds--the Ural-Altaic language only a true Mongol can understand. Finally, Kublai Khan speaks--in <u>impressive English</u>.

KUBLAI KHAN
Holy oil. A letter from the Pontiff. He wishes to spread Christianity throughout my lands. Is this not the same Pope who has called me the Devil?

The elder Polo's don't flinch.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Christianity is welcome in my kingdom. As is Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, and the Eternal Blue Sky of my grandfather Chinggis Khan--who was descended from a wolf.

Marco reacts, equal parts frightened and intrigued. His father and uncle appear terrified. The Great Khan cradles the vessel of holy oil, examining it in the light.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
I reverence them all. You see, the Mongols do not care which god is worshipped in their lands. As long as all are faithful to the Great Khan and obey his laws, they may do whatever they please with their souls.

The Khan's Buddhist advisor, a young, head-shorn Tibetan lama named PHAGS-PA, kneels very close by. His eyes are on the strangers.

Now the Khan gestures and the Baron signals for the foreigners to rise and face His August Personage.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
You wish to seek your fortune in my realm?

They do not answer. Eyes downcast, knees fairly knocking.

NICCOLO
We trade in spices, Sire, and the raw silk, and--

KUBLAI KHAN
--Not many travelers survive the crossing of the great Taklimakan. Please...describe for me my desert.

NICCOLO
It is a sea of sand, my lord. Barren. No life.

MAFFEO
Nothing. Not even the bird.

NICCOLO
Not even the bird.

MAFFEO
It is, My Lord, a sea of *death*.

MARCO
Yet very much alive.

The Khan angles his hard eyes toward the young man. Niccolo stops breathing; can't believe his son has spoken out. Maffeo might vomit.

MARCO (CONT'D)
At night you hear it--the sand--it *sings*...

This raises a controversial hiss in the palace and the Baron needs to raise a hand to restore silence...

MARCO (CONT'D)
As the sand shifts it makes a sound--like voices--spirits begin to speak as though they are your companions and sometimes they'll call you by name, trying to lure you off course. *Come--a drink of water* they will say, drawing you away from your fellows in the night.

KUBLAI KHAN
Who is this?

NICCOLO
Sire, he is my son. Marco. He--

The Khan lifts a hand. The Baron claps a wooden block once. Niccolo goes silent. Maffeo stares uneasily at the lion.

KUBLAI KHAN
You passed through the Wakhan Corridor. How?
(pointing at Marco)
You.

MARCO
By the grace of God, Sire. There are raiders in the mountains called Assassins--from the Arabic for *hashhish*. They are followers of a sorcerer known only as the Old Man. He plies these assassins with hashhish so that they do his bidding with their blades.
(MORE)

MARCO (CONT'D)
Many kings and many lords pay tribute to the Old Man for fear he might bring about their death. I would like to provide more detail, Sire, but we were moving at a gallop.

Marco feels the eyes of a powerfully-built young Mongol on him. It is the crown prince JINGIM, eldest son of the Great Khan. The young nomad is dressed in luxurious fox and sable, a long Chinese sword at his belt.

KUBLAI KHAN
Tell me of Tungat...

MARCO
A city of Heaven.

KUBLAI KHAN
Because of the magnificent lake?

MARCO
Because of the beautiful women.

Niccolo reacts, abhorred. Maffeo, too.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Their beauty, Sire, it is not of this world. They are practiced in the arts of love. Once you experience their charms...

NICCOLO
--Great Khan, I humbly apologize. My son, his mother passed and I had no--

A woman suddenly caterwauls IN MONGOLIAN, shrill and forceful. She is allowed, for she is CHABI, the principal wife of the Khan. At 34, she is the oldest of the Five Empresses but no less pretty.

KUBLAI KHAN
My eldest wife, Chabi, wishes to ask the young traveler a question.
(beat)
Of all the lands you passed through on your way...which province contained, to your eye, the most beautiful women of all.

Marco considers this, feeling the eyes of the court on him. It feels like some kind of trial.

MARCO
Honestly? I find that all females, no matter from which land--Venice, Paris, Persia, Tungat--they are all beautiful in their own unique manner. In Italy we have a saying: *La dolcezza del vero vino e un gusto.*
(beat)
The true sweetness of wine is one flavor.

The Baron TRANSLATES THIS INTO MONGOLIAN.

Chabi's stern face tightens...then surrenders a smile. Niccolo surrenders a breath of relief. The other wives smile, too, and so do the concubines (the lesser ones covering their mouths with silk napkins). A swell of approving giggles travels through the female royalty.

Jingim, the Junior Khan, skewers the Westerner with his eyes. Then the Baron Eunuch calls for silence.

KUBLAI KHAN
This thin boy from the west...when he speaks, I *see.* I see what my military scouts and mapmakers struggle to convey. Storytellers from Azerbaijan, magicians from Tibet...can hardly make invisible places come to life like this young traveler seems to do.

Niccolo glances at his son and tries to smile and nod. Maffeo, meanwhile, is staring at the carpet.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
You Latin merchants may engage in business along my Silk Road. Sanga, my Minister of Finance will discuss taxation and transit.

He gestures toward SANGA, a Turkish Muslim with an extraordinary hat. He bows.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Of course, it is the law that you leave tribute.
(beat)
This one you call Marco. He shall remain here--in my service--till your return.

Marco's eyes widen in distress. He looks at his father; his father returns the look. Maffeo leans close to his brother and they whisper covertly. Then Niccolo steps forward.

NICCOLO
Sire. He is my son...and I present him to you. As your servant and your man.

Marco reacts, incredulous.

MARCO
Father...

Niccolo turns to his son and stares at him for a long beat. He embraces him, kisses him on each cheek. Marco grips his arm. Niccolo takes his son's hand...and slowly removes it.

As the merchants of Venice follow Sanga down the long carpet toward the golden sunlight, Marco stands alone before the Mongol king.

MONGOLIAN THROAT-SINGING begins to build all around him in deep, haunting monotone...

MARCO (V.O.)
...and so, while my father and uncle traveled the East in search of ivory, jade, and silk, I was conscripted into the service of the Mongol Empire.

CUT TO:

--HOOVES THUNDERING as Marco clings to a wooden saddle on a wild pony. 9 YEAR-OLD MONGOL BOYS ride circles around him, knock him off with a long herding stick. The wind huffs from his lungs...

MARCO (V.O.)
I learned the customs of the Horse Culture, their languages and their letters...

--A HAND paints elegant characters as an ANCIENT BUDDHIST MONK instructs the young Italian in CALLIGRAPHY; with the same concentration, an arrow is nocked at an ornate Mongol bow...

MARCO (V.O.)
I learned hawking and archery, sword and lance...and the ways of the Lotus Fist...

--ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS are practiced on the same training field as MONGOLIAN WRESTLING and Marco gets his ribs bruised by all of it.

--HORSE ARCHER WARFARE is drilled at FULL GALLOP (all building with THEME SCORE to the ceremonial crescendo when):

--A GOLDEN TABLET with tiny falcon emblem is placed into the young Westerner's hands.

MARCO (V.O.)
In time, I was presented with the most coveted of honors: the Golden Tablet, granting safe passage throughout the empire.

--MARCO sits tall on a horse, out on the Steppe. His long hair is pulled up into a top-knot, resembling a cross between a swashbuckler and a samurai. He wears the attire of a Steppe Nomad, sword belted low, hunting falcon on his wrist.

MARCO (V.O.)
I was no longer a waif in the alleys of Venice, destined to be another shop apprentice. I had become Marco Polo: special emissary to Kublai Khan.

He stares wistfully, far out across the East and the promise of its hidden treasures.

FADE OUT.

INT. HALL OF AUSPICIOUSNESS -- REAL-TIME -- DAY

Inside one of the six halls of the Khanate, an internal meeting of the Superpower: Kublai sits on a raised pavilion, the embodiment of opulence and power, looking down over his 25-man CABINET:

Elaborately-dressed Mongols, Chinese, and Muslim Turks--an administration chosen for both its political and religious balance. In this moment of deep stillness the Khan's TAOIST ADVISOR is casting the *I-Ching,* a complex system of divination.

THE KHAN'S EYES observe as the Taoist sets down 50 yarrow stalks into <u>64 six-line patterns.</u>

KUBLAI KHAN
What do you see, Sage?

TAOIST ADVISOR
The Creative works sublime success, furthering through perseverance.

KUBLAI KHAN
(annoyed)
Are you a priest or a poet?

TAOIST ADVISOR
The movement of Heaven is most powerful. The Superior man makes himself strong and sees with great clarity causes and effects.

KUBLAI KHAN
I know about Heaven. It was from the sky-god that my grandfather received his mandate to rule. Like the great Chinggis, I will visit upon the Song Dynasty rebels...and cut off two million heads.

PHAGS-PA
Please, My Holy. You wish all of China to adore you. The Chinese pray for an emperor who will rule with good judgement and love.

KUBLAI KHAN
By slaughtering the corrupt Song officials, am I not demonstrating love for those who wish freedom from land tyrants? Lower taxes? Food for the poor?
(beat)
Jingim...

The eldest son, the crown prince, bows his head low in respect.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
You will one day sit where I do now. Let me hear your voice on this matter.

JINGIM
Destroying the Song holdouts is wise. But is it not more wise, to let them remain in Xiangyang...and pay tribute to the Khan? In annual shipments of golden silk...

KUBLAI KHAN
Thus, we treat the enemy as a cow that we draw milk from, rather than slaughtering the cow and receiving no milk. Or *silk* in this case.

Little Phags-Pa smiles broadly, clutching his prayer beads.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
I know you like that, Phags-Pa, because you do not eat meat.
(beat)
Bless the prophets and all the wisdom in this Hall. But the truth is this: Xiangyang guards the Yangtze River. It is the gateway to all China.

Another young Mongol, well-appointed in sable and ermine, bows his head and speaks up. Well-appointed, yes--but his face is coarse and Siberian with a long, barbarous drape of mustache. He is KAIDU.

KAIDU
Grand Khan. May your cousin, Kaidu, from the House of Ogedei, speak?

The Khan nods, irritated.

KAIDU (CONT'D)
The old customs of the Mongols are not those of the Chinese laws. Nayan Khan in the north fears that Our overlord is becoming...too 'Chinese' in his ways.

KUBLAI KHAN
My uncle Nayan? He wishes to see me poisoned so he can proclaim himself Grand Khan. How can I view his opinion as in the interest of my campaign?

KAIDU
On behalf of the Golden Horde in the western territories, we wish to know: does Our Grace more desire to be emperor of Mongolia...or emperor of <u>China</u>?

KUBLAI KHAN
You underestimate me, Kaidu. My bid is to become Emperor of the <u>World</u>.

Suddenly, movement at the open mouth of the Hall, draws eyes--and a few swords. It is a white falcon. Like some sign from above, some mystic moment, it soars up the long, gilded aisle--floating through slants of light and varied colors--to an awed hush from the spiritual advisors.

THE KHAN lifts a hand and the falcon lights on his wrist. He examines some braided leather tied around its leg.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Somebody has returned...

Jingim, the crown prince, reacts. Not so pleased.

EXT. XANADU -- GOLDEN LOTUS PLAIN -- DAY

Marco Polo is riding in at a free lope, the wind in his hair.

OUTSIDE THE HALL OF FRAGRANCE

A girl is strolling through a Zen garden, followed by THREE OLDER FEMALE ATTENDANTS and a giant EUNUCH. She is KOKACHIN one of the most beautiful young females in the Empire--if not in all the East. She is also one of the most guarded. When she hears LOPING HOOFBEATS, she gazes out.

As Kokachin watches the handsome rider trot by, he looks back at her. She reacts, but feels the protective gaze of the Eunuch. So does Marco, quickly turning his eyes back to the road as he passes.

ON THE MARTIAL TRAINING GROUNDS

MONGOL WARRIORS practice sword and shield; horse archer strategy; Mongolian wrestling and Chinese weaponry--all under the supervision of the Khan's Minister of Martial Art, a WuDang monk called HUNDRED EYES (40).

With his long Taoist top-knot and saffron robes, he cuts an enigmatic figure as he stands out on the training field, "listening". On HEARING HOOFBEATS, he reacts, without looking.

As Marco rides past the training field, he balls his left hand into a fist and brings it into his open right palm--a martial salute to the blind monk.

Hundred Eyes nods very slightly.

INT. INNER CHAMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE -- DAY

Marco walks with Kublai Khan...

MARCO
If there is a paradise on earth, Sire, it is called Quinsai...and it's marvelous.

KUBLAI KHAN
How big would you say?

MARCO
100 miles around or thereabouts.

KUBLAI KHAN
Bridges?

MARCO
12,000, all made of hand-cut stone. Some, My Grace, are so tall that a a ship could pass beneath and cast its light on a million streets and clear lagoons...and market square where 50,000 people gather to trade...

The Khan inhales smoke from an amber pipe as he takes in the imagery, step by strolling step...

MARCO (CONT'D)
...victuals and vegetables and a type of pear that weighs 10 pounds, white inside like a paste--and a fragrance, tracing to the east lagoon. Where the ferry man with a hermit's beard takes you up the River Han to the basin. There, in the distance, you see it. Guarding the waters, like a great stone beast, where the Han meets the Yangtze.

KUBLAI KHAN
Xiangyang.

MARCO
The walled city.

KUBLAI KHAN
Did you breach it?

MARCO
I did, Sire.

KUBLAI KHAN
Paint for me a picture.

They have reached a cul de sac and a great stone chess table in the Khan's royal water garden.

MARCO
I did, My Grace.

Marco opens his leather pouch and removes a folded sheet of brittle parchment. He spreads it on the chess table, revealing a lay-out so detailed it resembles one of Da Vinci's feverish schematics.

The Grand Khan's eyes glint in approval. He lets smoke escape from his nostrils as he leans over the chess table (like Patton over a map) peering down.

INSERT SKETCHED LAY-OUT: through amber pipe smoke, we MOVE DOWN INTO THE SKETCH, its layers and angles and--

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. XIANGYANG -- AERIAL -- DAY

LOOKING DOWN ON the walled city maze in river mist. MOVING INTO AND THROUGH its palisades and inner walls; careening up marble stairs, and urgently entering with A BANG OF DOORS--

INT. XIANGYANG -- IMPERIAL QUARTERS -- DAY

The Chancellor sits over a porcelain tea set. THREE HIGH RANKING OFFICIALS enter and bow. With them is the Red-Browed General who now bears a scar across his right cheek--courtesy of Marco's arrow.

RED BROW
There have been reports of a European who speaks fair Chinese, frequenting the bath houses of Quinsai.

OFFICIAL
--Chinese, Mongolian, Turkish, and a Persian dialect. He is believed to be a foreign agent to the Khan.

CHANCELLOR
Kublai is the devil of deception. To send a Latin demon to infiltrate the walls of Xiangyang should come as no surprise. The Tartars have tried to take this city for forty years.
(MORE)

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Not even Chinggis Khan could conquer these walls. This fat cripple Kublai is a desperate man.

The Chancellor smiles and gestures to his tea cup. His SERVANT is a hair late.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
I have surprises of my own awaiting him if he so dares.

SECOND OFFICIAL
Chancellor. The Empress Dowager, she is very old. She has terrible memories of the raids by the barbarians. She and her son the emperor are open to... negotiating with the Mongols in the interest of a unified China--

The Chancellor goes crimson. He hurls his porcelain cup at the floor, smashing it into splinters.

CHANCELLOR
Unified China? Negotiation? With the barbarians. Her mind is gone! And forget the emperor. He is weaker than the old woman.
(suspicious beat)
Who told the Court that a spy breached my garrison?

Dreadful silence. All eyes are on the floor. The Chancellor now SMASHES the tea pot itself, SHATTERING an exquisite example of painted Song porcelain.

OFFICIAL
Hua Lin. The concubine.

The Chancellor goes very calm now. He removes a silk purse from his belt and delicately opens it. He sets down an obscene amount of paper currency, freshly-minted by wood block.

CHANCELLOR
Tell this most precious consort that the prime minister has heard of her charms and will pay more than the emperor himself...

The Officials bow.

EXT. XANADU PRESERVE -- DAY

Out on the thousands of acres of the Khan's hunting preserve, three men ride in imposing formation:

KUBLAI KHAN
My blood feels strong today...

Marco is on one side, Jingim on the other. The mighty Kublai rides in the center on an albino horse, a GOLDEN EAGLE on his wrist. Looming a comfortable distance behind them: an armored MONGOL PROCESSION of 300 STRONG: Servants, Officials, Royal Dog Handlers, Falconers, and Cat Handlers (so much for a private hunt).

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
It has been too long since I've hunted on horse. My wives tell me I am too fat. That I must be carried in a pavilion on the backs of elephants.

JINGIM
Like a king, Father. Like a king...

KUBLAI KHAN
Yet look at this one here. He rides like a Mongol. Today: we will hunt like Mongols. And why?

MARCO
Sire?

KUBLAI KHAN
Why does the Mongol hunt? To kill? To feed his people?

As they ride in formation.

MARCO
Yes, My Lord. But also to practice for war.

Kublai is satisfied with the answer. His eyes are taking in the vastness, the mist on the horizon.

KUBLAI KHAN
We kill together. Like one wolf under one sky. That is how we fight.

JINGIM
And yet...does not the superior man win without fighting?

The Great Khan does a take as he rides.

KUBLAI KHAN
I've had my son Jingim schooled by Confucian scholars...so that he can answer his father's questions with questions.

Marco looks away, tries not to smile.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
He believes the best way to conquer the South of China is by allowing Xiangyang to stand. And pay rent.

JINGIM
There is another way.
(beat)
The river is their life line. That's how they've been able to remain. If we dam the Han, cut them off from the Yangtze--

KUBLAI KHAN
--we starve them out.

Kublai reins his horse to a stop, weighs the proposal. He stares at Jingim, the young man who will one day be Khan. But then--

MARCO
Prince Jingim is wise. But there may be a problem with that idea.

Jingim doesn't react. Yet, the chagrin foments in his eyes.

MARCO (CONT'D)
I assessed their storage. They've got enough grain to last another six years. Maybe ten. If the Great Kublai commits horse soldiers to the south for that many seasons--

KUBLAI KHAN
--My uncle Nayan will invade my lands and proclaim himself Khan.

Kublai turns his horse in a half-circle and gazes out across the lush grasslands, surrounded by his thoughts.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
The Chancellor taunts me from the banks.
(MORE)

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
He calls us barbarians who can't unite our own tribes, let alone unite China. Is he wrong?

Kublai sits between Marco and Jingim, his eyes forward, waiting for an answer. Neither young man will seize the bait.

Now the Khan's eyes detect something out on the horizon. IN THE MISTY REEDS, backlit by the fading sun, SHADOWS leap and bound. A HERD OF ROE DEER.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Master Marco. You've done a good service this day. Your shot.

MARCO
Jingim has more skill with the bow.

JINGIM
But there is only one Khan of Khans. The gift is yours, Father.

KUBLAI KHAN
If we continue to quarrel, the deer will be in Poland in another moment...

The Khan raises his arm, prepares to unleash his hunting eagle. Yet he hesitates...

JINGIM
Your leopards are caged with the convoy. Would the Grand Khan prefer to send a hunting cat?

Marco looks back at where a LEOPARD, a CHEETAH, and a LION lick their chops in royal cages on wheeled carts.

But Kublai lowers his arm and sets his eagle on his saddle.

KUBLAI KHAN
No. Today we hunt like Mongols.

JINGIM
You are not to ride at speed. My mother said it.

KUBLAI KHAN
Is the empress here? I don't see her among the royal handlers?

JINGIM
Your gout...

KUBLAI KHAN
Cshoo!

THE KHAN explodes forward on his horse, raising an arm in a signal -- a signal that triggers a RAISING OF BANNERS in the convoy (expertly coordinated communication) -- and 50 MONGOL HORSEMEN come out of the grass like a sudden wind.

Marco's horse rockets off so fast, he nearly leaves the saddle. But in seconds his bow is up, and he's swept into the surge of--

THE MONGOL HUNT

A rollicking, galloping, wave of wild horsemen. Following banner signals they gallop right, cut back left; although broken into five bands, they intuitively sense each other's shifts and turns, darting like a school of fish. One line retreats while a second line advances, ultimately forming a deceptive and unbreakable circle of horses.

Coming to rest now, each warrior in the saddle is aiming an arrow at dead center where--

A HERD OF ROE DEER

Skitter, bewildered and trapped. The hunters all await the Khan who has an arrow, fletched with crane feathers, drawn at his bow. His breathing is slightly labored, sweat on his lip. After a long moment, the Khan lowers his weapon.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Did we not make a fine falcon hunt two days ago? Is there any one hungry tonight in Xanadu?
(beat)
Let them run...

As the horsemen on the horizon peel back and form an opening for the deer, Marco watches the Grand Khan look skyward, his looped braids hanging behind his ears.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
(Mongolian; Subtitled)
I send this game back to the Eternal Blue Sky till another day. Thank you, my grandfathers.

He turns his horse and begins a casual trot back toward the royal convoy. Jingim enjoys the sight of the deer bounding off into the mist. Marco shares the view for a moment, then turns his horse to follow the procession home.

INT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- DAY

The beautiful Kokachin is in her bath, her hair bunned high with a delicate glass pin. She gazes out the open-sided hall at the bamboo pillars and gardens while one of her OLDER FEMALE ATTENDANTS washes her shoulders gently.

KOKACHIN'S POV: a bird lights in the branches, perches there.

KOKACHIN studies the white falcon for a moment as she savors the bath.

KOKACHIN
Please. I must sleep now.

The Attendant wrings out a bathing cloth and leaves the princess alone. Kokachin listens for the sound of the cane door closing. She yanks the pin from her bun and her black hair cascades free.

EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- GARDENS -- DAY

Kokachin, in a silk robe, steps out barefoot and ties a ribbon in a banyan tree. She scans the silent area with her pretty eyes, takes another look at the falcon in the tree. She turns and nearly walks into:

MARCO
Kokachin...

Startled, she shushes his lips with her fingers. She takes his wrist, leads him urgently into hiding, deeper among plum blossoms and peonies.

KOKACHIN
Where did the Khan send you this time?

MARCO
To Paris. For French coffee.

KOKACHIN
You tell good lies. That's why he likes you.

Marco smiles. She loves his eyes. Yet she slips away from him, moves through a long jasmine arbor. He traps her at a bench.

MARCO
Here is the truth: on my travels I came to a great river called the Yangtze.
(MORE)

MARCO (CONT'D)
In the sky above this river--if you know how to read clouds--you see two dragons fighting...

KOKACHIN
You should not be here. It is forbidden...

MARCO
These two dragons, they fight over a woman. And whenever they fight, something wondrous falls from the sky. Down onto the river. In beautiful pain...

KOKACHIN
Rain.

MARCO
No.

He removes his hand from behind his back. The strand of iridescent freshwater pearls are draped over and through his fingers, catching the light.

MARCO (CONT'D)
For you. Kokachin. In Mongolian: "She Who is Like the Sky." In Italian:

Marco gently puts them around her neck. He stares at her for a long moment.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Bellissima...

KOKACHIN
What does it mean...

MARCO
So beautiful.

Marco slowly leans closer, tries to kiss her. But she brings her hand up between their lips, stops him. He kisses her fingers, traces her lips with his thumb.

MARCO (CONT'D)
So, so beautiful...

The sound of HORSES outside the garden wall...

KOKACHIN
Somebody is coming.

Marco seems spellbound, presses closer.

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)
If you are caught here, you become a eunuch. Like Za Bing.

MARCO
Never a good octave for a vaporetto.

KOKACHIN
Go...hurry...

Marco is backing through the arbor, impossible to tear his eyes away from her. But he must. So he does. Gone into the plum blossoms.

Kokachin watches him go...then sits on the end of the bench. She runs the pearls through her fingers. She whispers.

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)
Bellissima...

EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- DAY

Marco is leading his horse in hand down a lane of magnolia and caged song birds. A big man falls in behind him. A big man with the voice of a woman. ZA BING, the Eunuch.

ZA BING
(sing-song)
Ni hao...

MARCO
Za Bing. *Ni hao*.

ZA BING
Are you practicing your boxing today?

MARCO
Indeed, I am late.

ZA BING
Ah. That why you're taking a shortcut through the princess's garden?

Marco keeps moving...

ZA BING (CONT'D)
How was South China? Warm and wet?

Marco gives a scathing look.

MARCO
Good day, Za Bing.

ZA BING
Good day, Master Marco...

With his hand resting on his massive scimitar, the eunuch watches him go.

CUT TO:

MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING -- OUT ON THE MILITARY PLAIN

Marco is going spear against sword versus Hundred Eyes, but the long-haired blind monk avoids or deflects every thrust. Marco is breathless; Hundred Eyes hasn't broken a sweat.

He strips Marco of his sword, knocks it to the grass.

HUNDRED EYES
Why do you think the sword has a colored sash. To look pretty? Do you wish to fight your opponent? Or fuck him?

Marco picks up the sword and this time wraps the sash around his wrist. As he does, he becomes aware of SPECTATORS watching from the margins of the training field.

This time Marco holds his sword well and parries. Hundred Eyes gives a mere nod of approval.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
Ah. Yes. I know. They watch you. The sons of the Khan.

MARCO
All forty-seven.

HUNDRED EYES
Half are from his concubines. They stand no chance of inheriting the throne.
(as they spar)
The other half...they don't like how His Excellency keeps you so near to himself.

MARCO
I'm a servant. They know that.

HUNDRED EYES
The Great Kublai is a dreamer. So are you. More like him in that regard than his own blood.
(beat)
Do you see a man, near the Hall of Clarity, likely standing with four wives?

As they spar, Marco shifts his eyes, discreetly. He sees the Khan's cousin, the Siberian-faced Mongol, laughing with his FOUR WIVES (one of those wives, SUREN, is staring at Marco with eyes that suggest a rare forest lynx--a hungry one).

MARCO
Kaidu.

HUNDRED EYES
First cousin to the Khan. Beware. He is grandson of Ogedei. Therefore, he believes he is the rightful Khan. Where his eyes move, danger follows.

JINGIM (O.S.)
He fights more and more like a Chinese every day...

Jingim, the eldest son, enters the training field. Hundred Eyes bows.

JINGIM (CONT'D)
You train him well, Hundred Eyes. Did you hear he fought rebels at Xiangyang?

HUNDRED EYES
If bandits harm him, I am held accountable.

JINGIM
Did Hundred Eyes teach you the respectful name for the Chinese broadsword?

MARCO
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
The General of Weapons.

JINGIM
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
Have you met the Marshall?

With the sound of singing steel, Jingim unsheathes a razor-sharp Tai Chi sword.

JINGIM (CONT'D)
Please. Let us practice.

Marco looks at Hundred Eyes, hoping for intervention.

HUNDRED EYES
You are the prince, Jingim. Kill him. If that's your desire.

Marco throws a sardonic look at Hundred Eyes as the monk walks away a neutral distance. Marco stands half-ready with his broadsword, the sash hanging long. Jingim moves with a grace that is terrifying in its slow, flowing, controlled beauty.

As he circles Marco, the Venetian does a reverse shuffle step--almost fencing style. Hundred Eyes senses something, or hears it in the breeze.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
Do you wish to fuck him?

Marco remembers: quickly wraps the sash around his wrist just as Jingim lunges and thrusts. Marco blocks and parries--the sword match is on! Jingim wields his weapon like a paint brush, every slash and stab refined and containing uncanny internal power.

MARCO'S POV (SWIRLING): Spectators. Many Junior Khans, many courtesans.

MARCO

Swings back to Jingim,just in time to BLOCK a fierce sequence of stabs; knocked to the grass, he rolls and throws a leg sweep that nearly topples Jingim. But the Junior Khan recovers, whirls, forces Marco's sword high then drops him with a kick. This time he kneels on Marco's chest and touches the point of the scholar's sword at his throat.

JINGIM
If you ever attempt to humiliate me in the presence of the Khan again...

MARCO
You would risk an empire over pride? I report what I see.

JINGIM
And half the time you fill it with flourishes to make yourself more grand. You're a court storyteller, not a scholar-warrior. Mind your place, Foreigner.

He relaxes the sword, stands tall, and sheathes the blade. He bows to Hundred Eyes and starts off across the training ground. Kaidu and the others are laughing and cheering the fine performance.

With Jingim gone, Marco dusts himself off.

HUNDRED EYES
He beat you.

MARCO
Extraordinary, your powers of perception.

Hundred Eyes smiles as Marco slaps away dust, trying to restrain his Italian temper.

MOMENTS LATER -- CROSSING THE TRAINING FIELD

Marco and Hundred Eyes ride horseback, side by side, at a walk. The day's tutorial has come to a close and the sun is lowering behind Dragon Ridge Mountain.

HUNDRED EYES
Why are you here?

Marco turns a studious half-squint on the inscrutable monk.

MARCO
In the universe you mean....

HUNDRED EYES
No. Why are you <u>here</u>? Wasting my time.

Hundred Eyes senses the look and smiles.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
You've traveled to the ends of the earth. To search for <u>what</u>?

A beat.

MARCO
Wonders. Treasures. Stones that burn....oil that comes out of the ground...paper money. Sorcerers who sing sharks to sleep--

A GIRL BOXER soars by in flying pirouette...

MARCO (CONT'D)
--Girls who can fly. Printing presses that produce books by the hundreds. *Thousands*...while men back in Europe must write out page by page with a quill.

HUNDRED EYES
Mere trifles. I think you search for something far greater.

Marco turns a confused look on him, but--

FLYING GIRL
Marco!

The Flying Girl has a MALE BOXER pinned with a Tiger Style arm-bar. Her name is Khutulum, which means "Moonlight". She is as beautiful as she is formidable.

KHUTULUM
Wrestle me.

MARCO
No, Khutulum. If I beat you, you'd become my wife.

She laughs and slaps her fist into an open palm in challenge as she watches the Venetian ride on alongside the blind monk.

HUNDRED EYES
While you were away, a noble from Kyrgyzstan came and bet one-hundred horses that he would defeat her and win her hand. Her father is getting rich in horses, but can't get rid of his daughter.

Behind them, she does a spinning heel kick and rear-naked choke when her opponent tries to blind-side her.

MARCO
Why doesn't she just let herself lose and take a husband?

KHUTULUM
(overhearing)
Because I am Mongolian! Come wrestle, Marco--maybe I'll let you win!

MARCO
That's what I'm afraid of--and you are too much woman.

KHUTULUM
I will come tackle you, Marco!

MARCO
Maddonna mia, she scares me.

HUNDRED EYES
It is not the strength of Khutulum you should fear. It is the weakness of your own resolve. Why are you looking toward the Hall of Fragrance?

Marco looks away.

MARCO
I was just looking for my falcon, he--

HUNDRED EYES
-the Khan makes me teach you to navigate the dangers of the forbidden lands. But there are more dangers here, inside the Imperial Gates, than beyond the steppe. Beware, Master Marco. Our lesson is done for today.

Marco digests then bows deeply. Hundred Eyes does that inscrutable bow of his...then heels his horse and lopes away.

EXT. MARCO'S YURT -- NIGHT

Marco hitches his horse outside his round felt tent (albeit a large and luxurious one with a door made of snow leopard fur).

INT. MARCO'S YURT -- NIGHT

Marco attempts to light his lamp...but at the center of the yurt his stove ignites softly. He sees someone waiting in there for him.

SUREN, one of Kaidu's young wives, stands across the yurt half in shadow. Lynx-eyed, she scrutinizes Marco Polo.

SUREN
I came to light your stove. It is the way of we Mongol women from the western lands. A man should never return to a cold yurt. You have no wife.

MARCO
Kaidu has four. And you are one of them. You shouldn't be in here, Suren.

SUREN
You were beaten by Jingim's sword today. He made a fool of you before the court.

MARCO
Jingim began with the sword before he could walk.

SUREN
Yes, the spoiled prince. Educated by the best scholars in all of China. Even his name "Jingim" is Chinese. If the Great Khan were to die...I'm afraid we'd be ruled by one who is more Chinese than Mongol.

MARCO
Why do you come here, Suren?

SUREN
As I say...

Suren unbelts her silk robe and lets it slip off her long frame. She stands unclothed -- well-made in all respects -- before the young European.

SUREN (CONT'D)
A man should never return to a cold yurt. It is just not our way.

MARCO
Suren...

SUREN
I know what you're doing here, Marco. Like all foreigners, you've come to Asia to get rich.

MARCO
My father and uncle came here to get rich. I came here to see the wonders of the unknown world and, Lady, I must say...you rank high among them.

Suren is quite secure in that. She crosses to him and teases her silk belt around his neck, draws him taut to her nakedness.

MARCO (CONT'D)
But Xanadu is not like Tungut, or some lands where men share the comforts of their wives. It is a violation here, one that would see me cut in two by a sword.

SUREN
So, I'm not worth the risk...yet somebody else is?

Marco reacts, troubled.

SUREN (CONT'D)
The Blue Princess is promised to the Great Khan's nephew, Arghun, in Persia and yet...you hitch your horse in the virgin's garden on moonless nights?

MARCO
If you came to warm my tent, Suren...it's been done. Thank you.

Suren strips the silk belt from Marco's neck and puts her robe back on, wrapping it gracefully around her figure.

SUREN
There are very few who are so near to Kublai Khan. You will tell me what is discussed in the Hall of Wisdom and in his Council of Finance.
(as she crosses to the door)
Consider yourself indebted to my husband Kaidu. Who will one day be Khan. Perhaps we will make you a noble, not just a messenger boy. Until then...your trespass is safe with me.

As she reaches the door, she hesitates and looks back at him.

EXT. MARCO'S YURT -- NIGHT

Marco sees her out, watches her walk off into the night. He lets a breath free. Not one of those Ural-Altaic sounds that mean "yes", but rather an Italian sigh that means "God save my ass."

ZA BING (O.S.)
Ni hao...

Za Bing the Eunuch is passing by, dressed in ermine furs against the night chill. He's walking an OCELOT on a braided leash.

ZA BING (CONT'D)
Great Khan entrusts you much privilege. But has he ever told you where he keeps his most poisonous snakes? The Bamboo Snake, when it is a baby, is most deadly. It is said he hides several. Do you know where?

MARCO
If I did, Za Bing, I would not share the information with a gossip like you. Goodnight.

ZA BING
I will tell you where he hides these most deadly little vipers.

He leans close to Marco's ear and confides.

ZA BING (CONT'D)
In that woman's vagina.

Marco draws back as the Eunuch smiles and fans himself, walks on with the ocelot.

MARCO (V.O.)
Hundred Eyes is right: there are as many dangers within the imperial gates as there are without...

INT. MARCO'S YURT -- DAWN

Marco's quill, swan feather and bamboo, streaks ink onto parchment by the glow of burning coals.

MARCO (V.O.)
I wonder, at times, if my father is even still alive...somewhere out along the Silk Road, filling his purse with riches...while I fill pages with the things I see...in the kingdom of Kublai Khan...

EXT. XANADU -- MORNING

Marco trots on his horse, past the outer yurt camps.

MARCO (V.O.)
Back home in the west, his name alone conjures dread -- the most evil savage in a depraved line of rude barbarians, a detestable race of Satan...

ONE HUNDRED POOR MONGOLS and UIGHERS are in a food line at a distribution station set up near market stalls. As the ragged recipients receive their warm bread, they mill about in joy, shouting “Praise the Khan!”

MARCO (V.O.)
Yet, every day that passes makes me wonder if it is *we* who are the barbarians. No one goes hungry in the Empire of the Khan, and I do not lie when I say that some twenty thousand poor receive bread and a bowl of grain every single day of the year...

A WOMAN OFFICIAL walks past, leading TWO CHILDREN by the hand, one of them deformed.

MARCO
Homeless children are well cared for and educated...

Marco rides past CAGED TIGERS and MONGOL GUARDS, entering and crossing--

THE COURTYARD OF INVENTION

Where an INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF ENGINEERS work on various projects commissioned by the great Khan: early camshafts, crank-driven chain pumps, and water-powered astronomical clocks.

MARCO (V.O.)
The Grand Khan takes responsibility for public schooling for all--at no tithe, and I can tell you he has recently erected the Institute of Muslim Science to develop a new calendar. Everywhere one turns in Xanadu, the Khan's vision is alive...

Marco's eyes lift onto a war ship in progress. 450 feet from bow to stern, it is enormous and boasts four masts, each with square-rigged bamboo sails (not for another 500 years will European vessels reach this size and complexity).

MARCO (V.O.)
But I shall not pass over the particulars: most of the artisans and scholars serving the Khan are those he let live after slaughtering entire cities.

Marco slows his horse to a captivated walk through the multi-cultural bustle.

MARCO (V.O.)
Once conscripted into service to the Khan, a man may go about the empire as he pleases...but he cannot leave. As Hundred Eyes says: we are all prisoners here. Prisoners and privileged guests...

Marco looks on in awe at--

FOUR MUSLIM ENGINEERS: TALIB and his sons ABUBAKR, IBRAHIM, and MUHAMMAD (they work with a wild passion and urgent Arabic tongue).

MARCO
Magnificent, Talib. Four masts?

TALIB
Abubkar, Ibrahim! Show him!

Talib makes a formal gesture, inviting Marco to <u>ride his horse up the gangplank</u> of the ship--and he does. While--

Abubkar and Ibrahim grab at a winch and hoist another two masts high. The father, Talib, scurries energetically behind Marco's horse as it clip-clops over the mahogany deck.

TALIB (CONT'D)
Six mast! And when reefed? Behold!

The Muslim lads demonstrate how the sails can concertina on themselves like a Venetian blind. He looks skyward to where triple-crossbow siege weapons are being mounted on tall platforms. War machines...

Marco drinks it all in as he rides down off the opposite gangplank of the ship and onward through the ambitious brains trust of CHINESE ALCHEMISTS--his horse spooks slightly at some SMOKE from purified potassium nitrate--then he sees:

A TEAM OF NESTORIAN ENGINEERS testing a collapsible, portable bridge that can be assembled with haste by a dozen men hoping to cross, say, a fortress moat.

Marco turns down a lane and bows his head to a PHALANX OF GUARDS who allow him through.

INT. HALL OF WISDOM -- MORNING

The Khan sits, overlooking his administration and advisors. At this moment, all eyes--including Marco's--are on a TAIGA FOREST SHAMAN who is crouched in convulsions. Reindeer antlers and iron bells rattle from his shoulders as he uses a skin drum to carry an ancient glottal tongue.

Phags-Pa, the young Tibetan monk moves his eyes uneasily.

KUBLAI KHAN
The shaman from the Taiga speaks in a tongue so ancient most nomads today would not understand.

MARCO
What does he say?

The Khan hesitates, apparently not encouraged.

KUBLAI KHAN
He says the Song Court will never fall. Not until Tengu the Sky God wills it so...and sends thunder bolts from the heavens, destroying Xiangyang.

JINGIM
With great respect to Tengu and our ancestors, perhaps we should levy a tribute on Xiangyang...while we wait for such heavenly intervention.

KUBLAI KHAN
No, my son. No more waiting.

Silence is tense in the Hall of Wisdom.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
No more diplomacy. No more casting of yarrow stalks and reading the planets. The superior man wins without fighting, you say? I agree.

Jingim looks up, pleased.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
The superior man crushes everything in his path with such conviction that there *is* no fight. Summon my cousin...

GUARDS move out; OTHER GUARDS open a path. Kaidu, adorned in fox and sable appears backlit by the morning light. He comes down the aisle and bows before the Khan.

KAIDU
Grand Khan...

KUBLAI KHAN
Kaidu. You insinuated that I am becoming too Chinese in my government, too civilized.

Kaidu appears nervous, pinned by the riveting gaze of the ruling Khan.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Perhaps you are right. For too long a wind has blown between my House and the House of Ogedei. If we are to create a new dynasty led by the Mongols, we must come together *as* Mongols. Barbarians? Perhaps. But in my soul I know this: if the Golden Horde would only unite with Kublai Khan and ride under one banner, there is nothing that will stop us from opening the Yangtze and fulfilling the dream of our grandfather Chinggis.

Jingim tries not to stir. The spiritual advisors can only cling to their respective faiths. Marco Polo takes it all in.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Ride to Kashgar with a gift of white horses for my aunt. Under the mandate of heaven, prepare the Golden Horde for a great war.

Kaidu returns to his knees and bows.

EXT. XANADU -- TRAINING FIELD -- DAY

Marco is riding toward the training field when another horseman intercepts him. A horse*woman* rather. Suren, wearing the jeweled Mongol head-piece and dressed for travel.

MARCO
Safe journey back to the western lands.

SUREN
Who will warm your yurt?

MARCO
My horse. He's of a very loyal nature.

SUREN
What is the Khan's plan?

MARCO
I believe that's between His Majesty and your husband. I'm just a messenger boy.

This callback riposte makes her smile. Gamely.

SUREN
Some might wonder if the Khan is attempting to take control of Kaidu's estates in Turkestan. Can he be trusted?

MARCO
Can Kaidu?

Almost on cue, Kaidu rides past at the head of a small but fiercely-armored detachment. In tow: his three other wives and an eye-catching band of ALBINO HORSES.

SUREN
What wonders will you witness next, Polo?

MARCO
The thought excites the blood.

SUREN
But war can *spill* it -- and wolves will drink it-- be careful where your curiosity leads, my pretty man.

Suren falls in regally with the mounted procession, rides away with Kaidu.

Marco sits on his horse, adjacent to the Hall of Fragrance where he can see someone watching him from the front gardens. Kokachin, the forbidden one, strolling with Za Bing the Eunuch.

Marco turns his horse and begins riding opposite, he gives the martial salute to Hundred Eyes who is walking onto the training field.

HUNDRED EYES
Put more weight in your heels.

MARCO
How can you possibly know the position of my heels?

HUNDRED EYES
The timing of your horse's hooves.
(beat)
The Khan is sending you on another task?

MARCO
To Kungurat. To investigate the truth behind a legend.

HUNDRED EYES
The bandits in that province prefer a weapon that resembles a small scimitar, hooked at the blade to better remove your intestines.

MARCO
Thanks for the knowledge.

Marco rides off.

HUNDRED EYES
Heels down.

ZA BING (O.S.)
Master Marco...

The eunuch flags him, catches his breath. He hands a closed Chinese fan up to the traveler.

ZA BING (CONT'D)
Somebody wishes for you to have this. On your journey.

Marco turns the ivory spine of the fan over in his fingers.

MARCO
Please send my gratitude to Her Kindness.

INSERT: as the fan accordions open to reveal a delicate image of two flying cranes and some beautifully-drawn calligraphy.

MARCO closes the fan gently.

ZA BING
Marco. It's from *me*.

Marco looks down from his saddle and surrenders an amused look. He nods, rides away at a jog...a trot...and now a gallop.

HOOF CUT TO:

EXT. XIANGYANG -- DAY

Distant HORSEMEN are approaching the walled city. Primitive-looking horse warriors. CHANGSHAN WAR DRUMS begin to beat an alarm at the guarded ramparts.

INT. XIANGYANG -- DAY

The Chancellor gently removes a praying mantis from a fine lacquered box, sets it on the table and prods it with a thin bamboo, assessing its fighting ability. A LIEUTENANT approaches, hurried but controlled.

LIEUTENANT
An envoy. From the Tartars...

The Chancellor reacts.

IN THE WAR ROOM -- SHORT TIME LATER

FIVE MONGOLS, heavily armed, are escorted under lance and sword to a pavilion where the chancellor has seated himself, guarded on each side by CROSSBOWMEN.

The lead Mongol steps forward and bows his head slightly.

KAIDU
I am Kaidu of the Golden Horde.

CHANCELLOR
You are brave. Mongols entering the very capitol of the Song Dynasty.

Kaidu responds with a calm that is almost eerie.

KAIDU
A Mongol convoy once visited the city of Korezm to speak of commerce. They were captured and executed. In retribution for every hair on their heads, one hundred thousand heads rolled in the dust.

A pause.

KAIDU (CONT'D)
That's how we Mongols do things. I am not so much brave as I am a student of my people's history.

CHANCELLOR
Since when does Kublai wish commerce with the Song? He is a butcher who just takes what he wants.

KAIDU
Who said I am here to represent Kublai? I am elected Khan of the Chagatai and we have our differences with him. So, too, does his uncle Nayan in Manchuria.

The Chancellor appears to take a true interest now. This is promising...

KAIDU (CONT'D)
You are right, Prime Minister. Kublai takes what he wants and he wants your river so he can invade all of China and be emperor of a new dynasty. Me? Kaidu Khan? I wish for the Yangtze to be a frontier between the Mongol and Chinese states. If we nomads came together, all of our tribes...could we destroy this last stronghold of the Southern Song?

He does that Mongolian intake of breath that means "you can bet your ass."

KAIDU (CONT'D)
We will allow Xiangyang to stand. Let the Song Dynasty return to its glory under your leadership. In exchange...you pay the Golden Horde an annual tribute in currency.

CHANCELLOR
But what of Kublai? What if he still chooses to attack with the Mongol horsemen who remain loyal to him?

KAIDU
Oh, he does. He will be coming. But as partners, perhaps we will help him to accept that he has outlived his reign.

The Chancellor sits back fairly intoxicated by this opportunity.

CHANCELLOR
And the tribute we would pay to your nation each year?

KAIDU
200,000 taels of silver. 200,000 bolts of silk.

The Chancellor ruminates for a moment. He leans forward and delicately removes an arrow from the ornate quiver slung over Kaidu's own shoulder.

He hands this arrow, beautifully fletched in goose feathers, to Kaidu. Kaidu takes the arrow in his hands--holds it for a moment--and he breaks it. A vow.

EXT. GOLDEN LOTUS PLAIN -- DAYS/WEEKS LATER

Marco rides out of the fireball glow of an Inner Mongolian sunset, the grass higher now--almost to his horse's hocks.

MARCO
Hundred Eyes!

Hundred Eyes is standing off, an easy breeze in his long topknot and his saffron robes. He is listening to the hoofbeats--because there are more than just one set of hooves.

MARCO (CONT'D)
It is no legend!

Cresting the grasslands just behind Marco are 50 DROP-DEAD BEAUTIFUL WOMEN, standing young and tall in three yak-drawn wagons.

MARCO (CONT'D)
The women of Kungurat are a species unto their own!

Tribal Belly dancers, that's what they appear to be: supple and feline in fitted hip belts and beaded fringe; dangling headpieces made of pearls. Their striking hair is cut Cleopatra style, nose-jewels, eyes painted in kohl. Several are calling "Marco" by name in dulcet giggles. Apparently, they've bonded with the young ambassador along the journey.

As Marco leads them past Hundred Eyes and a GATHERING CROWD...

MARCO (CONT'D)
The Khan will be pleased.

HUNDRED EYES
No doubt.

INT. HALL OF THE FIVE DESIRES -- NIGHT

In an enormous candle-lit bed of silk and oils, three of the Khan's four wives lay with the girls from Kungurat. It is an hypnotic orgy on a grand scale glimpsed only in soft angles: long naked legs and buttocks (as they perform "Turning Dragon"), lips touching necks, tongues lightly teasing ("Fluttering Phoenix"), Persian love beads and oils...forbidden objects made of smooth carved jade...

Marco drifts through the softly-lit chamber, intoxicated by perfumes and musk and the gentle moaning and purring.

MARCO (V.O.)
After passing through two rooms of judges who examine the maidens' hair, eyebrows, mouth, lips, sweetness of breath and the proportion of their limbs...those most fair and sound then go lay with the Khan's wives to be tested in the arts of desire...

Marco runs a hand through his shock of hair as if to stay focused on his path to...

THE GREAT KHAN

Who lies on a silk lounge with his eldest wife Chabi, drinking plum wine. Chabi is mixing some powdered substance in a lacquered bowl.

MARCO (V.O.)
Only the finest of the concubines are chosen for the Khan's own bed, each rewarded with twenty carats of gold. This honor makes them rich as it does their families back home...

CHABI
Our Lord has had so much on his mind. This treasure from Kungurut has put him in an excellent humor.

KUBLAI KHAN
Do they fear me in Kungurut?

MARCO
Indeed. A fear so marvelous it has become as love. They love you for not crushing their city.

Chabi pats the bed. Marco lays himself down, gazing up at the carved dragon roof. Chabi sees him eyeing the mixture she is putting in the Khan's wine.

CHABI
Horn of rhinoceros. His Majesty has a busy three nights ahead.

KUBLAI KHAN
How is your horse?

MARCO
Good, Sire, good.

KUBLAI KHAN
Would you accept the gift of a new one? A spectacular white mare from the royal herd.

A beat.

MARCO
I would be honored, Your Grace. But Batu has become as my brother.

KUBLAI KHAN
(to Chabi)
See? He is becoming Mongol.

CHABI
After the choosing, there will be a surplus of girls. Perhaps a young man will take one or two to his yurt and warm his bed, find a wife. The Khan would surely provide a dowry.

The Khan gives an insouciant shrug.

MARCO
Again, I am honored...how shall I say this? Back at my home, the vaporettos sing a song, in the canals after midnight...
(in Italian then translates)
Love is a single soul inhabiting two bodies....

KUBLAI KHAN
You need to expand your estate, Marco.

CHABI
She waits for you? Back in Europa?

Marco hesitates.

MARCO
Life can get complicated some times, Lady Chabi.

KUBLAI KHAN
Now he is speaking like a Confucian--in riddles.

Marco is up, something bittersweet in his eyes. He bows, requests to leave.

CHABI
You look skinny. Go feast. With the barons.

MARCO
Peace upon you.

KUBLAI KHAN
Are you not going to wish me good luck?

MARCO
I would if I thought my king needed it.

Kublai's eyes crinkle into an infectious grin. Chabi dabs some plum wine and rhino dust off her husband's bottom lip.

Marco leaves the Hall of Five Desires, trying not to look down the hall toward the taboo whispers of "Dragon rolls Pearl".

EXT. DRAGON RIDGE -- ON GOLDEN LOTUS PLAIN -- NIGHT

A full and dramatic summer moon ignites the ridge where Marco sits tall on Batu, a second pony tethered to his saddle ring. He is waiting for someone. Still, he starts when--

She comes out of the dark, a hood hiding her identity.

MARCO
I prayed you'd come.

KOKACHIN
To which god?

MARCO
All of them, like the Khan. I left no prophet unsummoned.

KOKACHIN
My heart is going to beat from my chest.

He turns his horse and reveals the second mount. She hesitates, nervous.

MARCO
I'd help you mount, but it'd be an insult to a Mongolian woman.

She goes up into the saddle like she's done it all her life--which she has. Her hood falls back as she savors the feeling of being on a horse again. Marco smiles at the sight: her short Mongolian jacket of ornate design, her hair tailed long, past her hips.

KOKACHIN
This is my home: the horse and bow.
Not in the Hall of Fragrance.
Waiting to replace a dying queen
far away.

MARCO
The moon rises right over there between Two Old Women Ridge. Shall we?

After a reflective beat--still thinking about her fate-- she looks at Marco and smiles. He kicks flank and they both gallop off, she the better rider.

MOON GLOW INTERLUDE -- FORBIDDEN LOVE THEME (in the Asian romance style of Tan Dun or Umbebayashi).

Marco Polo and Kokachin, the blue princess of Mongol history, canter side by side toward the river. Racing the moon light...getting there...catching the traces of gold on the water.

With their horses close together, they hold hands and witness the natural energies of Tengu the Sky God. She breathes in the chill dawn air. He brings her hand to his lips, kisses it gently in a Venetian manner that the Mongol girl finds foreign, disconcerting, and exciting as hell.

DISSOLVE TO:

ON A SHEEP SKIN BLANKET -- OUT UNDER THE MOON

Marco and Kokachin make passionate love. Yet, the young couple stop just short of intercourse--no matter how urgently both of them moan.

When Marco can no longer restrain, she stops him, her fingers forming a spear point at his throat.

KOKACHIN
Touch the gate, but do not enter.

MARCO
Sei bella...

As he holds back, practicing “jade stalk touching the gate”, he kisses her ear and they whisper.

KOKACHIN
The woman strengthens her yin. The man must subdue the white tiger, Marco. Must keep the yang inside. My attendants have taught me this.

MARCO
Kokachin. You are silk...

KOKACHIN
You are just inside the jade gate, Marco. No further.

MARCO
My God...

Marco has to roll over onto his back, grab fistfuls of river grass. He laments in a mix of pained laughter and what sounds like a Latin prayer. Finally, he looks at her, gathers his breath.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Shall we run?

KOKACHIN
(out of breath)
It is true. You are a dangerous foreign devil.

Marco rolls onto his side, gazes out toward the lanterns of Xanadu, the impossible dream of vast riches, not yet awake.

MARCO
I mean across the Steppe. Back to *Shang-du*. Before Za Bing finds you missing from your bed.

She looks into his eyes. Is that what he truly meant? But there is little time for deciphering such things.

KOKACHIN
Za Bing is drunk on plum wine. But, yes--we must hurry.

She gathers her clothing...

OUTSIDE THE HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- SHORT TIME LATER

The young lovers trot side by side in the glow of dawn -- almost to the Hall of Fragrance gate -- when a MOUNTED SQUAD OF MONGOL GUARDS jog out of the smoke of sandalwood fires, coming right at them. The unit intercepts them in a suspicious manner.

MARCO
I can explain. She is just--

As he looks to Kokachin, he finds that <u>she is not there.</u> Her saddle is empty. The Guards squint at Marco like he's been sampling exotic roots.

MARCO (CONT'D)
She is just a young mare. I've been up on the ridge, teaching her to race. Good blood. Like her sire.

The Guards stare at him. Something about those primal Genghis Khan beards and leather helmets that chill the ass. But then one of them breathes a tone that Marco understands.

Marco produces the Golden Tablet. The Guards open a lane for him, allow him to trot in through Xanadu. As he goes, he looks over his shoulder at the magnolia trees branching and billowing over the walls of the Hall of Fragrance.

FROM THOSE BRANCHES

Kokachin, a slight breeze in her hair, color in her cheeks, watches the Guards ride past...then slips down over the wall.

INT. MARCO'S YURT -- JUST BEFORE DAWN

Marco enters his yurt, closes the door. He starts forward, then freezes when he sees--

A KUNGURUT GIRL sprawled across his bed, on her side. Slender curves, jeweled navel.

KUNGURUT GIRL
Marco--

A SECOND KUNGURUT GIRL, naked, pops up from behind the first.

SECOND KUNGURUT GIRL
--Polo.

As Marco stares at the two giggling Afghan belly dancers in his bed, a female hand with many rings comes around from behind, teasing his Mongol trousers.

THIRD KUNGURUT GIRL
Marco...

As his sword belt comes undone, one of first two pulls him toward the bed, the third pushing lightly from behind.

MARCO
Madonna mia..

EXT. TRAINING FIELD -- MORNING

Marco, his hair disheveled and looking like a debauched sailor, walks out to meet someone.

HUNDRED EYES
You are late.

MARCO
With regret, *Sifu*. I will train beyond the sun if it pleases you.

The blind monk tosses him a new weapon today. The Shaolin whip chain. Hundred Eyes stands there for a profound beat.

HUNDRED EYES
We are weak in our legs this morning, yes?

INT. XIANYANG -- IMPERIAL BEDROOM -- DAY

The Chancellor sits on a lounge in silk robe, gazing off.

CHANCELLOR
When you have two pennies left in the world...use one to buy a loaf of bread. With the other...

She turns from the balustrade, HUA LIN the concubine.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
...Buy a Golden Flower.

Her beauty is unbearable. Adorned in red silk, hair coiled and pinned with jade-colored glass. When the Prime Minister gestures, she loosens the pin and lets her hair drop free.

He smiles, admires her perfume. He calls her to him and she obeys, kneels between his legs. With a delicate brush in his hand he does her eyes, paints them heavily. Then he does her lips a darker ruby; he does the cosmetics with an artisan's focus.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Go stand in the light.

Hua Lin goes there, her movements like silk. The Chancellor gestures to the wall, where a sword is sheathed in a hanging belt. Hua Lin hesitates...then removes the sword.

She waits for the next stage direction, but there is none. The Chancellor just stares transfixed.

Hua Lin handles the sword like an awkward child, acting as though the blade is too heavy. Then, just as suddenly, she assumes a skilled Shaolin sword stance, sword held out in elegance, opposite hand at her ear, two fingers melded together. She is highly trained and does a kung fu form with operatic beauty...

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
I can see why you're the emperor's favorite consort. Why he takes you in his bed and you whisper into his ear...secrets. Then you come here and sleep with my commanders, collecting more naughty secrets to whisper in Duzhong's ear.

All the while, her kung fu dance of death continues in the slants of light blading across red lacquered tiles. She coils now into the stance of the Phoenix Dancing in Ninth Heaven. It is both sensual and threatening.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Do the honorable thing.

She has the sword drawn back across her ear, drawn so tight she could slice a strand of her hair. Her eyes are crazy/ beautiful; at any second it seems she might assassinate the Chancellor.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Your family lives here in Xiangyang. What you do, and the words you speak as you do it...will determine their fate.

With a tear streaking the garish Kabuki make-up, Hua Lin spirals in crane-like ballet and brings the sword high in two refined hands. The Chancellor appears utterly captivated.

She wants to call him terrible things, insult his honor. But he's got her in a corner--and he loves it.

HUA LIN
Prime Minister is great. Jia Sidao is a hero.
(she raises the blade higher)
May Song Dynasty endure ten-thousand more years...

In a moment nearly forgotten by history -- but still remembered in the folk songs of Zhejiang Province -- the concubine commits suicide in front of the "Cricket Minister".

EXT. XANADU -- NIGHT

A MONGOL EXPRESS RIDER gallops hellbent on a fast horse, dust tailing. His head is swathed in desert rags.

The Rider wears a bandolier of BELLS so he can be heard at a distance as he bears down on--

THE IMPERIAL GATES

And presents his Golden Tablet to GUARDS. FOOTMEN run out ahead of him with torches, lighting his way through--

THE IMPERIAL GROUNDS

Where Marco, shirtless and eating from a bowl of rice, steps out from his yurt to inspect the sound of BARKING DOGS and MESSENGER BELLS.

KUBLAI KHAN (V.O.)
My cousin Kaidu has sent word from Kashgar...

INT. HALL OF WISDOM -- NEXT MORNING

Kublai Khan presides over his 25-man Cabinet as well as his GENERALS and MILITARY ADVISORS.

Marco sits on a cushion by the wall, witness to history.

KUBLAI KHAN
On the night of the Lotus Moon, the Golden Horde will unite with us on the banks of the Han River...to lay siege to Xiangyang. My heart is pleased by this solidarity.

The Mongols in the room draw in breath. Marco moves his eyes from the Grand Khan to the generals, calibrating their reaction.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
The campaign will be led by my Generals: Aju, grandson of the great Subedei...

AJU is a fierce-looking Mongol at the hardened old age of 32. Beside him is ALI-HAIYA, a dark-skinned man with a cataract in one eye.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Ali-haiya, a Uighur of renown. My navy will be led by Admiral Liu Cheng, who has defected from the Song to stand in arms with the Mongols. No one knows the rivers of South China better...

LIU CHENG sits with a face like carved marble, a Zen master in the art of nautical war. He needs to spit and does so into a porcelain vase.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Among the leaders of my horse warriors will be ten of my forty-seven sons, five from principal marriages. At the crest of this battallion--my son Jingim Khan.

Jingim inhales slow and steady, eyes set ahead. A proud and defining moment for the crown prince.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Let us prepare.

At a gesture, AJU'S LIEUTENANT drives his heel into a rolled carpet, unscrolling it open. In fact, it is not a carpet, but an epic map on silk.

The Generals encircle it. As Admiral Liu Cheng touches a long scimitar to the South China diagram, he begins an impassioned treatise in MANDARIN...

EXT. ARENA OF THE HORSES -- DAY

MONGOL HORSEMEN are practicing war games. Hundred Eyes stands down on the field, listening as a RAM'S HORN is sounded and--

A Mongol Rider explodes out of formation and gallops across the arena. A Second Horseman is charging toward him, each armed with a 12 foot lasso pole. They COLLIDE at center and the Second Horseman ropes the First off his horse.

UP ON A PAVILION

The Khan sits with his Four Wives, watching the war games. Nearby, BARONS and OTHER NOBLES sit as well. Among them, Kokachin, her Attendants, and Za Bing the Eunuch.

DOWN IN THE ARENA

The victorious Mongol Rider races back to the formation, and in tag-team fashion, touches the poll of another warrior's horse. Now this one rockets forward, clutching his lasso pole. GREAT CHEERS go up, mixed with AMUSED LAUGHTER.

HUNDRED EYES cocks his head, feeling the feverish hoofbeats punch past him, weighing the nuance of the laughter.

ON HIS HORSE, MARCO storms an opponent, a round-faced young man named BYAAMBA, son of a royal concubine.

BYAAMBA
Behold me, Foreigner! I am descended from the line of Chinggis! Son of Kublai!

IN THE FORMATION Jingim, in leather armor, rolls his eyes; a foreigner squaring off with a wanna-be prince.

UP ON THE PAVILION

The Khan observes, expressionless. His wife Chabi leans close while the Three Other Wives TRILL wildly.

CHABI
Your son Byaamba.

KUBLAI KHAN
Ah. The one with the eyes like my brother Mongkhe'. Good rider. Distinguished with the lance. Who does he fight?

CHABI
Marco.

The Khan watches.

KOKACHIN stops fanning herself, takes interest.

DOWN IN THE ARENA

Marco and Byaamba charge each other like a cross between Cheyenne warriors and medieval knights. As they collide, Marco slams Byaamba with his lasso pole, but the Mongolian deftly lands the loop around Marco's horse's head and makes him rear.

Marco is thrown from saddle and lands in the horse shit and dust to a great burst of TRILLS and HOLLERS. Byaamba prances his horse around him to rub in the victory.

BYAAMBA
Go back to Greece!

MARCO
(pained ribs)
Italy...

UP ON THE PAVILION

Kokachin stands in worried reflex. All eyes go to her. Slowly, she sits again, fanning herself.

DOWN IN THE ARENA

A KETTLE DRUM is booming now. Marco, dusting himself off, feels a horse trot by closely.

GENERAL AJU
You. Latin. On your horse. We need you at east flag.

Marco quickly mounts Batu and joins in--

A MONGOL ROUND-UP AND DRIVE

As 100 HORSES are released from a holding pen and allowed into the arena. With great fanfare--and the DRUM STILL BEATING--Marco, Byaamba, Jingim, Aju, and other horsemen drive the wild herd up and down the arena.

ON A THIRD PASS -- MARCO

Sees a rolled and tethered carpet in the dusty arena center. HOOVES STAMPEDE over it, crush it. Then circle back...

MARCO
Jingim! What's in the carpet?
Millet? Are we milling grain?

Jingim does a take as his horse passes Marco.

JINGIM
Sanga. Sanga is in the carpet.

MARCO
Sanga?

Marco watches the HORSE HERD PULVERIZE the carpet for a fifth time.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Sanga, the Minister of Finance?

JINGIM
His accounting did not match the tax receipts from Daidu.
(beat)
He stole.

Jingim rides on, working his whip at the rear of the herd. Marco just sits on his saddle, observing Mongol justice. He does not join in for a sixth stampede. He looks up at--

THE PAVILION

Where the Khan is now leaving. The tails of his silken robes forming a train as he ascends, his vast ENTOURAGE on all sides of him.

INT. HALL OF MEDICINE -- NIGHT

The Khan is stretched out, half naked, on a grand cushion with acupuncture pins in many parts of his body. A CHINESE HEALER kneels over him, gently positioning the needles by candle light.

Marco enters, watching the strange treatment with intrigue. He goes to one knee, lowers his head.

MARCO
You summoned me, Sire?
(met with silence)
Is it the gout? The nights have been damp...

KUBLAI KHAN
My *chi* is trapped in my spleen. I need to get it traveling to more strategic parts of the body, if you understand my meaning.

MARCO
Indeed, My Lord...

The Khan says something in a Northern dialect and the Healer bows, crawls from the dark space, acupuncture needles still imbedded in the Great Khan's massive body.

KUBLAI KHAN
When we train a war pony, Marco, we judge his condition by the taste of his sweat. At first, it is a "mud sweat" thick on the tongue. After months of training he breaks a "clay sweat", and then--after much training--that day comes when he breaks a "pure sweat". The *sweetness*, we call it. And we know the young colt is ready to ride with the best of the Mongol horses.

Marco isn't sure where this is leading...

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
I am considering that Master Marco ride with the Khan's army. At the rear, so his eyes miss nothing. What does your distinguished mind say on this matter?

MARCO
If I don't go, Sire...who will tell the Great Khan so that the triumph comes to life for him to see?

KUBLAI KHAN
If you don't go, Marco...who will tell the *world*...so that the triumph lives forever.

A look passes between them.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Go now. My *chi* has moved into the jade stalk. I must conquer a territory of another kind. My third wife has been feeling neglected.

Marco bows and starts out. The Khan watches him move to the door.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Marco...I send you into war with the same heavy heart that I send my own sons. It is not an easy decision.

Marco looks back at him, moved. With another bow, he leaves His Lord to the Chinese medicine. MONGOLIAN THROAT SINGING drones hauntingly over--

EXT. XANADU -- DAY

Chabi stands on a grassy hill, sprinkling mare's milk to the Four Directions as Buddhist Monks bang instruments from up on tiled balustrades and Taoist Priests burn incense.

A MONGOL WAR PARTY rides out of Xanadu, horse soldiers wearing lacquered leather armor and the savage Chinggis Khan styled helmets. Aju, the famed general rides at the lead with Jingim and OTHER KHAN SONS.

WOMEN TRILL from each side of the road as their men march to war. Kokachin, the Blue Princess, is out there watching them leave. There is no remorse in her eyes; she is a Mongolian woman and she looks on with steady eyes at--

MARCO, riding at the rear with A FEW FOREIGN ASTROLOGERS and CAMEL DRUMMERS. The handsome venetian wears a metal helmet with leather neck cloak. An ornate quiver of arrows is slung from his saddle, a scimitar at his belt. Batu, his horse, also wears boiled leather armor.

Marco's eyes lift to a HIGH PAVILION where The Khan himself watches his army ride out of Xanadu.

Marco sees Hundred Eyes standing formally by the road with other conscripted monks and artisans. Then he looks over his shoulder for one last look at Kokachin, heartbreakingly beautiful.

INT. XIANGYANG -- SUNSET

The rival army stands amassed on the military floor, a frightening sight. Their armor is markedly different than the Mongol style, featuring chain mail and iron helms with elaborate carving. They REPEAT THE FIERCE CHANT of General RED BROW and then the fortress town falls chillingly silent.

The Chancellor now stands before them in his ornate robes.

CHANCELLOR
A more fierce army I have never seen. You all know what is at stake.
(as he strolls before them)
But it has come to the attention of your prime minister that one of his great soldiers has questioned the political order of the Song Court.

THE FACES OF THE SOLDIERS could be terra-cotta. SWEAT doesn't drip, it courses over their branded tattoos.

RED BROW
Yang Chun!

The soldier who steps forward is six cubits and a span tall, sleeveless armor revealing arms like Burmese pythons. His hair and beard are insane--a perfect example of the kind of marsh outlaws and mercenaries among these Song rebels.

Called out to the floor, he towers over--

CHANCELLOR
You are the one called Whirlwind Tiger? From Liangshan?

WHIRLWIND TIGER brings his hands together in salutation.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Your name is famous here. You have mastered the Long Fist style and the Five Animals of Shaolin.

Whirlwind Tiger bows deeply, every sinew rippling.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Whom do you serve?

WHIRLWIND TIGER
May the Song endure ten-thousand years!

CHANCELLOR
The walls have ears, my friend. You spoke against the court.

WHIRLWIND TIGER
With humility and respect, I observed our chancellor's practice of little insect games. I mentioned it as a...curious hobby. Those were the only words whispered, Great Chancellor.

The Chancellor stares intently into the small eyes of the big soldier. Perhaps he will let it go. Then he smiles. Holding his arms out he summons a PAGE to remove his silk robe. The Chancellor's underlayer is a black silk uniform with white collar.

Whirlwind Tiger shifts his hard eyes as the smaller man begins to circle him, slowly.

CHANCELLOR
Show me your Long Fist. Show me your Five Animals of Shaolin. Defeat me, you are promoted to a command post--with all the residual income and pleasures.

Whirlwind Tiger carefully shifts his weight as the Chancellor tightens the casual circle.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
However...if I defeat you, you are my whore.

Whirlwind Tiger seethes, but contains it. The Chancellor makes a sudden move into a *bai jong* stance. Whirlwind Tiger refuses to engage.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Insult me, you die. Show me why they fear you in Liangshan and why the name Whirlwind Tiger is famous.

Chancellor throws a finger jab; Whirlwind Tiger blocks it, effortlessly. Chancellor smiles. Game on, he circles faster. Tiger drops low into a *Hung Gar* stance and deftly establishes his fighting measure.

The entire army stands rapt as the two square off. Then Chancellor lunges at the soldier with a flurry of strikes and kicks. Whirlwind Tiger deflects them all and lands a Crane strike to the neck of the prime minister.

Emboldened, he whirls with a spinning ax kick, and that's when it happens: the Chancellor traps the kick with his hands held in "mantis claws." Whirlwind Tiger spins free and attacks with a flurry...

The Chancellor intercepts every strike with Praying Mantis moves and then fires a lightning-quick blow to the bridge of the soldier's nose, dropping him.

A GREAT HUSH of awe spreads through the fortress. Whirlwind Tiger rolls to his feet, sweating even harder. He cannot believe what he is tangling with.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Take up a weapon.

Whirlwind Tiger hesitates a beat then turns to the phalanx, grabs a broadsword. He spins at the chancellor, "flowering" the sword in a deadly blur and goes for his head.

The Chancellor seems to transform into a praying mantis as he sucks in the surge of power, clasps the sword arm in a Mantis Hook, twists low, and BREAKS THE SOLDIER'S ELBOW with a sound like splintered wood.

SLOW MOTION: the Chancellor goes airborne and SPINS 360 with a kick that fractures the jaw. As Whirlwind Tiger falls, Chancellor goes with him, <u>lashing a Mantis Claw at a vital meridian point</u> under the big man's arm and paralyzing him.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
A most curious hobby, yes?

The Chancellor drives the broadsword downward, his knee on the blade and CUTS THE SOLDIER'S HEAD OFF (in a move called Mantis Beheads Its Prey).

Now he stands before the army taking great satisfaction in their transfixed gazes. He holds his arms out and the Page hurries to him, helps him back into his silk robe.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
One rotten log can weaken the forest.
(beat)
The Devil's Horsemen are coming.
The forest must be impenetrable.
General...

As the Chancellor exits, Red Brow takes over, SHOUTING COMMANDS.

EXT. SOUTHERN STEPPE -- DAY

COLUMNS OF MONGOLS ride up a gradual slope, Jingim at the helm of the LIGHT CAVALRY. He stops at the crest to look down the spectacular cliffs at--

THE HAN RIVER (BIRD'S EYE VIEW):

50 MONGOL BATTLE SHIPS, those cutting-edge designs by the Muslim engineers, V-shaped hulls knifing downriver. The ships are filled with MONGOL SOLDIERS, some even with HORSES.

A SHOUT echoes opposite and Jingim turns to see a WILD-LOOKING MONGOL HORSEMAN coming out of a misty tree line. His dress style and weaponry appear more Persian than the Khan's army. He hands General Aju a scroll, bows his head, then wheels his horse and whips him urgently back to the trees.

As Jingim watches him go, someone else moves his horse up alongside him.

MARCO
(re: the lone rider)
Golden Horde?

JINGIM
You are not to ride with the light cavalry.

MARCO
The astrologers back there, they speak a tongue I don't know.

JINGIM
Uzbekestani. It is not so difficult.

MARCO
I just want to be certain that I understand Aju's strategy--

BYAAMBA
Do not tell him!

There he is--the round-faced Khan son who knocked Marco off his horse during training.

BYAAMBA (CONT'D)
Concubines, jugglers, and court scribes are all potential spies.
(to Marco)
Go back to where the horses shit, Latin.

Byaamba rides on, emboldened by the laughter of his unit.

MARCO
Your half-brother doesn't like to speak his mind does he?

JINGIM
It is the sons of my father's consorts who speak the loudest.
(beat)
When you see us retreat from the enemy, know that we're not cowards--

MARCO
--crow and wolf formation. Like when we hunt...

JINGIM
When we retreat into the river basin, Kaidu's army will attack our pursuers from the trees. Poison arrows will take their horses out from under them and then we behead the fallen. With their field army down, we form a second prong with Liu Chen's navy. March divided, attack united.

MARCO
And once inside the fort?

A beat.

JINGIM
Kill everything that moves.

Marco nods, understands. As he begins to turn back to the rear of the march, he gives Jingim a lingering look, sees something in his face; the scholar-warrior who is, perhaps, more at ease with the scholar part (as opposed to the barbarism that he knows he must perpetuate as heir to the khanate).

Jingim leads the Light Cavalry down the other side of the scenic slope. Marco returns to "the back of the line."

EXT. XIANGYANG -- NIGHT

The walled city, lit by torches at the battlements and drum tower. It is silent but for one sound: CRICKETS. The night chirping is hypnotic even as it deafens. The sound comes from <u>within the walls</u>, not from without.

INT. XIANGYANG -- CHANCELLOR'S IMPERIAL QUARTERS -- NIGHT

The Chancellor kneels in meditation before a bank of candles and Taoist shrine. His eyes are closed. But when the CRICKETS STOP CHIRPING and all goes dead silent...his eyes open.

Game time.

EXT. HAN RIVER -- JUST NORTH OF XIANGYANG -- NIGHT

Admiral Liu Cheng, the Song defector leading the Khan's nautical troops, stands at the helm of the lead vessel as it moves silently toward the torch glow of the fortress town (the sails are wisely secured now and FOUR-MAN OAR teams are silently rowing).

The sound of the crickets abruptly ceasing their chirps registers in the Admiral's eyes. And something else... something out of place...

POV: hay bales. Massive bales of dry straw lining the banks.

ADMIRAL LIU CHENG

Doesn't like it. As if in a silent chess match with an unseen opponent, he appears forced to make a split decision. He waves an arm and--

FROM A HIGH MAST

A Mongol banner of the sun and moon sweeps east and west, rippling in the wind.

AN ARCHER

Does the Mongolian "thumb-draw" of a recurve bow and aims an arrow toward the stars. An arrow with a hole through the metal head: a "Devil's Howler". He LAUNCHES IT.

THE ARROW

Rockets toward the constellations, making a terrifying BANSHEE SOUND.

EXT. IN THE RIVER BASIN GRASS -- NIGHT

Jingim, sitting ready on his horse, hears the Howler. HIS KNEE-HIGH BOOT hitches up and heels his horse's flank.

IN THE REAR SQUADRON

Marco looks up at the whistling sound. He hears and feels a MASS SHIFT FORWARD, a mass of men and horses. Batu nickers nervously...

EXT. HAN RIVER -- JUST NORTH OF XIANGYANG -- NIGHT

Suddenly, the Mongol war vessels are lit up as if by some magical conjuring of daylight. Flames flicker off the sweat on Admiral Liu Cheng's startled face.

The HAY BALES LINING THE BANKS are ON FIRE, and from behind them, SONG REBEL ARCHERS rise up and unload. Ambush.

ON THE MONGOL WAR SHIPS

MONGOL ARCHERS, high up on the uniquely designed shooting platforms, are impaled by gusts of arrows. Several of the Archers tumble to the river.

FROM THE BATTLEMENTS OF XIANGYANG

Triple cross-bow siege weapons fire 5 pound POISON AND SMOKE BALLS down onto--

THE SHIP DECKS

They EXPLODE in a burning lava of arsenic, human excrement, and blister beetles (early napalm). Liu Cheng, scimitar drawn, fights through SMOKE to give the order and drop a gangplank from another ship, releasing--

50 MONGOL HORSEMEN

Onto the pontoon bridge that connects Xiangyang to the other side of the Han River. They gallop across the bridge, stampeding the fort. A few of them FIRE ARROWS from a gallop and snipe the SONG SIEGE MEN off the battlements. But they're like cockroaches-- when one gets crushed, another takes his place.

EXT. IN THE RIVER BASIN GRASS -- NIGHT

Jingim leads a mounted charge--in eerie silence--toward the moat surrounding the fort from the land side

A SONG FIELD ARMY mounted on large armored horses meets the charge, shields and javelins up.

Jingim's band breaks off from the others. Just as in the hunting games back in Xanadu, they split up into five units, yet moving as one school of fish (communicating via banners).

The Mongol “crows” attack the Song charge, shooting arrows and harassing the enemy at the flanks. The Mongol “wolves” with heavy lances fill in the gaps. A DOZEN SONG REBELS go down, only A FEW MONGOLS are hit...and that’s when Jingim shouts a single sound (*Ereg! Ereg!*). Pretending to be overcome, the Mongol horsemen turn tail and retreat at a blazing gallop.

IN THE REAR SQUADRON

Marco sees the retreat coming toward him. He reins Batu around to run--

DOWN INTO A VALLEY

Where Marco then canters up the far side of the grassy lip so he can wheel about and watch the Mongol strategy unfold, his composite bow ready just in case.

ON THE PONTOON BRIDGE

Mongol Horsemen GALLOP, advancing on the fortress.

ON THE WALLS OF XIANGYANG

General Red Brow gives a command and--

THE PONTOON BRIDGE

EXPLODES! Men and horses are BLOWN SKY HIGH into the night; FLAMES light the river blood red.

EXT. IN THE HAN VALLEY -- NIGHT

Jingim and the “Wolf” units continue their fake retreat, luring Song Cavalry into the valley. But when they get there and begin to scatter, Jingim whips his head east and west. Something is wrong. The Golden Horde are not there to carry out the plan.

FROM THE GRASSY RIDGE

Marco sees this, his pulse in his neck.

MARCO
Kaidu...where are you...

DOWN IN THE VALLEY

The Song Cavalry, enspirited by the perfect ambush, fall upon the smaller Mongol bands. Outnumbering them 6 to 1 they engage in--

MARTIAL WARFARE

lit in a night prism of moon beam and distant flashes of fireworks. The Mongol Cavalry, silent till now, ERUPT INTO WARRIOR TRILLS AND HOWLS. WAR DRUMS start up from the backs of camels on the high ridge...

Jingim pivots in his saddle, fires a “Parthian Shot” at a gallop, then draws his scimitar and CUTS THE ARM OFF an onrushing Song Rebel. FLYING BLOOD -- JINGIM SOARS -- out of his saddle, rolls in the grass and comes up fighting hand-to-hand. In blazing Long Fist style, he strips a Song Rebel of his lance, uses it like a staff to block, thrust, whirl, and impale a CHARGING HORSE.

Byaamba, the Khan’s concubine son, is on his feet in the bloody grass, fighting like an uncaged wolverine. Advancing in a cat-stance shuffle, he sweeps his blade in deceptive figure 8’s, slicing through chain mail, cutting off limbs and heads.

The Song Rebels use their array of weapons and training to great advantage while--

General Aju, great Mongol general, is in the fray, too. Unlike the yowlers and screamers, he fights with a Zen stillness, using a lance hook to snag chainmail and yank rebels savagely from their horses before impaling them systematically, like harvesting peaches.

But even fierce Mongols cannot stem the rebel tide -- spilling in from all sides -- AND MORE ON FOOT.

FROM THE GRASSY RIDGE

Marco’s hands tremble with adrenaline at his leather reins. He uses his wrist-whip to smack Batu into a lunge, and he GALLOPS down the hill, setting up his bow.

DOWN IN THE VALLEY

Jingim is killing three and four rebels at a time with a sword skill refined since boyhood. At the sound of a wild yell, he looks over to see--

BYAAMBA, whirling and fighting with two arrows planted deep in his leather, and his left thigh has been sliced clean to the sinew. Still he fights with Tartar savagery, stumbling to a knee.

A Song Rebel is coming at him from a cruel angle with a pudao, but an arrow hits him under the arm, spins him. The arrow was fired by--

MARCO, galloping through the blood slick, sliding and executing a ROUND KICK from the saddle, further disabling the wounded Song Rebel.

Byaamba sees this as Marco rides past, circles him, and offers an urgent hand up onto his own horse.

Byaamba refuses, keeps fighting on foot, deeper into the bloody debacle. Then, in full view of Marco, he stumbles face down with a javelin in his back.

General Aju is shouting "*Yavii, Yavii*!" and the bloodied survivors are now making an authentic retreat. Marco spots Jingim, streaking past him into the dark, clinging to the side of his horse like a Plains Indian.

Marco wheels his horse and races back for the crest. As Batu churns up grass and dirt, A CHINESE ARROW missiles through the odd glow just as Marco turns in his saddle and lifts his shield. THE ARROW HITS THE SHIELD WITH SUCH FORCE it nearly dislocates the Venetian's arm. A SECOND ARROW pierces Marco's flesh between collar bone and first rib. This one pitches him -- In SLOW MOTION -- AIRBORNE (NO SOUND BUT FOR THE SCREAMING OF HIS HORSE) and he lands with a WIND-HUFFING THUD on his back in the grass.

CUT TO BLACK:

HAZEY POV: A FACE

General Aju peers down, speaking Mongolian. He is over--

MARCO who is sprawled on his back, his leather armor removed and strewn all about the grass. He is in his long silk underwear, somewhere on the distant Steppe on a sunny windless day.

Aju pulls the undergarment at a taut diagonal away from the imbedded arrow head...then yanks. The arrow comes out, bloodless. The silk that swallowed it is not even damaged.

Marco, white in the cheeks and nauseous, squints at the wound as it seeps. Jingim's blood-caked, knee-high boots come into view.

JINGIM
Now you know why we wear silk under the armor.

General Aju sees something else on Marco's undergarments: a small wooden crucifix on a leather cord around his neck. The General examines it for a moment, then leaves.

Jingim gets up on his horse, walks on with the other remaining Crow and Wolf Units. Marco collects his sections of leather armor, his helmet, finds Batu and mounts quickly to stay with the defeated migration.

MARCO (V.O.)
There is a thing about fighting and battle that can only be called evil...

OUT ON THE INNER MONGOLIAN GRASSLANDS -- DAYS LATER

Marco appears sunbaked, weak, and nearly dead in the saddle as he moves with the slow march of ribby horses. The Mongols all ride at a motionless slouch, toward a far horizon.

MARCO (V.O.)
But there are no warriors more fierce than the Mongols, and I will tell you, that even betrayed and outnumbered six to one, they will kill many and fight like beasts for the lives of their brothers...

Marco looks across the slow procession to see a MONGOL SOLDIER, so weak he is about to slide off his saddle. The Soldier unsheathes his dagger and makes a tiny poke on the withers of his horse. He bends forward and drinks from this trickle of his own horse's blood.

Marco looks away. After a moment, he unsheathes his dagger. He hesitates, rubs Batu's mane soothingly and whispers something to his faithful mount. He pricks skin and Batu nickers low, nothing more. Marco does what he must to survive: he leans forward and draws some blood from his horse's flesh as they walk on...

INT. XANADU -- INNER CHAMBER -- NIGHT

Kublai Khan sits in a dark mood at his stone chess table. When he sets flame to his amber pipe, his eyes look like those of a man who has not slept in some time, small and swollen and fierce with a contained rage.

KUBLAI KHAN
In an hour that would have altered the history of the empire and crowned my grandfather's dream...we were betrayed from within.
(MORE)

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
(beat)
Kaidu now claims that the Golden Horde was blocked by a civil skirmish along the Silk Road. I put my trust in a lowly dog that would eat its own afterbirth.

Silence. Marco sits on the floor cushion, staring down at a pipe he doesn't feel like lighting on this night.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
How did my son, Byaamba, fall?

MARCO
Fighting, Sire. Like a Mongol.

KUBLAI KHAN
The Prime Minister is now claiming a great victory for the Song Dynasty. Those who doubted him are hailing him as de-facto emperor.

MARCO
At what price came his victory? He lost thousands in the field. He was forced to destroy his own pontoons--

KUBLAI KHAN
--It was glorious, wasn't it, Master Marco?
(beat)
Do you try to appease me with your fables?

MARCO
I don't understand--

KUBLAI KHAN
--You tell me the city of Quinsai is a marvel of 12,000 stone bridges and 3,000 baths. You report that, in the caves of Dunhuang, there resides a statue of my countenance the size of a temple. Do you paint these portraits of my realm the way they are? Or should be?

MARCO
I paint it for Your Grace as I see it--

KUBLAI KHAN
--do you make these cities and their wonders and valiant war efforts come to life so that I don't see my empire rotting... like trusses under a bridge soon to collapse...

Marco studies the Khan's massive frame, his robes of silk and gold and embroidered dragons. He moves a single pawn carved from crocodile bone.

MARCO
Hundred Eyes, he--

KUBLAI KHAN
--now you will quote a blind monk in an hour already dark.

MARCO
He taught me that warriors of the Khan never retreat. They might turn and run, yielding to force...but only to turn that force back on itself. You know it's not over, Sire.

A beat.

KUBLAI KHAN
Byaamba was the son of my concubine Yi-Ling. He could never inherit the throne. Yet, he had more of Chinggis Khan in him than the one who *will* one day be Khan. Leave me to grieve an empire...and a son.

Marco bows and hurries out. One does not press the Khan when he's in a head-rolling humor.

ON THE WAY OUT OF THE DARK CHAMBER

Marco is startled by someone standing just outside the royal entrance. Someone who has been waiting and listening. Someone with a strong Mongol face and fierce eyes and a resistant tear tracing a cheekbone. Jingim does not look at Marco as he passes him; nor does Marco look back.

INT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- EXOTIC BEDCHAMBER -- NIGHT

Marco and Kokachin sit naked and cross-legged, facing each other in a bed of silks and sable furs.

By the glow of a single joss stick, they exchange breath, move their hands gently over each other.

The Blue Princess brings her lips to the stitched wound near his collar bone. She lightly kisses the damage.

MARCO
(whisper)
Silk is arrow-proof. I never knew that...

She moves her lips north, to his. They roll over into the silks...

KOKACHIN
We must overcome this desire, Marco.

MARCO
I can no longer stop at the jade gate.

KOKACHIN
You are a warrior. You ride with the men and get shot. Does the eel seek the warmth of the cave? It is harmony.

MARCO
It is torture.

KOKACHIN
Then take me.

Marco thrusts and enters. Kokachin moans. And just as their woven whispers become a SCREAM -- THE DOOR IS CRASHED OPEN and a BULL MASTIFF BARKS a harsh report.

MONGOL GUARDS enter with torches and blades and the Mastiff on a chain.

Marco awakens from the dream. He is in--

INT. MARCO'S YURT -- NIGHT

Marco is yanked violently from his bed--

MONGOL GUARD
On your knees, Latin.

MARCO
What...

With a sword at the back of his neck, he watches Guards ransack his yurt, making his falcon flutter defensively from its corner perch.

Turning his bed over, they find what they are looking for: MARCO'S JOURNALS, three of them, bound in red Song Dynasty leather. A Guard opens one of them, turns pages, sees the voluminous writing and sketches.

MARCO (CONT'D)
What are you--

Marco is hit between the shoulder blades with the flat of a sword. He pitches forward, face down.

INT. HALL OF WISDOM -- NEXT DAY

The Khan is sitting on his pavilion, his main wife Chabi nearby. They watch as --

Marco is escorted down the long Persian carpet that is flanked by Priests and Advisors. Shoved to his knees, he touches his forehead to the carpet. When he lifts his eyes, he sees that Jingim is there among the tribunal. So is Za Bing, the Eunuch. Not good...

MARCO
My Lord. Forgive me, but I don't understand.

Pause.

KUBLAI KHAN
It is said there is only one secret among the Mongols and that is where my grandfather is buried. Secrets do not live long in my empire, Master Marco. I opened the imperial gates to you. I opened my arms...
(gesturing)
Phags-Pa...

Phags-Pa, the young Buddhist monk rises from his cushions with a bow and walks out before the pavilion. His normal enlightened grin is absent today.

PHAGS-PA
It has been whispered, in the temple, that a foreigner has lay with a young and forbidden woman.

Marco nearly vomits. His eyes dart off Za Bing who stares at the floor...move over Chabi who stares off, uneasy. Meanwhile, Phags-Pa, reams him with his gaze.

CHABI
Is it true, Marco?

Marco hesitates.

MARCO
No.

PHAGS-PA
Then you lie, too!

The tiny, unassuming Tibetan monk now takes on the shrill nasal attack of a drill Nazi.

PHAGS-PA (CONT'D)
A witness of great reputation, a royal guard, saw her leaving your lodge at a taboo hour. She was recognized as Suren, wife of Kaidu, the Great Khan's cousin. Truth?

KUBLAI KHAN
If my ambassador answers no, cut off the guard's head right here and put an end to this matter.

A pause.

MARCO
Yes. Kaidu's wife came to my yurt...

A thrum rustles through the council. The Khan watches, slouched in his cushions. Chabi appears disappointed by Marco's choices.

MARCO (CONT'D)
But in the august presence of the Khan of Khan's, I swear to you, she did not lay with me. She came, uninvited, to seek my confidence as an emissary to the Khan.

PHAGS-PA
She came to seek your confidence...

Phags-Pa turns a brow on Chabi then strolls off a few barefoot steps, hands clasped behind his saffron robes. Jingim bows once, then speaks up in his educated tone:

JINGIM
Kaidu is allied with the Khan's Uncle Nayan. Nayan wishes to rule the Mongols as a Christian Empire.

PHAGS-PA
Perhaps the Khan's rivals found an ally...in a European traveler.

Phags-Pa unclasps his hands from behind his back and reveals a small wooden crucifix on a broken leather cord, the one Marco wore into battle under his armor.

JINGIM
Your letters, Marco, they contain great details in the secret history of the Mongols. How we hunt, our war practices, our inventions, our use of paper money. And how Kublai Khan desires to dominate the world.

PHAGS-PA
The cup of treason has not only been passed between the traitor Kaidu and Nayan Khan the Christian, the alliance travels much farther-- to distant shores, perhaps. And so, the question we put before our Great Khan today is this: who is Marco Polo? Why did he come to the Orient with the blessing of the Pontiff?
(beat)
I, Phags-Pa, will tell you.

Phags-Pa, little crucifix in hand, lets the silence torture as he crosses before the council and the kneeling defendant.

PHAGS-PA (CONT'D)
Marco Polo, his father, and his uncle...are agents of the Vatican.

The hush that courses through the counsel is a dark one. The Great Khan's eyes meet Marco's gaze.

MARCO
This is a lie.

KUBLAI KHAN
My kingdom, I'm afraid, is *ensnared* in lies. Kaidu might be a traitor, but he was right about one thing: I have opened my gates too wide.
(MORE)

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
The sound of those gates closing must now resound as thunder from the gods.
(beat)
So be it.

INT. HOLDING CELL -- XANADU -- DAY

Marco sits on the floor of a cell, eating rice with chopsticks from a lacquered bowl. The only light in the cell comes from a high window where DOVES perch, cooing and shitting everywhere.

With his rice bowl empty, Marco rests a single chopstick on the rim and sets a small chunk of brick on the stick end. Positioning the bowl to take aim, Marco strikes the upper end of the chopstick and pitches the brick chunk up toward the doves.

THE BRICK CHUNK falls short of the window, causing a few sentry doves to flutter and coo, but still the flock remains.

A MONGOL GUARD enters to remove Marco's toilet.

MARCO
Borte. I have lost count of the sun. On what day do I meet the sword?

GUARD
No sword. You are special. You will be rolled in a carpet and trampled by the Khan's own horses. So that no blood is spilled and the gods do not see what was done.

MARCO
A privilege, indeed.

The Guard stands at the door, holding the commode. He does some math for a moment.

GUARD
When the sun rises tomorrow...you leave us.

When the door closes, Marco--nothing but time to contemplate being rolled in a carpet and trampled--sets up another projectile on the end of his chopstick, moving the bowl to get more drop. He strikes the opposite end and pitches the stone skyward. This time--

THE BRICK CHUNK lands very near the window. A THIRD SHOT hits the center of the flock and the pest birds fly off. Gone.

Relieved by the silence, Marco sits back on the floor, contemplating Mongol justice. The chopsticks are idle in his hands, but as he drums them off his boot, he stares distantly at them.

INT. HALL OF AUSPICIOUNESS -- DAY

The Great Khan rests on cushions with Chabi nearby as Phags-Pa reads from Marco's "letters". The only other one in the chamber is Jingim, seated Chinese style on a cushion.

PHAGS-PA
(reading)
The Great Lord of Lords, who is styled the Grand Khan, is of good and fair size, neither too small nor too large...

The Khan glances at Chabi with what might be a hint of pride.

PHAGS-PA (CONT'D)
(reading)
His face is white and red like a rose...his eyes are black, the nose well-made and well-set...
(off-book)
My Lord, perhaps I should move past these idle musings and examine his notes on our system of printing money--

KUBLAI KHAN
--read on.

Phags-Pa resumes, obediently.

PHAGS-PA
(reading)
...my father was away on commerce for most of my life, even in the long years my mother was dead. I never truly knew him but for the three years it took for us to reach China--yet, over that time, I still felt like an orphan...

Phags-Pa hesitates, impatient with the poetic musings. Chabi appears intrigued. Jingim looks away, perhaps disturbed by this insight.

PHAGS-PA (CONT'D)
(reading)
My father dreams of wealth in raw silk and rubies. I dream of wealth in experience, so that perhaps my descriptions will one day form a bridge between East and West. But how do I tell you? The great culture of the East is becoming more like my home than the land from which I sailed.

The Khan is looking away, his face set stern and seemingly unmoved.

PHAGS-PA (CONT'D)
He goes on to identify a plant in Gaindu Province with white leaf and twigs like--

KUBLAI KHAN
--enough for today, Phags-Pa. I am getting stiff. That is my fate: I am growing stiff in the parts that should be soft, and soft in the parts that should be stiff.

CHABI
The boy speaks well of the Khan. But for his questioning why some sorcerers eat human flesh--

Phags-Pa covers his ears at the mere mention--

CHABI (CONT'D)
--I see no evidence of treason.

JINGIM
Our enemies know the empire is weakening. How would it appear...if the Khan spared the life of a foreign envoy suspected of being a spy?

A pause.

JINGIM (CONT'D)
Did not my father have his own younger brother, Ariq, killed for lying?

CHABI
Ariq was killed because he was a no good bastard.

JINGIM
Semantics, Mother.

KUBLAI KHAN
There is no reversing a king's decree.

He looks at Jingim, as if to be certain that the law is transmitted to the crown prince.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
When the Khan of Khan's orders a man punished, he is punished. No matter what regrets he may have.

Phags-Pa sighs in approval, his prayer beads clicking through his fingers.

EXT. XANADU -- ROYAL ALBINO HERD -- SUNSET

The magnificent herd of white horses are grazing in a special area of imported grass and vetch. 50 GUARDS and HERDSMEN stand watch.

Suddenly, something bites a mare in the ass and she spooks forward, pinning her ears. The Guards react, weapons drawn, eyes searching for fox or wolf, or even midges that would be punished for offending the white horses.

The herd soon settles down, lowering heads to graze. But again, something bites a mare and the herd spooks into a confused run. The Guards and Herdsmen are just as confused.

INT. HOLDING CELL -- XANADU -- SUNSET

Marco is pitching stones from his cell, lobbing shots high out the window and down into the royal herd. He has now fashioned a small leather sling to one end of a chopstick and is using a brick as a counterweight. Again, he sends one... listens intently for a moment...then hears the WHINNYING and mild stampede he's creating from his cell.

MARCO
Borte!

After a moment, the door unlocks and the Mongol Guard stands there with his lance.

MARCO (CONT'D)
I must see His Greatness.

The Guard chortles at such a request.

MARCO (CONT'D)
On the eve of my execution, I have a request of the Grand Khan.

MONGOL GUARD
The Good-Hearted Kublai has allowed his servant to eat as much rice as he desires in the hours before the ceremony.

MARCO
I wish to give the Khan...one last description.

The Guard stares, hard-eyed.

MARCO (CONT'D)
If you don't deliver this request, and the Khan learns of it, you will not have the marvelous end of being rolled in a carpet and crushed--you will be cut in half by Aju's sword--the big one with the many ridges.

MONGOL GUARD
How would His Majesty know if you asked for anything other than more rice?

MARCO
Spirits are all around us, Borte. The priests invoke them and translate their tongues to the Khan. I have been inside the Hall of Auspiciousness and I can tell you that the Khan hears <u>everything</u>.

Borte stands tense for a long moment. Then, in a fit of resentment and fear, he throws a bowl of rice at the prisoner. He slams the door and bolts it.

Marco sits back on the floor, watching the sun lower through the window above.

INT. ROYAL PAVILION -- NIGHT

CLOSE ON: The East Pavilion Eunuch, staring downward.

EAST PAVILION EUNUCH
The Grand Khan is not well...

MARCO, a three day beard and dirt on his cheek, is on his knees, flanked by ARMED GUARDS.

EAST PAVILION EUNUCH (CONT'D)
Do not attempt to appeal any decision or decree. And do not speak of food or wine as he is being treated for excess of such.

Marco nods. The East Pavilion Eunuch turns on a heel and leads the prisoner into the--

INNER CHAMBER

Where the Khan is sprawled on his lounge, TWO YOUNG CONCUBINES giving him a warm foot bath, TWO MORE sweating his head and neck in hot towels.

When the Eunuch announces Marco, the Khan dismisses his attendants and watches the young envoy come forward and assume the ceremonial bow.

KUBLAI KHAN
I have seen men, on the eve of their punishment, request a woman; a skin of wine; a smoke from the amber pipe. Master Marco Polo wishes to leave us with a story.

Marco stands there, drawn in the face from days without sun.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
I find this humorous in a most perverse way. Why? Because on this long sleepless night with the gout in my bones and dampness in my spirit...I summoned your accounts of Quinsai and Dunhuang and the Sorcerer Who Could Sing Sharks to Sleep.
(beat)
So, go on. Tell.

MARCO
When Alexander the Great realized there were no more worlds left to conquer...he wept.

Marco looks for an instant reaction in the Khan's eyes--and sees one, even as the ruler lights his pipe, tries to disregard it.

MARCO (CONT'D)
But he nearly fell short of his conquest.
(MORE)

MARCO (CONT'D)
Standing outside the walled Phoenician city of Tyre...a city that had defied the Babylonians for thirteen long years.

KUBLAI KHAN
A fortress that denied him?

MARCO
Built on an island...

KUBLAI KHAN
With walls to the sea?

MARCO
Right to the sea. An insurmountable fortress that was the key to all Persia.

KUBLAI KHAN
How did he breach it?

A pause.

MARCO
The trebuchet'.
(beat)
A siege engine.

KUBLAI KHAN
The Chinese have had catapults for hundreds of years. We Mongols have developed our own. They're futile against a moated town like Xiangyang--

MARCO
--because, Sire, it takes three dozen men to load and fire, and at a distance that leaves them vulnerable to arrows.

The Khan stares, intrigued.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Alexander's trebuchet' was not powered by men, but by a counterweight, capable of catapulting a three-hundred pound stone, one-thousand feet into the air...

Marco produces something from his tunic. Chopsticks, taken from his cell. The chopsticks are bound together and he has rigged a chunk of coal as a weight at one end.

The Khan watches Marco kneel and balance the model “lever arm” on the toe of his boot. He slips a small stone into a “sling” fashioned at the opposite end.

MARCO (CONT’D)
Imagine the weight of six-thousand pounds on one end...a three-hundred pound missile set at the other.

Marco angles his boot, aims the “trebuchet” at a garden wall. He releases the weight, and when it drops, the stone is pitched upward in the sling, lobbed far over the wall.

MARCO (CONT’D)
Imagine firing two-thousand rocks in a single day.

The Khan studies the demonstration, his military mind racing.

MARCO (CONT’D)
Imagine, My Lord, what even three of these engines could do to the walls of Xiangyang?

KUBLAI KHAN
(distracted)
Thunder bolts from the sky...

MARCO
Sire?

KUBLAI KHAN
My shaman from the Taiga. He prophesied that the Song Dynasty would only fall to great thunderbolts delivered from the heavens. Three-hundred pound rocks, soaring remarkable distances upon the city? Perhaps the shaman’s vision was this European machine you describe.

Marco doesn’t push his luck, says nothing. But it’s a good observation, indeed.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT’D)
Marco...when Kaidu’s wife came to your yurt to conspire, why didn’t you report to me at once?

Marco cannot answer. If he does, it could cost Kokachin her blood. The Khan makes a deep study of him.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Life can be complicated at times, yes?
(beat; let's Marco squirm)
You will have four days to prove this strategy to me.

CUT TO:

EXT. COURTYARD OF INVENTION -- NEXT DAY

WHITE OXEN grunt and sweat as they pull a travois full of harvested timber into the industrious courtyard.

MARCO (V.O.
I shall tell you that the Khan's team of engineers are brilliant masters of their work and have brought their science upon this strange, new idea...

Marco, like some 13th century architect stands in the courtyard holding a detailed sketch on parchment. He has gone from death row to overseeing a bustling team of Muslim and Chinese engineers and many laborers; Talib and his three sons, work with energetic passion, arguing with each other in ARABIC as they erect a massive wooden frame and axles, winching in a lever-arm from fresh-cut maple...

CITIZENS OF XANADU crowd every open gate and climb on walls to gawk. GUARDS shoo them off.

Marco looks up from his diagram to the growing monstrosity.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Talib, what are those spheres of metal for?

TALIB
Bearings, Master Marco. Better than wood. When they wear smooth, they will need no grease.

MARCO
You are masterful. You will make this work. Yes?

Talib is now staring up at the towering thing from a new angle and it kind of worries him.

He smiles with neglected teeth and shrugs. Marco shrugs back in question. Talib answers with the same: a shrug.

Marco watches Talib walk back to resume his technical genius.

MARCO (V.O.)
Within four days, Talib and his sons had constructed a counterpoise trebuchet' of European design...

EXT. XANADU PRESERVE -- DAY

The completed trebuchet', mounted on a flat cart and wheels, is pulled by OXEN out onto a vast grassland with a view toward a treeline (where Marco once hunted deer with the royal entourage).

A GREAT ASSEMBLY OF BARONS and ADVISORS (Military, political, financial, and spiritual) are out there on horseback, some in wagons. Jingim rides up on his horse to join the viewing; he peers up at the trebuchet' with a skeptical eye.

Marco stands with Talib and the main engineers, fidgeting around the 40 ton siege engine. And then they look toward--

A GRAND ENTRANCE: FOUR ROYAL ELEPHANTS

Draped in silk and beaten-gold, a gilded PAVILION supported on their backs. In the PAVILION, seated on a silk couch covered in tiger skins, is Kublai Khan, Chabi, several Royal Barons, Consorts, and Two Archer Bodyguards.

IN HIS MOUNTED PAVILION

The Great Khan peers out at the intricate machine, intrigued. After a moment, Marco climbs up the side and enters the royal space.

MARCO
My Lord, your--

As he kneels beside the couch, he spots someone seated there, a VIP spectator at the event: Kokachin, wearing the tall, jeweled *bocca* (headpiece) of a princess. She tries to keep her gaze set ahead...

MARCO (CONT'D)
Your stone cutters from Kazakh have made a two-hundred and eighty pound rock into the shape of a sphere. The treeline beyond is eight hundred feet distant.

KUBLAI KHAN
Let us see.

MARCO
Please: Only at a signal from the Great Khan's own banner.

The Khan likes this formality. He gestures to an Archer in the PAVILION who takes up a great flag. The Khan dips his chin.

THE ARCHER waves the banner, cutting the wind.

DOWN ON THE GRASSLAND

Talib sees the signal, says something in ARABIC to his son Abubkar and the young man uses a pike pole to hook a loop of braided leather, yanking it away from a release pin. The counterweight -- a great box of lead -- drops hard, swinging the beam upward. The sling, with the rock missile in it, is whipped skyward and forward....and--

THE FLYING ROCK MISSILE

Is lobbed sky-high through the China blue, arcing long and deadly. It soars for a seemingly endless, weightless time, then--

CRASHES INTO THE TREELINE

Splintering mature timbers like they are toothpicks. Having shredded trees, tearing a few out by their roots, it pounds the ground and literally SHAKES THE EARTH.

IN THE LINE OF SPECTATORS

Horses spook a little and a great SOUND OF AWE--in many languages--courses through the Barons and Advisors. General Aju is speechless; Jingim, too; Little Phags-Pa is laughing in both fear and excitement as he tries to control his alarmed pony.

UP IN THE ROYAL PAVILION

The elephants tremor a bit, but Kublai Khan stares, emotionless, his eyes still fixed on the horizon and the tree-flattening spectacle he's just witnessed.

MARCO (CONT'D)
We were aiming for the cluster of trees slightly to the left.

The Khan makes a low Mongolian breath sound.

CHABI
Our lord is very glad and astonished.

KUBLAI KHAN
Not nearly as astonished as the Song rebel bastards will be.

Marco smiles, both proud and relieved. Kokachin glances at him, pleased by the outcome, but hiding her emotions. Marco contains his, too.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Launch another. This is wonderful to behold.

MARCO (V.O.)
Instead of being rolled into a carpet, I was presented with one; a fine Persian weave from Tabriz...

CUT TO:

A GREAT CELEBRATION, FULL-SWING -- IN ROYAL COURTYARD

FIREWORKS and KETTLE DRUMS, the LION DANCE and all manner of opulence and ceremony.

MARCO (V.O.)
...Gems and furs were also awarded me, and I was allowed to drink of *koumis* from the Khan's own sacred white mares...

Marco, a new ermine cloak on, is drinking the potent fermented mare's milk with the Khan and His Wives at a great low table ornately carved. GREAT TRILLS go up when--

Talib and his sons are paraded through the courtyard on horses, FIREWORKS popping and HANDS CLAPPING in a recognition ceremony.

DEEPER IN THE FESTIVAL -- A MOMENT LATER

Marco is drifting through CONCUBINES and ACROBATS and JUGGLERS with a slight stagger in his step. He speaks a little Chinese here, a bit of Turkish there as he passes by the Mongolian wrestling matches (the combatants wearing the ceremonial attire).

Marco stands beside Hundred Eyes who hovers near the matches.

HUNDRED EYES
Everything you've learned here--
Chinese boxing and weaponry, Mongol
horse and arrow, letters and
languages...in the end -- facing
the wall -- what did you draw on?

MARCO
Absolute desperation.

Hundred Eyes smiles as the wrestling match grunts and sweats a few feet from them, and the party surges all around them.

HUNDRED EYES
You drew upon your own self. Your
own land, your own stories--of a
Greek king was it?

MARCO
Alexander the Great.

Hundred Eyes smiles again, and now he nods; as if to say "You Silver Tongued Devil, perhaps you know the Khan better than he might even know himself."

KHUTULUM (O.S.)
Marco!

It is Khutulum, the girl champion. She's in the pit with a MASSIVE WRESTLER pinned under her knee.

KHUTULUM (CONT'D)
I've been waiting for you. Come
wrestle me...

Hundred Eyes laughs as Marco gets lost in the celebration. Khutlum twists her opponent's elbow joint and drives his chin into the dirt. She's brutal.

INT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- NIGHT

Kokachin is asleep in her silks when the sound of a howling animal makes her stir and light a lantern. It is not a dog. Someone is singing out beyond the wall, on the road.

She props herself on an elbow and listens. It is an ITALIAN LOVE SONG, full of longing and fermented *koumis*.

She drops her head on her pillow.

KOKACHIN
Crazy.

She begins to giggle, pulls the silk pillow over her head.

EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- NIGHT

THREE GUARDS and ZA BING the Eunuch stand outside the wall, watching TWO MOUNTED GUARDS gently encircle the staggering, weaving Marco as he sings: *O, la mia bella, la mia cuore...*

Using herding poles like they would on a stray colt, the Mounted Guards patiently poke and herd Marco down the long road, back toward his yurt.

The Venetian love song echoes through the night lanes of Xanadu.

INT. HALL OF WISDOM -- WEEKS LATER -- DAY

Kublai Khan sits on his PAVILION, looking down over his ADVISORS. There is a fresh look about him, a new fire in his eye.

KUBLAI KHAN
When the Mongols retreat in battle,
it does not mean the war is over.
It means it has just begun...

A SOUND begins, faintly at first--the eerie hum of MONGOLIAN THROAT-SINGING.

EXT. GOLDEN LOTUS PLAIN -- SUNRISE

Coming over a grassy crest, backlit by a fireball of sun: 20 TEAMS of WHITE OXEN, each pulling a carriage that transports a 40 ton trebuchet. 20 of the siege engines loom tall as the oxen drag them forward...

KUBLAI KHAN (V.O.)
If we do not have the support of
the White and Golden Hordes, then
we do as Chinggis Khan and make our
few appear to be *many*...

PULLING UP TO ARIEL VIEW: a great mounted march leads the weapon train: HUNDREDS OF MONGOL HORSE SOLDIERS, some of heavy armor and artillery, some of light.

KUBLAI KHAN (V.O.)
Our citizens are soldiers; our
soldiers--citizens. And where our
men end, fill the saddles with
women and young boys far at a
distant ridge to portray an endless
sea of barbarians...

BEHIND THE WEAPONS TRAIN: ANOTHER WAVE OF MOUNTED HORSEMEN, the lance-carriers, and BEHIND THEM: the MUSLIM TECH SPECIALISTS, camels and pack-horses, and DRUMMERS.

MONGOL WOMEN and BOYS ride in a great squadron at the back, moving with HERDS OF SHEEP (portable commissary).

RIDING UP FRONT -- WITH THE LIGHT CAVALRY:

Jingim and Aju at the head, their armor heavily leathered, their helmets those of generals. Nearby, Marco rides Batu, armed with bow and scimitar. He scans the unit to see Hundred Eyes, riding on a horse with a mane that touches the ground. The monk wears no armor--just his Taoist robe and his topknot drawn long.

HUNDRED EYES
You bring your underwear?

Marco pats his armor to confirm that he's wearing silk body armor.

Marco, taking it all in, feels the MONGOLIAN THROAT-SINGING coming up from the horsemen behind--each man creating multiple tones over one fundamental one-- like droning up out of the earth. Marco loosens his jaw slightly, lets the tone form in his chest cavity.

KUBLAI KHAN (V.O.)
Summon the spirits of our ancestors, so the enemy hears their deepest fears in their sleep...

It becomes ONE MASS DRONE like a growing swarm of bees. Marco turns his eyes out toward the vast steppe beyond. He feels gooseflesh...

INT. XIANGYANG -- NIGHT

SONG GUARDS on the battlements are staring out, on edge, toward the BEE-LIKE DRONE. They have summoned General Red Brow -- he hurries to the drum tower to look out.

POV: campfires. <u>Tens of thousands of campfires</u> in the night as far as the eye can see.

REVERSE -- GENERAL RED BROW

Reacts to the size of the invading camp, the mass sound of throat-singing. Someone else steps up to share his view. The Chancellor, now dressed as regally as an emperor. He can't believe his eyes--but after a moment, he smiles.

EXT. HAN RIVER BASIN -- NIGHT

Marco sits in the grass, writing in his journal near a small fire where Batu grazes. Around Marco are four other small fires, each under his supervision. THE KHAN'S V.O. segues into MARCO'S as he writes--

MARCO (V.O.)
Let our troops multiply still when each soldier makes five fires as if he were five men...and the dust in our wake stretches to the horizon...

FAR OUT BEYOND THE CAMP -- LIT BY FIRES

YOUNG MONGOL BOYS are riding horses back and forth as if playing horse games--but they are not. Each of their mounts has branches fastened behind them, dragging up dust all night long.

IN MARCO'S CAMP

Marco writes in his leather-bound journal, the flames flickering on the page.

MARCO (V.O.)
And when the sun rises...let us finally do what the Mongols have attempted for forty years. Capture Xiangyang and unite China under a new dynasty.

Marco slowly closes the leather book, puts it safely away in his saddle pouches. He looks up to see--

EXT. XIANGYANG -- MAGIC HOUR

The fireball of sun seems to surface from the Han River, rising behind the impenetrable fort.

SONG DYNASTY REBELS man the ramparts with swords, lances, triple-crossbows, bladed halberds, and an imposing array of kung fu cutlery.

General Red Brow moves along the battlements, shouting at the troops. He moves to a high position and looks out.

POV: the sun has come up to reveal, not only great formations of fierce Mongol warriors and a distant horizon black with dust, but 20 strange machines like towering dinosaur skeletons, aimed at the fort in a great arc. PANNING EAST:

The Mongol Navy has also returned, led by the Song defector Liu Cheng. The war vessels are anchored, cutting off the river.

DOWN IN THE WALLED CITY

The POPULACE is beginning to panic at the sounds of the barbarian throat-singing, KETTLE DRUMS, the sight of thousands of fires, the dust devils on the skyline; psychological terror (a Khan specialty) surrounding them.

A SONG LIEUTENANT is shouting at the townspeople from his position up on a water cistern.

SONG LIEUTENANT
Any one attempting to defect will be killed! Women! Children! All!

THE CHANCELLOR

Assesses the Khan's strategy, squinting at the strange war technology.

CHANCELLOR
What are they?

Red Brow General just stares out, wondering the same...

EXT. HAN RIVER BASIN -- MAGIC HOUR

General Aju reins his heavily-armored horse at the base of the first trebuchet. He makes a wide sweep of his hand, signaling a MOUNTED SOLDIER to heft a tall banner of the sun and moon and sweep it across the sky.

The Trebuchet gunner yanks his pike and pulls the braided leather loop off the release pin. The counterweight -- a massive box of lead -- drops hard, swinging the beam upward. The sling, with the rock missile in it, is whipped skyward and forward....and--

Marco watches; Jingim watches; Hundred Eyes listens...as...

THE ROCK MISSILE

Soars in the dawn sky toward the walls of Xiangyang. It CRASHES INTO THE DRUM TOWER with a sound like THUNDER, it CRUSHES STONE and SHATTERS TILES and kills A DOZEN ARMED GUARDS. The Drum Tower IMPLODES with a terrible quake.

MARCO reacts; JINGIM reacts, shocked himself by the unprecedented force and effect.

INT. XIANGYANG -- DAWN

The CITY POPULACE is screaming from down in their homes, near where rock missile sits in the courtyard--sunken three feet in the solid ground.

SONG SOLDIERS are assembling in mass formation, like fighting dogs, waiting to be let off their chains -- the Chancellor moves carefully along the wall.

He has to stop short and turn when A SECOND MISSILE SMASHES into the north wall doing damage. A THIRD MISSILE crushes a rampart from where a TRIPLE-CROSSBOW SIEGE WEAPON is firing.

CHANCELLOR
Let us cast for fish.

RED BROW shouts, triggering a REPORT OF CHANGSHA WAR DRUMS.

SONG SOLDIERS begin urgently working some kind of winch, cranking something skyward.

EXT. HAN RIVER BASIN -- DAWN

General Aju gives a command and the banner goes up again.

The FOURTH TREBUCHET fires a missile. All eyes watch it go up, lobbing toward the--

THE WALLS OF XIANGYANG

Just as netting--from one wall to the next--is winched high from the banks of the moat. The rock missile hits the netting, drives it down over the wall like a coiled spring...HEAVY BEAMS are dropped, tightening the net...and the rock gets LAUNCHED RIGHT BACK at--

THE MONGOL ARMY

Who scatter on their horses as their own missile is served back to them, CRUSHING TWO HORSEMEN on the fly.

DOWN ON THE FRONT LINES

Jingim and Aju control their spirited horses alongside each other, assessing the epic netting--a sight even more strange than their European siege engines (strange, but historically true). Once again, they are at a stalemate with the Chancellor.

Marco gallops over, joins them.

MARCO
They wish to play chess? Our Chinese alchemists have some of their own magic for them.
(as he gallops away)
Trebuchet seven and eight, at your command.

Aju and Jingim stare at the Venetian for a beat, then Aju waves his arm, SHOUTS out. The BANNER RIDER sweeps the Khan flag in a specified signal.

TREBUCHET # 7

Prepares to launch. A CHINESE ENGINEER touches a torch to something. The pike pole triggers the release pin. What goes skyward now is not a great rock, but a 300 pound flaming ceramic ball, covered in metal barbs, called a MOLTEN IRON BOMB.

The BOMB HITS THE NETTING, the barbs rip it, burn through it, and the “bomb” STRIKES THE NORTH WALL WITH AN EXPLOSION!! SPARKS GO SKY HIGH AND CASCADE down over the walled city.

JINGIM and his horse are both startled; MARCO, too, can’t believe what he is witnessing--a 13th century version of the Atom Bomb.

INT. XIANGYANG -- DAWN

As the north wall detonates and crumbles, Red Brow intercepts the Chancellor.

RED BROW
We must charge them!

CHANCELLOR
Hold...

ANOTHER MOLTEN BOMB hits the North Wall and EXPLODES in flame, sparks, and shrapnel. The North Gate is splintered. Xiangyang is burning...

EXT. HAN RIVER BASIN -- DAWN

Hundred Eyes sits still on his horse, listening to EXPLODING INCENDIARY BOMBS and SCREAMING HORSES. Suddenly, inexplicably, he lifts his leather shield...and catches a sizzling arrow otherwise aimed for his chest. Like snatching a fly.

All is dead still for a second. Then...

General Aju SHOUTS in Mongolian and now a STORM OF MONGOL HORSEMEN charge the collapsing walls. But on closer look: each horseman is carrying a second soldier who clings monkey-like to a stirrup, lance in hand, like catching a ride.

A FEW ARE HIT BY ARROWS as they get close, but the main surge gets to the moat, deposits the “Stirrup Riders” in the grass, then whips around and races back, FIRING ARROWS while completely turned in the saddle. The Stirrup Riders pull sections of portable bridge out of the grass and breach the moat.

INT. XIANGYANG -- DAWN

The Chancellor remains near a still intact wall, giving the orders.

CHANCELLOR
Hold...

Red Brow is sweating heavily, livid scar across his cheek.

EXT. XIANGYANG -- DAWN

The HORSE ARCHERS pick up ANOTHER UNIT of Stirrup Riders and charge back, all the while LIGHT CAVALRY are beginning to weave in and out in “Crow and Wolf” formation, flanking the fort...

JINGIM raises his sword and shouts a command. At a blistering gallop, he leads A CHARGE toward the moat.

ANOTHER UNIT OF TEN is summoned to charge. Marco is in this one. He gets his heels down, his bow ready. Here we go...

INT. XIANGYANG FALLING -- DAY

Through crumbling wall and RAINING SPARKS, Jingim gallops into the city, leading an eerily silent unit of armored Mongols.

The Chancellor watches his soldiers from the wall, the troops as still as terra-cotta:

CHANCELLOR
HOLD...

The Mongols come at a furious gallop, ready to “kill everything that moves.”

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
Now.

THE FIRST COLUMN OF SONG REBELS lift their weapons. Not spears; not swords. Not even crossbows. They have <u>firearms</u>.

<u>BOOOOM!!</u>

The report deafens as multiple "Fire Lances" shoot pellets in a purple belch of saltpetre and sulfur.

MEN AND HORSES are hit by gunfire...

Jingim's horse is killed instantly. The prince is unseated, goes flying. Lands in the MIDDLE OF BRUTAL WARFARE and FLEEING REFUGEES, rolls to a knee and drives his sword through the first Song "musketeer" he sees.

Into this storm charges Marco Polo.

Raising his bow, he times the exact second that all four of Batu's hooves leave the ground...and FIRES. Clean kill on a gunner. As he turns back around, he sees--

A FIRE LANCE

Aiming right at him. But the Gunner is reloading and relighting. Marco does the math and charges, standing in his stirrups, leaning forward and SLASHING HIS SCIMITAR at the Gunner's helmet. He notches him just as a PURPLE BLAST goes awry.

SLOW MOTION: BATU REARS

And Marco spills off his wooden saddle, lands with a dull clatter of armor. In the SMOKE, he loses Batu, has to roll, slap at his boots where he unsheathes his twin short-swords.

MONGOL HORSE ARCHERS

Run "crow and wolf" formations through the Song Gunners, shooting arrows faster than the latter can reload-and-light gunpowder. Many go down shot, but more keep galloping in.

HUNDRED EYES

on his horse, moves at an illogically slow pace through the battle. He turns his horse in each direction, feeling the movement of the fight and making precise sword blows. All around him SONG REBELS drop, cleanly cut an inch beneath their helmets.

But still, he appears to be a goner when FOUR SONG REBELS charge him from as many angles, aiming the strange Fire Lances. SHOUTING IN MANDARIN, they order him to drop his sword.

He does.

Unarmed now, the blind monk slowly lifts his hands from his horse's ground-length mane. Lifts them high. In each hand, he holds a braided length of mane with a metal spike woven into each end--a horse mane fashioned into Shaolin weighted rope darts. With an over-and-under whip-like swing, he kills three of the Gunners, before breaking the fourth's neck with a subtle kick, his foot still in the stirrup.

Now, he steps down off his horse, pats its rump. The horse runs away. Hundred Eyes touches the hilt of his fallen sword with his toe...and flips it upward, back into his hand.

He impales a Gunner who is reloading. Right through the back. Monks play cheap, too.

AT THE EDGE OF A BURNING MARKET STALL

Marco is uncorking all the Lotus Fist he knows--and it requires every advance-retreat and spin to keep his twin butterfly blades deflecting and parrying; mostly he's keeping his head from being cut off which, in a battle like this, seems a near miracle.

Marco blocks a hook-scythe spear attack, but loses a blade. Hundred Eyes makes short work of a Rebel nearby.

HUNDRED EYES
Don't give up your fighting measure.

MARCO
What fighting measure? They're on all sides!

Hundred Eyes snatches a lance from a Rebel, drops low and pivots on a foot with a release of internal power. He takes down a CIRCLE OF REBELS...then hands the lance to Marco as if to say "there, like that."

MARCO (CONT'D)
Right.

Hundred Eyes is gone, fighting his way deeper. Marco blocks a sword with the lance, inverts it and fractures the jaw mandible of a tattooed Rebel. When the guy falls, Marco impales him with a vicious downward "sting", then steps on the man's chest to pull the bloodied lance back out.

As Marco turns to keep moving, he finds his path blocked by a SMALL BOY. He is holding a crumpled red kite in his hands. Dried tears have formed patchy ruts on his dirty face.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Run! *Va*!
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
Go hide!

The Boy hesitates a second longer, then scampers away. Marco, disarmed by the human moment, doesn't see what is coming at his back.

A beast of a SONG REBEL with so much armor he looks more machine than man, hefts a 9-ring *kwan do, a* ten pound weapon with a Song Dynasty symbol carved into the massive blade. He brings it down on Marco just as--

SOMEONE intercepts, redirects the blade, CUTS ARMOR MAN'S HEAD -- still in helmet -- CLEAN OFF. It is Jingim. Marco locks eyes with him.

JINGIM
Where is Aruka?

MARCO
I don't know.

JINGIM
I need archers. Imperial Keep.

Marco preps his bow then blitzes with Jingim at the head of the foot soldiers. They charge up a flight of marble stairs, slick with boiling fat from the dead, littered with fallen soldiers and civilians.

JINGIM (CONT'D)
(to the troops he leads)
Spare any member of the Song Court
who accepts defeat...

MARCO
Your father's order?

JINGIM
My mother's. She oversees the
politics.

They fight their way toward a gilded door emblazoned with dragons. They kick it in and enter--

THE IMPERIAL KEEP

Only to be met with ANOTHER ROUND OF GUNPOWDER. TWO INNER DOOR GUARDS stand in formation, aiming fire lances.

Jingim is hit, his armor blistered. He goes down, shot. Marco drops with him as Mongol Soldiers collide with the Fire lancers--ANOTHER ROUND EXPLODES--overcoming them with swords even as two more Mongols go down.

MARCO
Jingim...

Beyond the scrum, Marco sees the Chancellor, slipping through silk curtains.

JINGIM
He dies, the Song dies...

Jingim is fading quickly. When MORE MONGOL SOLDIERS spill in, Marco flags them.

MARCO
Stay with him! Guard him...

As they do, Jingim watches bleary-eyed as Marco takes off after the Chancellor. Perhaps it is the last thing the crown prince sees.

EXT. HAN RIVER BASIN -- DAY

A BAND OF FLEEING SONG REBELS are galloping away on their horses, a few of them wounded. Cresting a grassy bluff, they find their path blocked by a line of 25 Mongol Horsemen. At first, they tense, then they see that the riders are women. The MONGOLIAN WOMEN just stare expressionless at them.

FLEEING SONG SOLDIER
Crafty Mongols. They use their women to appear as more soldiers at the rear.

SECOND DEFECTOR
Do we rape them here, or take them with us to the marsh?

As they debate, 20 MONGOL COMPOSITE BOWS come up. 20 arrows are expertly nocked. The women archers stare dead-eyed.

SECOND DEFECTOR (CONT'D)
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
Shit.

20 arrows kill 12 men. One gets away, an arrow in his arm. One of the Mongol women whips her horse. It is Khutulum, drawing her blade. She's going after that soldier...

INT. XIANGYANG FALLING -- HIGH BATTLEMENTS -- DAY

Marco, sword in hand, runs along the balustrade, hundreds of feet above the Han River. He turns a corner and sees--

The Chancellor attempting to use a grain winch to go over the balustrade and descend to the water. Marco skids to a stop. Eyes meet.

CHANCELLOR
You. The Westerner...

The Chancellor releases the grain rope, straightens his back. He begins to circle Marco. Marco has his blade up in a *bai jong* stance; the chancellor is unarmed.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
What cricket do you have in this fight, Round-Eye?
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
What do you know of dynasties?

MARCO
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
I know that the Southern Song is corrupt.
(circling)
I know that the people wish for a united China...under a new emperor. I'm just an envoy to the Khan. Come down with me and surrender to General Aju.

CHANCELLOR
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
Surrender to the yoke of the Tartars?

The Chancellor EXPLODES at Marco with a spinning heel kick. Marco jams it with an advance, drops low, and sweeps the chancellor's planted leg. The Chancellor vaults and throws an elbow strike.

Marco blocks and parries, slashes a brutal sword attack. Chancellor <u>snatches Marco's wrist</u> with that lightning-quick mantis hook and smashes the sword against the balustrade. It embeds deep in the wood...just as Marco fires a Lotus Fist move, hitting the Chancellor in the face.

Livid now, the Chancellor assumes his praying mantis stance. Marco squares off with him, his hands in the Chinese boxing position. Chancellor Sidao lunges--just like the insect he studies--and strikes Marco in a vital meridian point under his arm.

Marco twists, paralyzed on his left side. The Chancellor now angles and strikes with another deft touch of his fingers to the kidney meridian, dropping Marco to his knees.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
(Mandarin; Subtitled)
Your Chinese is excellent. Your kung fu...not so much.

SLOW MOTION: the Chancellor pivots airborne and lands a third mantis hook to Marco's neck. Marco goes down. The Chancellor grabs the hilt of Marco's sword and yanks it free of the wooden balustrade.

CHANCELLOR (CONT'D)
I will take your head with me. And put it on a bridge post in Quinsai--as a warning to foreign demons and meddlers.

He begins to make his move...

HUNDRED EYES
Chancellor...

The Chancellor swings a look at the blind monk, standing in the mist on the battlements.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
Even a blind man can see that it's over. Let's go have some wine.

The Chancellor WHIRLS at Hundred Eyes. Marco watches, dazed, from the tiles as the two masters collide; Mantis versus Lotus -- sword versus sword -- a sumptuous dance of death on the high battlements of the ancient city.

The "Cricket Minister" slices the monk's robes with a vicious strike, but Hundred Eyes moves just enough to avoid damage--and counters with an attack that draws blood.

MARCO'S POV:

Surreal in the smoke and mist--both fighters lose their swords, go purely fist to fist now. The Chancellor knocks the monk back into a parapet then scrambles for his fallen sword.

He doesn't get there.

SLOW MOTION: Hundred Eyes launches himself from the wall, coiling, and “windmills” into the prime minister, knocking him against the balustrade. The Chancellor is good. Great, even. But Hundred Eyes is at a rarefied level. And now--

MONGOL SOLDIERS

Spill onto the battlements as they secure the captured city. Arrows are trained on the Chancellor. He’s cornered.

DOWN IN THE GARRISON -- MOMENTS LATER

Chancellor Jia Sidao kneels on a marble fountain, holding a fine porcelain bowl of clear wine.

Behind him stands the Red Brow General, sword in hand. Defecting Song Soldiers and Citizens are CROWDED around the fountain to witness while the Mongols loot silks and porcelain and clean house for a new administration.

RED BROW
(a military bark)
Jia Sidao! Too many people have died! So that you could fill your robes with silver! Your chamber with fine porcelain!

MARCO comes through the rubble, steps up in the crowd of bystanders. He watches, intrigued.

RED BROW (CONT’D)
We are not defeated this day. We are not conquered. We are liberated! From a Song Court that would have us as slaves. Have your last sip of wine. It is from the new Emperor...Kublai Khan.

The Chancellor stops the bowl short of his chapped lips. His hands tremble with emotion, his eyes move along the tiled floor. He sees something, squints at it: a cricket, scurrying along. A strange and final irony...

He lifts the bowl high...and spills the wine out in defiant statement. The SWORD COMES DOWN.

MARCO TURNS AWAY as--

BLOOD PLUMES THE WALL in scarlet, like a Yuan Dynasty paint-on-silk.

EXT. XIANGYANG -- DAY

As CIVILIAN DEFECTORS assemble in the basin, Marco drifts through the aftermath of war, looking up at the towering trebuchets.

He approaches a circle of men around the wounded form of Jingim. The prince lifts his eyes to Marco.

JINGIM
Gunpowder. My father has been searching for years. He'll be glad.

MARCO
He'll be glad his son survived the discovery.

Pause.

JINGIM
Our Lord will want to hear your account of the Siege of Xiangyang.

MARCO
Then he will hear that his oldest son fought like his great grandfather, Chinggis Khan. A khan worthy of the throne.

With a grudging respect, Jingim watches Marco walk away.

OUT ON THE GRASSLAND

Marco appears somewhat lost for a moment as he searches the distance. He whistles. Looks around. Whistles again. He starts to walk on when a HORSE RESPONDS from in--

THE HEAVY RIVER MIST

Batu comes trotting forward, his leather armor half-off, dust in his eyes, some blood caked in his mane.

MARCO (CONT'D)
Batu...

Batu trots to Marco with a rattling snort, and the traveler grabs his forelock, pats his neck. He does a Mongolian mount and gets settled into the wooden saddle, heels down.

KHUTULUM (O.S.)
Marco!

Khutulum, in her leather armor, bow slung over a shoulder is walking through the high grass. Her left hand holds a fistful of hair on the head of the Song Soldier she decapitated.

MARCO
Did he ask you to marry him?

KHUTULUM
He didn't have the courage. Or the dowry. I will see you at the feast, Marco...!

Marco rides on, falling in with Hundred Eyes and a northbound procession of horses. The SOUND OF MESSENGER BELLS INTO--

EXT. KAIDU'S YURT CAMP -- KASHGAR -- DAYS LATER

In a hot gravel wasteland, white yurts stretch for miles like clouds. An EXPRESS RIDER gallops in, TURKISH DOGS yapping at his horse's hooves.

UP IN A PAVILION

Watching the horse game "Buzkashi" (played with the head of a sheep), sits Kaidu. Nearby are his wives, headed by Suren, the bitch who would be Empress.

The Express Rider dismounts, his head swathed in dusty rags, bells wrapped around his middle. He presents a leather wrapped scroll to an ASSYRIAN ATTENDANT who, in turn, brings it up the steps of the pavilion to Kaidu.

He unties the tanned leather and unfastens the scroll. What he reads bleeds the color from his coarse barbarian face. Suren and the other wives search his eyes. He can hardly get the words out.

KAIDU
Xiangyang has fallen.

Suren reacts.

KAIDU (CONT'D)
Kublai is Emperor of all China. His armies have now grown...

SUREN
As do ours, Kaidu.

Kaidu peers out as if looking at a dark cloud forming on the horizon. Perhaps he's unnerved, or perhaps he's bracing for civil war on an epic scale.

EXT. XANADU -- GARDENS -- DAWN

A white falcon lands in a banyan tree.

INT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- DAWN

Kokachin asleep in her bed, hears the falcon in the branches. She lifts her head. Instantly, she's out of bed, grabbing for the ribbon--her signal to Marco.

EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE -- GARDENS -- DAWN

Kokachin goes out to tie the ribbon. She stops short when she sees something draped over the branch: a gold chain and locket, from travels afar. It was left there during the night.

Kokachin stares at it for a second then removes it carefully from the branch. She sits in the garden sunrise and holds it, holds the promise...

THE FALCON flies off.

MARCO (V.O.)
...you wade along the bank in waters red with blood...

INT. INNER CHAMBERS -- XANADU -- DAY

Kublai Khan is settled back on a silken couch, smoking a long-stemmed amber pipe and listening to Marco...

MARCO
...and as the north wall falls away, you find yourself looking out to where the Han River meets the Yangtze...

The young envoy is seated on the floor nearby, on a cushion. He, too, holds a delicate amber pipe. Just the two of them alone, sharing a smoke.

MARCO (CONT'D)
And you realize, in that moment...the gate is open. Kublai Khan is the first non-Chinese emperor to conquer all of China.

The pause is a vast one here. The Khan's nostrils flare as he savors smoke with the enormous victory.

KUBLAI KHAN
My grandfather's dream has been accomplished.

MARCO
And *your* dream, Sire?

KUBLAI KHAN
It is just beginning. I assure you, Marco, on that day...I will not weep like Alexander. I will drink *koumis* and celebrate with forty maidens from...I don't know, say--

MARCO
--Lesser Armenia?

The Khan does a take.

KUBLAI KHAN
Lesser Armenia? Are they marvelous?

Marco smiles, his face reddening slightly. He calls back that over-the-top shrug from Talib the Muslim engineer. The Khan's mischievous glint (with that hint of danger) shimmers in the light.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
We will explore such wonders at a later time. Presently, I need you and your fine horse to carry out a most discreet mission.

MARCO
We are ready, My Lord...

EXT. XANADU -- DAY

Marco trots out of the Imperial Gates on Batu, his falcon on his wrist; mongol bow, quiver, and Chinese sword at his belt. He nods to Hundred Eyes who sits alone in the vast expanse of the training field, his back to Marco. Yet he returns the nod. Slightly.

MARCO (V.O.)
I shall tell you that the things seen were *seen*, and the things heard *heard*--as to assure you that I am bound to the truth...

Marco rides past the Hall of Fragrance and thinks of her--will long for her--on this next ride to who knows where.

MARCO (V.O.)
If I one day return home to Venice,
will they call me a liar? Perhaps.
But I will let them know: I have
not told the half of what I saw...

Marco Polo cracks his wrist-whip and his Mongolian horse EXPLODES INTO A GALLOP--

CUT TO BLACK: