

Marco Polo

EPISODE #101

WRITTEN BY

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NETWORK DRAFT

04/06/12

CAST

MARCO POLO.....	TBD
KUBLAI KHAN.....	TBD
CHABI.....	TBD
PRINCE JINGIM.....	TBD
JIA SIDAO.....	TBD
HUNDRED EYES.....	TBD
KOKACHIN.....	TBD
ZA BING.....	TBD
AHMAD.....	TBD
MEI LIN.....	TBD
MONGOL WARRIOR #1.....	TBD
MONGOL WARRIOR #2.....	TBD
DONA CATERINA.....	TBD
DONA'S HUSBAND.....	TBD
CANAL RAT #1.....	TBD
CANAL RAT #2.....	TBD
CANAL RAT #3.....	TBD
AUNT PATRIZIA.....	TBD
OLD MAN.....	TBD
NICCOLO POLO.....	TBD
MAFFEO POLO.....	TBD
OLD WOMAN.....	TBD
ARMED GUIDE.....	TBD
MONGOLIAN CHIEFTAN.....	TBD
EUNUCH.....	TBD
BARON.....	TBD
COURT EUNUCH.....	TBD
OLD SCHOLAR.....	TBD
TAOIST ADVISOR.....	TBD
PHAGS-PA.....	TBD
YUSUF.....	TBD
ARIQ BOKE.....	TBD
Kaidu.....	TBD
GENERAL RED BROW.....	TBD
ZHAO XIAN.....	TBD*
GOVERNOR OF HANGCHOW.....	TBD
EMPRESS XIE (DOWAGER)?.....	TBD
MOUNTED GUARD.....	TBD
SANGA.....	TBD
JURCHEN WOMAN.....	TBD
MONGOL GENERAL.....	TBD
LING LING.....	TBD
BYAAMBA.....	TBD
EXPRESS RIDER.....	TBD
MONGOL GUARD.....	TBD
SLAVE.....	TBD
IMPERIAL EUNUCH.....	TBD
MONGOL HERDSMAN.....	TBD
KHAN SOLDIER.....	TBD
SONG SOLDIER.....	TBD
WHIRLWIND TIGER.....	TBD
GENERAL AJU.....	TBD*
GOLDEN HORDE WARRIOR.....	TBD
ARIQ'S GENERAL.....	TBD
GENERAL BATAAR.....	TBD
HORSEMAN.....	TBD*

*NON-SPEAKING

SETS

INTERIORS

VENICE APARTMENT
 BEDROOM
 BALCONY
PATRIZIA POLO'S APARTMENT
CATHOLIC CHURCH
IMPERIAL PALACE
 FRONT HALL
 THRONE ROOM
 KHAN'S QUARTERS
 HALL OF MILITARY AFFAIRS
 CHESS ROOM
 ROYAL PORTICO
 INDOOR LAKE
HALL OF PURIFICATION
ECHO PAVILLION
XIANGYANG
 EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS
 JIA SIDAO'S QUARTERS
HANGCHOW
 BED CHAMBER OF SILK
MARCO'S QUARTERS
SANGA'S HOVEL
HALL OF FIVE DESIRES
 ROOM OF FIFTH DESIRE
HALL OF FRAGRANCE
 BATHE
ARIQ'S ROYAL YURT
MEI LIN'S CHAMBERS
HALL OF HARMONIOUS PURCHASE
LONE YURT

EXTERIORS

MONGOLIAN STEPPE
 FRONT OF MARCH
 REAR OF MARCH
 NORTH OF CAMBULAC
 NEAR THE LONE YURT
 THE LONE YURT
 SOUTH HILL
 NORTH HILL
 BATTLEFIELD
VENICE, ITALY
 GRAND CANAL
 CANAL ALLEYS
PORT OF VENICE
THE LUNA
FOREIGN LANDS
NORTH CHINA
 RAZED VILLAGE
CAMBULAC
 MARKET PLACE
 TRAINING GROUNDS
 CALIGRAPHY TREE
 DOWN A SIDE STRAND
 NEAR A MARBLE FOUNTAIN
 DOWN A GARDEN COLONNADE
GRASSLANDS
MARCO'S QUARTERS
SOUTH GATE
STABLES
 ARENA OF THE HORSES
 PAVILION
XIANGYANG
 THE WALLED CITY
 MILITARY COURTYARD
SOUTH CHINA
 WUCHANG VILLAGE
HALL OF FRAGRANCE
HALL OF FIVE DESIRES
KARAKORUM
 GRAIN STORAGE
OUTSKIRTS OF KARAKORUM
CITY OF HANGCHOW

FADE IN:

1 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - DAWN

1

SHAPES MOVING IN MIST. THE SOUNDS OF WAR: Metal on metal, screams of the wounded, the dying, and, under it, the foreboding low ominous drone of MONGOLIAN THROAT-SINGING...

SLOW MOTION: A SINGLE RIDER comes out of the fog, galloping toward us. His helmet and face are covered in a mysterious cowl and he wears the Asiatic style of lamellar armor, sword at his belt, high boots made of felt and leather...

SUDDENLY: TWO HORSES jump him from tall grass, causing his mount to scream and rear. The Rider is thrown, lands hard. Face down.

TWO MOUNTED WARRIORS move in. One is armed with a Turko-Mongol sabre, the other grips a two-bladed halberd. Asiatic faces, wind-burned and fierce; nomads of the Steppe. They speak MONGOLIAN (subtitled):

MONGOL WARRIOR #1
(Mongolian)
You take his horse.
(beat)
I'll take his head.

One Mongol catches the riderless horse, the other dismounts, all business. Still, a THIRD MONGOL WARRIOR rides up now, cold-eyed. He dismounts, draws a mace.

The Fallen Rider rolls to his feet, his helmet somewhere in the grass, his cowl down.

The Mongols are about to attack when something freezes them. Something utterly strange. The Fallen Rider is a white man. A striking young European.

MONGOL WARRIOR #2
(Mongolian)
What kind of ugly foreign devil...

MONGOL WARRIOR #1
(Mongolian)
It is a round-eye...

The Third Mongol chambers his mace, is about to cave the Westerner's head when --

MARCO
(Fluent Mongolian)
By Tengri the Sky God, may your
herds fatten well...

(CONTINUED)

1 CONTINUED:

1

Now all three balk, weapons drawn. MARCO POLO, 21, darts his eyes toward the warrior on the horse, takes a cautious step backward... scheming a way out...

MARCO (CONT'D)
(Mongolian)
Peace upon you and the Golden
Horde. Bless Genghis Khan... and
the Eternal Blue Sky...

As he cautiously backs his way toward the high grass, he becomes aware of a FOURTH MONGOL behind him --

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

THE WARRIORS ATTACK!

Marco ducks a sabre, rolls from the path of the double halberd. It SLASHES at him again. He rolls again, alarmed. Now a hook-scythe comes at him.

Marco slaps at his leather boot and draws, a Kerait dagger.

The Third Mongol charges with a brutal five-blossom spin of a scimitar. He cuts Marco's leather plates, but the young foreigner "swallows" his opponent's momentum...

SLOW MOTION: Marco spins 180 and impales the attacker with an inverted dagger stab at the same time he fires a round kick, disabling the Halberd Warrior.

The Fourth Mongol is stunned by this unlikely display of Chinese martial arts. But not as stunned as Marco; competent skill aside, the young man is sweat-drenched and unnerved as --

MONGOLIAN SOLDIERS flood the valley. THROAT SINGING chills his blood...

MARCO SWEEPS A HANDFUL OF SAND at the Fourth Warrior's face. He then grabs the stirrup of his escaping horse, makes a desperate running mount...

BEHIND HIM: That HORSEBACK MONGOL sets chase with Double Fire Meteor Hammers, two spherical weights connected by a chain, filled with fuel and lit afire.

Marco gallops for his life across the Steppe. He rides well, but not as well as the Flying Hammer Rider gaining on him at breakneck speed...

Marco lifts his small, Mongolian-style recurve bow. Draws an arrow from his quiver, nocks it. Turning around in the saddle -- completely around -- he raises the bow.

(CONTINUED)

1 CONTINUED:

1

ALL SOUND FADES. Only MARCO'S PULSE -- in his face.

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 the
world...

SLOW MOTION: Marco 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...

CUT TO:

2 EXT. VENICE, ITALY - DAY

2

FOUR YEARS EARLIER.

Renowned for her beauty, the "City of Water." Magnificent
architecture frames the Grand Canal; a sultry breeze moves in
the curtains of a second story balcony.

The sounds of boats, chimes, and impassioned fucking.

DONA CATERINA (O.S.)

Marco, no... it's not right...

3 INT./EXT. VENICE APARTMENT - BEDROOM/BALCONY - DAY

3

MOVE IN THROUGH THE BALCONY CURTAINS... ONTO AN ORNATE BED...
where 17 year-old Marco Polo makes hot Italian love to 33
year-old DONA CATERINA, a blonde Venetian.

MARCO

Sei molto bella...

DONA CATERINA

(edge of orgasm)

You must leave...

But her long legs are wrapped tightly around him.

MARCO

My soul is moist... but when I touch
your breasts, I feel the sun...

(kissing her areola)

Sea foam and roses... what is this
scent? *Profumo segreto?*

Her fingernails cat-claw into his back. And then -- SUDDEN
BANGING AT THE DOOR.

(CONTINUED)

3 CONTINUED:

3

DONA'S HUSBAND (O.S.)
Caterina!

Young Marco rolls into his trousers. The naked Dona Caterina, nipples erect, blonde tresses wild, ushers him out --

ONTO THE BALCONY

Where he gets dressed on the reckless descent, climbing down the portico where incoming ships SOUND BELLS and A DOG BARKS from the next balcony down...

MARCO (V.O.)
Venezia, from the Latin 'Veni
Etiam,' that is, come back again,
and again, for however often you
come, you will always see new
marvels, and new beauties...

4 EXT. VENICE, ITALY - GRAND CANAL/CANAL ALLEYS - SUNSET

4

Marco sits on the end of a dock, eyes searching the vast waters of St. Mark's Basin. He is writing in a small leather bound journal...

MARCO (V.O.)
But as a child of the canals I
longed to see the marvels that lay
beyond. The wonders explored by my
father, far out at sea...

A GONDOLIER punts his batela dream-like on the lagoon, a silhouette.

MARCO (V.O.)
It had been sixteen years since
Nicco Polo sailed on his great
adventure... eight months before I
was born.

VOICE (O.S.)
Marco!

Four teenaged Venetian Street Toughs come out from the maze of alleys: The locals call boys like this CANAL RATS.

CANAL RAT #1
Soldi, soldi -- Where's my coins?

MARCO
(writing)
I told you, Bernardino. Market day.

(CONTINUED)

CANAL RAT #2

Didn't the Baron's wife pay you
today? For carrying her flowers up
the stairs?

Canal Rat #3 wraps his cape up around his head like a woman's
shawl and hugs himself in amorous mockery.

CANAL RAT #3

(woman's voice)

Oh, Marco, Marco. It's not right.
Fuck me deeper...

Laughter echoes in the canals.

MARCO

Go fuck your sister.

CANAL RAT #1

(grabbing Marco's journal)

Give me the book.

Marco tries to tug the journal away from the juveniles.

CANAL RAT #2

Let's see your stories. About the
great traveler --

He grabs again; a struggle ensues --

CANAL RAT #3

He's no hero, Marco. He's a carpet
peddler. A spice salesman.

MARCO

Va fanculo.

CANAL RAT #1

Va fanculo tua Madre.

A FIST smashes INTO HIS FACE as Marco hooks him; fight's on --
spilling into the -- CANAL ALLEYS.

Canal Rat #4 draws a street stiletto. Fists fly as Marco
takes a punch, throws three back, cuts another guy's eye. And
now Marco, too, has a short blade in his hand.

The other boys spread out to let Marco and Canal Rat #4 pair
off with blades. The footwork is an unrefined form of
European fencing, blades extended. Lunge and parry; parry and
lunge.

MARCO

You speak sin on my mother's grave,
Strunzo, I'll cut you...

(CONTINUED)

4 CONTINUED:

4

One of the punks hisses out something and they scatter. Marco watches them go, pockets his blade. A GROUP OF LA FORZA (Medieval Police) march stiffly by the mouth of the alley...

Marco picks up his journal, still seething. He spits.

AUNT PATRIZIA (PRELAP)
I don't understand you...

5 INT. PATRIZIA POLO'S APARTMENT - NIGHTS LATER

5

AUNT PATRIZIA POLO, 45, a stern spinster in a formless shift and head scarf, cuts up some fish on a butcher block.

AUNT PATRIZIA
All you do. All the time. Fight in
the street, or look on the map...

Marco sits at the end of a cot, studying parchment charts. His finger traces the Silk Road route on one such flat-earth map (along with India and Arabia, the map also recognizes the Garden of Eden and sea monsters).

AUNT PATRIZIA (CONT'D)
Dreaming about all these places.
Why? It has no use...

MARCO
Aunt Patrizia, please. I am trying
to find the Strait of Ormuz...

AUNT PATRIZIA
You want to find something, find a
job.

MARCO
I have a job.

AUNT PATRIZIA
What, for the Baron's wife? You
carry her flowers up the stairs? I
don't understand --

SOMEONE ENTERS unannounced. An OLD ITALIAN MAN with a Verona cap and the thick wheeze of an asthmatic. Some kind of urgent news brims at his lips...

OLD MAN
It's Niccolò. His ship has been
spotted. Off Torcello...

Marco stands, maps falling --

6 INT. CATHOLIC CHURCH - LATER

6

The Old Man and TWO OTHER RELATIVES lead young Marco into the ancient church. Dimly-lit, stained glass. Empty.

Marco proceeds alone -- slowly, steadily -- down the dark aisle toward -- THE FRONT PEW.

Where NICCOLÒ POLO kneels, an ornate silver cross in his fist. The merchant is dark eyed and handsome, but years of sea and desert travel have weathered his olive skin.

He looks up to see his son for the very first time. An emotional albeit awkward moment...

NICCOLÒ

Marco. She gave you a fine name.
Come here, Son...

Marco enters the pew. Stands taller than his father. Much leaner. Niccolò admires his stature, his striking face. Tears well a bit... then he kisses the lad on each cheek.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

When did she die?

MARCO

I was six.

Niccolò ruminates.

NICCOLÒ

For you...

He lifts the fine silver cross with Latin inscription and drapes the chain around his son's neck.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

From Jerusalem.

Marco fairly beams; a gift from his father, great explorer returned. Then Niccolò notes that the young man's curious eyes are on --

ANOTHER BEARDED MAN, standing off, speaking in hushed tones to FATHER GREGORY, an ancient Catholic Priest.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

Your Uncle Maffeo. Not as pretty as me, admit it. But he, too, is pleased to be home; he missed the red wine. And the fat women.

Niccolò gestures for Marco to sit.

(CONTINUED)

MARCO

Some say you saw India. Arabia. Is it true, Father? That the remains of Noah's Ark rest somewhere in the mountain ranges of Asia, Armenia perhaps...

NICCOLÒ

The Silk Road, Marco. It ends here in Venezia... stretches four thousand miles across the world.

Marco's eyes are glowing with imagination...

MARCO

Did you reach Cathay?

NICCOLÒ

Indeed. Some men now call it 'China'. And it is to China that I must return.

Marco's smile holds, but his eyes betray.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

I have no choice. It is a mission of utmost importance.

MARCO

I don't understand...

NICCOLÒ

One day you will. For now... let us go to your Aunt Patrizia's and have our first cup of wine together. Then I will show you some of the wonders I brought back, yes?

He clasps a hand on Marco's shoulder, but it's not comforting. Marco's mind is reeling...

MARCO (V.O.)

How does one tell it? I was seventeen when I met my father for the first time....

7 EXT. PORT OF VENICE - WEEKS LATER - DAY

7

BUSTLING PORT and wooden galley being packed and readied for another voyage. Niccolò walks the deck...

MARCO (V.O.)

...He was away in Tabriz when I was born...

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

7 CONTINUED:

7

MARCO (V.O.) (CONT'D)
in the jungles of Java when my mother
died. Now he was returning to the
mysterious East --for how long?
Another sixteen years?

Uncle Maffeo loads crates of spices and fabrics. He gazes out
at the GATHERING CROWD, does a take. What he sees does not
please him. Nor does it upset him; he simply shakes his head,
resumes his business.

Marco is coming up the dock, lugging a valise of his spare
belongings. He follows SIX FRANCISCAN PRIESTS onto the ship.

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

CUT TO:

8 EXT. THE LUNA - DAY

8

WAVES SMASHING AGAINST the Luna. The six Priests cling white-
knuckled to the railing while the Polo Brothers man the
ship...

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

NICCOLÒ
Marco...!

Marco is lost in the dolphin spectacle.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)
Marco, the rope...!

Marco 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.

MAFFEO
Useless!

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

MAFFEO (CONT'D)
What? What does he see?

(CONTINUED)

NICCOLÒ

How do I know what he sees? What am
I going to do? Leave him in the
canals? Marco!

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!

Niccolò intercepts.

NICCOLÒ

Look. We travel for the silk and
the gems, yes? The Persian carpet.
Not the fucking dolphin. Do you
know who we are going to see? Do
you?

Marco studies his father's eyes, intrigued.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

The richest man alive. The most
powerful king in all the world.
(beat)
Kublai Khan, the barbarian.
Grandson of Genghis.

Marco's imagination is fired even as the savage name of
legend gives him gooseflesh (and seems to unnerve the
priests).

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

So, never mind the dolphins.

MAFFEO

The rope, the rope...

NICCOLÒ

Marco, here -- hold tight, hold
tight!

Niccolò fastens the rope at the mast and looks away. Then,
suddenly, Niccolò'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.
EXOTIC SCORE (Persian/Asian/Tribal) rises up as we --

FADE IN ON:

(CONTINUED)

8 CONTINUED:

8

INSERT: 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...

9 EXT. FOREIGN LANDS - MONTAGE - DAY

9

MUSIC UP.

Marco looks over his shoulder as some turbaned members of an ARMED RETINUE escort two of the haggard Priests in the opposite direction; they are retreating. After a concerned beat, Marco spurs his donkey on...

-- SILHOUETTES AGAINST A RAGING SNOW STORM: hooded, frost-bitten men and a LARGER ARMED ESCORT on donkeys lead Bactrian camels 14,000 feet above sea level. Niccolò looks back at young Marco, wrapped in layers, high on a camel. Freezing, but keeping on with absolute determination...

MARCO (V.O.)

We crossed the Hindu Kush...
crossed the Gobi, the Desert of Lop, the Taklimakan...

-- A BARREN SEA OF SAND DUNES. As the Polo caravan crests a giant dune, they behold: the TAKLIMAKAN DESERT. No end in sight. As a sun-blistered Niccolò checks the water supply, another Priest drops to his knees, exhausted.

MARCO hears STRANGE VOICES; like a MILLION WHISPERS in different tongues, surrounding him. Calling to him. Then, as the "SINGING SANDS" shift, they WHISPER LOUDER and --

A SAND STORM swallows the caravan. Shouting in urgent Italian, Maffeo tosses a rope to Niccolò. Niccolò tosses a knotted length back to his son. They cling to the same rope as they vanish...

MARCO (V.O.)

After three years and eight-thousand miles...

THE SAND STORM BEGINS TO MORPH into something wondrous and beautiful. A vast panorama...

(CONTINUED)

9 CONTINUED:

9

MARCO (V.O.)
...the Silk Road delivered us into
the fabled lands where few
Christians had ever set foot.
Cathay. The Middle Kingdom...

MARCO'S POV: EIGHTEEN MAGNIFICENT MOUNTAIN PEAKS pierce the
clouds like something from a Song Dynasty painting; pine
trees cling near a GIANT BUDDHA carved into the side of the
limestone mountain.

MARCO (V.O.)
China.

Marco drops his hood, looks around. He is 20 now, raw-boned
and handsome. Long curls ride his shoulders; a hint of a
beard threatens at his chin. He smiles in awe...

MUSIC DOWN.

10 EXT. NORTH CHINA - RAZED VILLAGE - DAYS LATER

10

The Polo caravan slowly approaches a village of adobe-like
huts and smoldering thatch. An ARMED GUIDE holds up a warning
hand... then cautiously proceeds into -- A RAZED VILLAGE.

Where they ride along the margin of a high wall. Marco
realizes, as he passes through, that the wall has been
constructed of dead bodies. He covers his nose with his
threadbare scarf...

The last Priest remaining crosses himself, but endures.
Niccolò and Maffeo dismount cautiously and approach a TINY
OLD WOMAN; she speaks in hoarse MANDARIN while the Armed
Guide begins to translate.

ARMED GUIDE
(Translating)
She says it's the work of Kublai
Khan, the barbarian devil.

Marco dismounts, curious. He draws near the corpses,
breathless. He passes piles of char, begins to slip and slide
on the melted fat of burned bodies, falls. Almost vomits when
he realizes what he's slipping on...

ARMED GUIDE (CONT'D)
(Translating)
Her village was called Liu Shan.
Loyal to the Song Dynasty rebels in
the South. Kublai is at war with
the Song loyalists. If one does not
submit to the rule of the Khan...
this is what happens.

(CONTINUED)

Marco absorbs this... then he sees the last Priest doing something odd. He is backing away from the scene and reciting something in Latin about Hell and demons. He turns, begins to run as --

TWENTY FIVE MONGOL WARRIORS EXPLODE from a gully in a THUNDER OF HOOFBEATS. In their heavy armor and furs, long mustaches, they resemble a cross between mounted Samurai and demons from the pits of Tartarus (the Priest's point, exactly).

The Mongols surround the Polo party, bows raised and arrows nocked. Niccolò discreetly moves himself in front of his son. Maffeo reaches for his saddlebags, but the MONGOL CHIEFTAN YELLS at him in MONGOLIAN. Niccolò speaks back, calmly. Firmly.

NICCOLÒ
(Mongolian; subtitled)
We are guests of Kublai Khan, the
Great Lord of Lord's.

Marco observes as Uncle Maffeo slowly produces a gold-plated wooden passport so all can see...

The Chieftan rides forward, angles a look on it. The golden tablet bears Mongolian script and Chinese letters.

Tense beat. As the Chieftan confers with a LIEUTENANT, Niccolò and Maffeo make cautious eye contact. Marco relaxes a bit, intrigued by the Mongols.

SUDDENLY: At a one word command by the Chieftan, the Mongols FIRE THEIR ARROWS. They begin to kill everyone. The armed guide next to Marco crumples with an arrow through his throat; another is brain-pierced, falls off his mule. An epic arrow launch takes down the running Priest.

The Mongols slaughter everyone... except the three Polo's.

MONGOL CHIEFTAN
(Mongolian)
We're your escort now. These Turks
had no permission to come this
close to the City of the Khan.

With that, he turns his horse and begins to lead the entourage out of the razed village.

MARCO (V.O.)
How shall I say this? There is no
hiding from the eyes of Kublai Khan
on the road to the Imperial City.
The great palace called Cambulac...

11 EXT. CAMBULAC (CITY OF THE KHAN) - DAYS LATER - DAY 11

The Mongol military escorts leads the Polo's toward a magnificent, multi-cultural Utopia (precursor to today's Forbidden City).

As they approach one the city's three Western Gates, Marco and the elder Polo's are swarmed by a MASS OF VENDORS and LAUGHING CHILDREN. A shouting swell of CHINESE, MONGOLS, TIBETANS, and PERSIANS...

THREE BOY HORSEMEN gallop past; painted PROSTITUTES gaze up at Marco; A DRUNKEN UIGHUR hurls insults at the Europeans. A MONGOL SOLDIER strikes the offender brutally to the grass with the butt-end of a lance.

And this is just the village outside the gate. Passing through a GARRISON OF MONGOLIAN AND CHINESE SOLDIERS, the Polo's make a dizzying entry --

THROUGH THE WESTERN GATE -- INTO THE IMPERIAL CITY.

Where a CLOCK BELL is ringing a deafening announcement of the arrival. Marco clings to the reins, enthralled, as they are escorted through a SEA OF HUMANITY to --

12 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - FRONT HALL - DAY 12

The Polo's are led down an ornate hallway, past gilded chambers where --

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 MANDARIN.

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?

NICCOLÒ
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.

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

(CONTINUED)

12 CONTINUED:

12

NICCOLÒ
Eyes down, down...

Uncle Maffeo looks particularly unnerved.

13 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - THRONE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

13

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

Niccolò and Maffeo prostrate themselves, touch their heads to the carpet three times. Marco follows suit. On his third bow, he covertly lifts his eyes, 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, Niccolò 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-Altai language only a true Mongol can understand. Finally, Kublai Khan speaks -- in impressive English.

KUBLAI KHAN

The Latins. Yes. I remember. But where are the Christian priests you were to bring?

NICCOLÒ

Lord Kublai... please accept our remorse. Our priests... they could not bear the rigors of the journey. But we did bring you holy oil from --

KUBLAI KHAN

-- your men of God retreat, but this boy advances? This says very little for your Savior.

NICCOLÒ

Loyalty of a mortal son to his mortal father, Great Khan.

The Khan reveals no sympathy.

(CONTINUED)

KUBLAI KHAN

Holy oil. A letter from the Pontiff who wishes to spread Christianity throughout my lands. Is this not the same Pope who has called me the spawn of Satan?

The elder Polo's don't flinch.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

I will say this and you will listen: Buddhism is welcome in my kingdom. As is Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, and the Eternal Blue Sky of my grandfather Genghis 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 revere them all. The Mongols don't care, you see, which God is worshipped in their lands. As long as all are faithful to the Great Khan and obey his laws, they can do whatever they please with their souls.

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

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

So tell your Pope that he, himself, must come here and demonstrate miracles.

Marco feels the critical eyes of a handsome young Prince in luxurious fox and sable, long Chinese sword at his belt. This is JINGIM, the Junior Khan -- eldest son of Kublai.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

As for you merchants... you wish to open trade routes on my Silk Road...

NICCOLÒ

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

KUBLAI KHAN

-- I am told you came across the great Taklimakan Desert. Not many travelers survive such a crossing. Describe for me my desert.

(CONTINUED)

NICCOLÒ

It is a sea of sand, My Lord.
Barren. No life.

MAFFEO

Nothing. Not even the bird.

NICCOLÒ

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. Niccolò 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

This whelp. What name has it?

NICCOLÒ

Marco, Sire. I am sorry, he --

The Khan lifts a hand. The Baron claps a wooden block once. Niccolò goes silent.

KUBLAI KHAN

Tell me of Hangchow.

Beat.

MARCO

A city of Heaven.

KUBLAI KHAN

Because of the magnificent lake.

(CONTINUED)

MARCO

Because of the beautiful women. In
the bath houses...

Niccolò reacts, abhorred. Maffeo, too.

MARCO (CONT'D)

They are clever and practiced and
once a foreigner has indulged
himself of their charms, he thinks
of little else.

(beat)

I don't remember much about the
lake.

NICCOLÒ

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 EMPRESS CHABI, the
principal wife of the Khan.

KUBLAI KHAN

The Empress, Chabi, wishes to ask
the young wayfarer a question.

He sweeps a hand, inviting her.

CHABI

Of all the lands a traveler passes
through... which province contains,
to your eye, the most beautiful
women of all?

Marco considers this, feeling the eyes of the entire court on
him. Especially that of young Prince Jingim. It feels like
some kind of trial.

MARCO

I find that all females, no matter
from which land -- Venice, Paris,
Persia, Hangchow -- 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.

A long, terrible beat.

Chabi's stern face tightens... then surrenders a smile.
Niccolò surrenders a breath of relief.

(CONTINUED)

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 retinue.

One girl in particular lowers her painted fan, revealing stunning eyes. KOKACHIN, early 20s, otherworldly beautiful, peers with curiosity. At her shoulder, a giant of a EUNUCH GUARD hovers like a stone arhat.

Marco clocks Kokachin, eyes holding on her for a split second before the Khan speaks --

KUBLAI KHAN

Why is it, that when this thin boy from the West speaks... I see. I see what my military scouts and map-makers struggle to convey. Storytellers from Azerbaijan, magicians from Tibet... can hardly make invisible places come to life like this young traveler seems to do.

Niccolò and Maffeo exchange glances. Quick glances, but deep -- as only brothers can do.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

You raised him well, Latin. He has a very distinguished mind.

NICCOLÒ

Sire. Lord Khan. He is my son and most dear to me...

Marco might beam if not under such scrutiny.

NICCOLÒ (CONT'D)

But if it pleases your Greatness... you may take him as your man and servant.

Marco isn't sure he heard that right.

The Khan shifts his eyes from Marco to Niccolò. The Great Khan seems to study the dynamic...

KUBLAI KHAN

What greater tribute can a man offer than his own flesh and his own blood?

Marco is looking to his father, still stunned while Kublai confers privately with his Advisors.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

You Latin merchants may engage in business along my Silk Road.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

13 CONTINUED:

13

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Ahmad, my Minister of Finance will
discuss taxation and transit.

AHMAD, a striking young Persian, gives an obedient nod.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
I give you leave.

Niccolò turns to his son, stares at him, uncomfortable.
Quickly, he embraces him, kisses him on each cheek.

MARCO
In the name of God... what are you
doing? I am your son...

NICCOLÒ
(into Marco's ear)
Insult him and we'll all have our
heads cut off, do you understand?
It will not be forever...

Marco grips his father's arm, tightly. Niccolò takes his
son's hand... and slowly removes it from his arm.

Now, Marco finds himself physically separated from his father
as an OFFICIAL CEREMONY of ARMED ATTENDANTS surrounds him.
MONGOLIAN THROAT-SINGING is starting up; KETTLE DRUMS
beginning to boom.

MARCO
Father...

His eyes follow as Ahmad and an official retinue lead the
merchants down a long hall. Marco tries to break free, tries
to follow, but he's hemmed in.

COURT EUNUCH
This decree is not done. The
subject must thank the Great Khan
for this honor and pledge
loyalty...

Fuck that. Marco explodes through the official gathering. He
doesn't just run. He rampages, trying to get out.

FROM HIS THRONE -- The Khan just watches, inscrutable. He
makes a simple breath sound and SOLDIERS GO AFTER the
runaway.

14 EXT. CAMBULAC - MARKET PLACE - MOMENTS LATER

14

Marco runs roughshod through market stalls and hanging ducks,
baskets of pears spilling over. Like a canal rat back in
Venice, he darts up alleys, navigates walls...

(CONTINUED)

14 CONTINUED: 14

A HORN ALERT is sounding and HOOFBEATS gain as MONGOL SOLDIERS react to FLAG SIGNALS being relayed by a CHINESE FOOT PATROL...

And now the SEA OF HUMANITY, those who swarmed him when he arrived, are swarming him again -- some wanting to touch his skin, some wanting money, some hearing the horn and trying to detain him. Marco is trapped.

COURT EUNUCH (V.O.)
You have been conscripted into the
service of Lord Kublai, Khan of
Khan's...

Marco is restrained by GUARDS, twisting himself to look for the caravan taking leave.

MONTAGE BEGINS (MARCO'S INDUCTION).

15 INT. HALL OF PURIFICATION - DAY 15

OUT OF MIST, Marco emerges naked, scrubbed of lice. Disoriented. The waiting Eunuch hands him some folded clothes. Simple leather and felt.

COURT EUNUCH
By order of the Great Khagan, you
are to learn the customs of the
Tartars...

16 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - DAY 16

HOOVES THUNDER ON THE HORSE GROUNDS as Marco clings to a wooden saddle on a wild Mongolian pony. With ARMED GUARDS watching --

9 YEAR-OLD MONGOL BOYS ride circles around the foreigner, knock him off his horse with herding sticks.

COURT EUNUCH (V.O.)
You will be tutored in languages
and letters...

17 EXT. CAMBULAC - CALIGRAPHY TREE - DAY 17

A CALLIGRAPHY BRUSH makes a delicate stroke in the hand of an ANCIENT CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR. Marco sits beside him, distracted by the deep abrasion on his arm from a horse fall.

(CONTINUED)

17 CONTINUED:

17

COURT EUNUCH (V.O.)
You will be trained in hawking and
archery...

18 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - DAY

18

AN ARROW IS NOCKED AT A COMPOSITE BOW as a MONGOL TUTOR
demonstrates a "thumb-lock" --

THE ARROW LAUNCHES, strikes a leather ball that hangs from a
wooden mount. Marco is handed the bow.

COURT EUNUCH (V.O.)
You shall be tutored in the great
arts of the East by those scholars
and artisans loyal to Lord
Kublai...

END MONTAGE.

19 INT. ECHO PAVILION - DAY

19

A small temple-like structure. Marco sits on a bamboo mat
across from a joyous, grinning OLD SCHOLAR. There is still
defiance in Marco's eyes, and he wants to know:

MARCO
Why?

OLD SCHOLAR
In Chinese, please.

MARCO
Weisheme'.

OLD SCHOLAR
Persian.

MARCO
Leysh.

OLD SCHOLAR
Mongolian.

MARCO
Yagaad?

OLD SCHOLAR
Most excellent.

(CONTINUED)

19 CONTINUED:

19

MARCO
And the answer?

The Scholar gives a toothless grin of Buddhist joy.

OLD SCHOLAR
Only the Khan knows.

Flustered, Marco looks toward a lute-shaped window through which he can see the sun play on distant mountains of purple mist. Is his father out there somewhere?

A BIG SHADOW fills the doorway. A LARGE MONGOL GUARD holding a bladed halberd. He summons.

20 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - SHORT TIME LATER

20

Two Mongol Guards walk Marco across a field, point him in the direction of a lone figure, just sitting out there in the grass. Hesitantly, Marco approaches the man from behind.

Judging by his saffron robes, he must be a monk. But his hair is worn in a long topknot, the sign of a Taoist. HUNDRED EYES, Minister of Martial Arts, is much younger than the other scholars.

After a long moment of what seems to be profound meditation, the monk speaks.

HUNDRED EYES
May I ask... which hand does a European wipe his ass with? The left or the right?

Hundred Eyes bites into a pear as he turns toward Marco. But he doesn't look directly at him. He is blind.

MARCO
I was told that you are to teach me Chinese boxing. What would the hand that wipes my ass have to do with such a discipline?

HUNDRED EYES
Absolutely nothing. I just never met a Latin before. I am curious.

Hundred Eyes rises, takes another bite of the pear.

MARCO
You are blind...

(CONTINUED)

HUNDRED EYES

No matter. I can still hear the
sound of one hand clapping.

MARCO

Would that be the same hand that
wipes your ass?

Hundred Eyes goes hard-faced for a moment. Then he breaks a
dangerous smile, begins to laugh. Marco knits his brow; this
guy doesn't seem like a monk at all.

SUDDENLY: Hundred Eyes tosses the pear core into the air.

SLOW MOTION: He whirls, drawing a Chinese broad sword. HE
SLICES THE PEAR CORE in half -- not once, not twice, he dices
it before the pulp lands like descending blossoms.

Marco stares, incredulous, a bit unnerved. The blind monk
sheathes his sword, rests his hand casually on the hilt.

HUNDRED EYES

You have been conscripted into the
court of Kublai Khan. For what, I
do not know. Me? I am kept here to
train the Khan's sons. His nobles.

(off Marco)

His pets. I am Hundred Eyes.

(beat)

We are all prisoners here.
Prisoners and privileged guests.

He turns his back on Marco, keeps turning, saffron robes
whirling -- and sweeps Marco on his ass.

MARCO

Putana...

HUNDRED EYES

No roots.

Marco rolls to his feet, dusts off.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

You have spirit, Latin. Of the Yin
and the Yang... you have an
abundance of Yang. But without Yin,
Yang dies on the battlefield. Do
you see what I did to that pear?

Marco doesn't respond.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

That's your cock... in the first
three seconds of a fight with a man
trained in the blade arts.

(CONTINUED)

Hundred Eyes is reasonably confident that he has the young man's ear now.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

I don't know why you are here and I don't care. But I have been told this: If the Latin is unable to protect himself in the kingdom, it is I who will be killed. Do you hear me?

Marco doesn't reply. Hundred Eyes cocks his head.

MARCO

I hear you.

HUNDRED EYES

Good. Let's get started on roots.

Hundred Eyes barely moves, sweeps Marco on his ass again. Even harder.

21 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALL OF MILITARY AFFAIRS - DAY

21

Inside one of the six halls of the Khanate, a war assembly is being held. The Mongols call this a *Kurlitai*. But in Kublai's progressive palace it resembles more of an internal meeting of the Superpower: The Great Khan sits on a raised pavilion, the embodiment of opulence and power, looking down over his TWENTY FIVE 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 fifty yarrow stalks into 64 six-line patterns. The traditional Mongols sitting nearby all frown, puzzled by Kublai's evolving interest in these cultured Chinese ways.

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?

(CONTINUED)

TAOIST ADVISOR

(reading the stalks)

The movement of Heaven is most powerful. The superior man makes himself strong and sees with --

KUBLAI KHAN

-- I know about Heaven. It was from the Sky-God that my grandfather got his mandate to rule. Like the great Genghis, I'll cut off the heads of these Song Dynasty rebels who stand in my way. Roll your sticks. See what the Gods say about that.

PHAGS-PA, Kublai's 15 year-old Buddhist monk advisor, bows then speaks:

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

I understand this, Phags-Pa. But by slaughtering corrupt officials -- the true enemies of China -- am I not demonstrating love for those who want freedom?

(beat)

Jingim...

The Crown Prince in handsome ermine robe, bows his head low in respect.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

You'll one day sit where I do now. Speak to your cousins and uncles who have traveled far.

Prince Jingim looks at the traditional Mongols sitting cross-legged on the floor in their felts and furs.

JINGIM

Destroying the Song holdouts is wise. But isn't it more wise, to let them remain in their stronghold... and pay tribute to us? In annual shipments of golden silk...

Kublai looks over at YUSUF, a white-bearded Saracen who walks with a limp, his body twisted wrong under his *Deel* robes. He lives with pain.

(CONTINUED)

KUBLAI KHAN

What does my Vice-Regent Yusuf say
on the matter?

YUSUF

Prince Jingim is wise. North China
already adores Lord Kublai. Let
South China stay inside their
walled city. Treat the rebels as a
cow that we draw milk from...
rather than slaughtering the cow
and receiving no milk.

AHMAD (O.S.)

Or *silk* in this case.

The attractive young Persian Finance Minister has risen. He
looks to the Khan for permission to continue.

AHMAD (CONT'D)

Why spend money on a war effort,
when we can *make* money by keeping
the cow alive? With respect to the
Secretariat Council -- and to his
August Prince Jingim -- I will tell
you why.

(beat)

The walled city of Xiangyang guards
the Yangtze River. The Yangtze is
the gateway to all China.

Ahmad holds the floor.

AHMAD (CONT'D)

If Xiangyang falls, the Song
Dynasty falls. The time for a new
dynasty will then lie wide open
before the Khan Empire.

Ahmad bows elegantly to Kublai as the Great Khan digests
this, showing no emotion...

An imposing Mongol now makes a breath sound that means he
wishes to speak. When all eyes go to him and he rises, it is
as if beholding the ghost of Genghis Khan. ARIQ BOKE wears a
strip of hair down the middle of his head which is shaved
bald on either side, the back hair long and braided.

KUBLAI KHAN

My little brother, Ariq the Strong.
How are things up north, in the old
capitol of Karakorum?

ARIQ

Khagan Kublai, Older Brother...

(CONTINUED)

21 CONTINUED:

21

It's a voice as deep as the belly of a yak. Tribal.

ARIQ (CONT'D)

Things in the old capitol are just
as our grandfather Genghis would
have them.

(a glance at Jingim)

The customs of the Mongols are not
those of the Chinese laws. There
are some in Karakorum who fear that
our overlord -- our big brother --
is becoming... too 'Chinese,' too
cultured in his ways --

Now stands KAIDU of the Western Mongols, a branch that is
distinguished by wearing a turban.

KAIDU

Lord Khan. May your western cousins
from the House of Ogedei, speak?

The Khan nods, irritated.

KAIDU (CONT'D)

We just want to know: Does Our
Great Khan desire to be Emperor of
Mongolia... or Emperor of China?

KUBLAI KHAN

Little Brother. Cousin Kaidu. You
underestimate me.

Kublai rises to his full height and overweight girth, a bit
stiff in the joints, a bit tentative on sore feet. He holds
out a hand and an ATTENDANT presents to him a long ceremonial
sword...

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

Emperor of China? Emperor of
Mongolia?

He stabs at what appears to be a rolled silk carpet. As the
carpet unrolls down the length of the floor between the
seated Mongols and Cabinet, Kublai stands over the great silk
map of the massive Khan empire.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

My ambition is to become Emperor of
the World.

REACTIONS all around.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

Grandfather Genghis was given this
mandate by Heaven.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

21 CONTINUED:

21

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Only one thing stood in his way, as
it now stands in mine...

SWORD POINT touches a mark on the GREAT SILK MAP OF ASIA --

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Xiangyang, the walled city. Thus, I
have already sent troops into South
China. They are amassing as I
speak. My spies tell me that in
order to starve the rebels out --
(points)
-- we must cut them off from the
farming village of Wuchang. I am
sending horse soldiers down to take
that position. My son Jingim, blood
of my blood...

Jingim looks up, as if snapped from some deep thought.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
...he will lead the assault.

KAIDU
Our Nephew Jingim. Educated in
Chinese ways. Who better to lead an
attack on the Chinese?

It's a loaded statement disguised as praise. The resentment
is palpable, but then --

ARIQ
Older Brother. If this is a call to
war... you have your younger
brother's horse and his bow. I will
lead our Golden Horde down from the
north and into battle with my
nephew.

A low tone rises up from where the Mongols sit. A vibrating
sound from the throat. Blood is in the air...

ARIQ (CONT'D)
We will crush Wuchang, then take
the walled city --
(slaps his heart)
-- and by the blood of Genghis, I
will cut their leader's head off
and tie it to the mane of my horse.

The THROAT SINGING is rising to a deafening level; it could
rattle porcelain. Phags-Pa, the teenaged Buddhist monk, puts
his fingers in his ears.

(CONTINUED)

21 CONTINUED: 21

Jingim stands there, torn between barbarian inheritance and Chinese education; Kublai raises his sword and drives it downward, impales the MAP IMAGE OF XIANGYANG, and --

22 EXT. XIANGYANG - WALLED CITY - DAY 22

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.

POV: Far out in the distance, MONGOL TROOPS amass. Soldiers, horses, livestock, and yurts. The Khan's men.

23 INT. XIANGYANG - JIA SIDAO'S QUARTERS - DAY 23

CHANCELLOR JIA SIDAO, 47, stares with tranquil eyes. The eyes of a warrior-philosopher-sociopath.

JIA SIDAO
My General is great. Do you see?
He pretends inferiority to
encourage his opponent's advance...

HE PEERS DOWNWARD ON: A battle between a praying mantis and a cricket, fighting on a table "arena" between Jia Sidao and his GENERAL RED BROW. The two men bet with paper currency.

The Chancellor now teases a small bamboo stick at the cricket, makes it turn toward the mantis...

RED BROW
Kublai Khan's men continue to
amass. Have you looked outside the
walls, Chancellor.

JIA SIDAO
How is our Emperor?

RED BROW
Unwell.

JIA SIDAO
How much longer I mean.

Red Brow glances toward the GUARDED DOORS of the Imperial Chambers where candles burn in vigil.

(CONTINUED)

RED BROW

Another week... two would be a miracle.

Jia sidao inhales thoughtfully.

JIA SIDAO

It will be a sad day, but much more efficient once he's gone. No more mixed messages from an Old King to the people. I will give all orders and all orders will be followed.

RED BROW

Yes, Chancellor.

JIA SIDAO

And that goes for the Emperor's favorite royal concubine.

Red Brow glances back at the Imperial doors again.

RED BROW

Where *is* your sister?

JIA SIDAO

Doing what she's famous for. Improving diplomatic relations with the Governor of Hangchow.

The Chancellor smiles, leans forward, watching the mantis grab the cricket. A little boy's head appears, head shaven but for a long plaited queue. When he tries to grab a cricket, the Chancellor grabs his arm, fiercely. Then he loosens the grip, checks his temper. He smiles at little ZHAO XIAN and pats the top of his head. The boy runs off...

24 INT. HANGCHOW - BED CHAMBER OF SILK - DAY

24

MEI LIN rides atop the breathless GOVERNOR OF HANGCHOW. Naked -- her hair up in a coiled bun, held by a jade ornament -- her shoulder reveals a vibrant tattoo of a dragon coiled around a rose vine.

MEI LIN

White Tiger enters the Jade Portal.
Do you know this game?

Whatever it is she is subtly doing with her ass, half-lit by candles, is pushing the politician to the verge of cardiac.

Then she stops, suddenly, like a skilled mime. With his other hand, the Governor sets down more money.

(CONTINUED)

24 CONTINUED:

24

She looks at the purse out of the corner of her eye as she slides like liquid silk over him... moving into "Dragon rolls the Pearl".

MEI LIN (CONT'D)

How much did you pay my brother for this opportunity, Governor?

GOVERNOR

More porcelain than he's ever seen...

Mei Lin raises her arms, dance-like, her hands in her coiled bun. She removes the jade ornament and lets her hair cascade long and loose. He almost passes out over her legendary beauty... and then she puts the jade pin to his throat. His eyes widen in terror... an assassination?

MEI LIN

Don't fear, Governor. This is part of the game you paid for. The Danger Game. You are but a lowly worm...

GOVERNOR

Yes... yes...

Mei Lin, the most dangerous fuck in China, rides the white tiger.

25 INT. XIANGYANG - EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - DAY

25

Dark, candle-lit. The aging EMPEROR is skin-and-bones in his bed, dying. At his side the EMPRESS XIE, a handsome old woman of regal bearing.

Chancellor Jia Sidao enters, somber, porcelain tea cup in his hand. He holds it foppishly.

JIA SIDAO

Empress Xie... is there anything your Chancellor can do...

EMPRESS XIE

Tell me the barbarians are no longer out there, amassing their troops.

Beat.

JIA SIDAO

I will not lie. The demons remain. But upon the soul of our Emperor... I promise they will soon be gone.

(CONTINUED)

25 CONTINUED:

25

She touches her husband's head, worrying. Not just about the man, but the fate of a dynasty.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)
Long live Song Empire...

He bows slightly, turns on his heel and leaves...

26 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - SUNSET

26

Marco is swept on his ass. It's been going on a long while and he is sweat-drenched. Dirty-faced. It seems that this monk is taking out his own ordeal on the young, foreign pupil.

HUNDRED EYES
Get up.

Marco gathers his breath, pulls himself to his boots.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
I did not ask to train you, Latin.
There is no honor in this for me...

Hundred Eyes walks around him in a methodical circle. Again, he attempts to sweep. But Marco has had it; he decides to evade, and does.

But Hundred Eyes is not where Marco expected... and the Monk kicks him hard in the ass.

Marco spins and lunges with Italian temper. Hundred Eyes evades with an almost imperceptible movement.

Marco goes at him, swings viciously. Can't touch him.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
Nor did you ask to be left here...
by a man who would trade his own
son like two pounds of spice...

Marco goes "canal rat," advancing with knife-fight footwork, gives it all he's got. Still can't touch him.

Marco lunges, swings, misses the ghost again.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
For the opportunity to open trade
routes to the West.

Marco fakes a lunge, changes his angle and attacks with a bitter hook. Misses cleanly, can't believe it.

(CONTINUED)

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

Let him go, Latin.

The thought fills Marco with one last burst of rage. He lunges, swings, feels himself giving out... and finally goes down, exhausted in the grass.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

Get up. If you wish to survive here... get up at once.

Marco HEARS HOOFBEATS. He lifts his head, breathing like an angry, unbroken colt. He gets to his feet just as --

TWO MONGOL GUARDS ride up on horseback with official bearing and stare down at Marco.

MOUNTED GUARD

The foreigner has been summoned. To the Imperial Palace.

Marco reacts. Hundred Eyes does not.

27 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - THRONE ROOM - NIGHT

27

Kublai sits on his throne, A KAZAKH PETITIONER kneeling before him, the last one of the day. At a single word in MONGOLIAN, the Kazakh is led down the aisle, passing --

Marco as he's escorted in. Marco notes that the Kazakh is weeping/babbling like a child as he's led out. Marco drops to all fours, keeps his face down. Until the Khan invites him to rise. The anguished cries of the Petitioner linger outside...

KUBLAI KHAN

The man who is found in possession of a stolen horse, must return it to its owner and add nine horses of the same kind. If he is unable to pay this fine, his children must be taken instead of the horses, and if he has no children, he himself shall be slaughtered like a sheep.

(beat)

That man has no children.

Marco absorbs this; can still hear the desperate begging fade. But for TWO GUARDS at the door, Marco and the Khan are alone now.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

I hear from my Minister of Falconry that you've taken well to the hawks. Archery is improving, yes?

(CONTINUED)

27 CONTINUED:

27

Marco is clearly resistant, doesn't want to be there. But he knows he's got to play the game...

MARCO
(flatly)
Yes, Great Khan.

KUBLAI KHAN
Not so well with calligraphy I am told. I, myself, was always a bit clumsy with the making of Chinese letters.

Beat.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
When you and your father crossed Central Asia, you passed through the Wakhan Corridor. Describe for me... in the way you do... how you made the passage and what you saw.

MARCO
We rode camels. Saw sand.

Kublai stares at him, waiting for more.

KUBLAI KHAN
Do you defy me?

MARCO
No, Sire.

KUBLAI KHAN
I will ask you again, Master Polo. Describe for me the Wakhan Corridor.

Beat.

MARCO
I've never passed through a region so warm. The footing was hard on our beasts.

Long, seething beat.

KUBLAI KHAN
(to his guards)
Take him to the horse grounds. One hundred blows of the rod... then stuff his mouth with the shit of pigs. Now.

GUARDS seize Marco by each arm. But as they drag him...

(CONTINUED)

MARCO

You enter a gate made of rock, east of Kashgar. There are raiders in the mountains called Assassins -- from the Arabic for *hashhish*. They're followers of a sorcerer known only as the Old Man...

At a look from the Khan, the Guards stop dragging Marco. He recovers, continues:

MARCO (CONT'D)

He plies these assassins with hashish so that they do his bidding with their blades. Many kings and many lords pay tribute to this Old Man for fear he might bring about their death. I'd provide even more detail, Sire, but we were moving at a gallop.

KUBLAI KHAN

I have been told that Venetians are great exaggerators.

MARCO

I tell the Great Khan things I have seen, as I saw them.

KUBLAI KHAN

Very well. As my servant, you will accompany my tax collector, Sanga, as he makes his rounds. This will give you a view of my Imperial City and my subjects... and you will report back to me and describe the things you have seen, as you saw them.

Marco considers the assignment, nods tentatively. The Guards react to the informal nod. Marco checks it, bows properly.

Finally, the Khan gestures and Marco is escorted back down the long carpet.

JINGIM (O.S.)

A silver tongue, indeed...

Kublai looks at his son as he approaches from the inner sanctum, elegant in his ermine and fox fur.

JINGIM (CONT'D)

With utmost respect, Royal Father... are you grooming a Latin to become an emissary?

(CONTINUED)

KUBLAI KHAN

Where is your armor, Jingim? Your sword? My astrologers told you that this morning was the most auspicious hour to move troops south.

JINGIM

The Confucian advisors said it is better we ride at night.

KUBLAI KHAN

They also believe a war can be won without fighting. Why must they always speak in riddles, these Confucians?

Jingim smiles, amused.

JINGIM

The supreme art of war, Father. Still, tomorrow I ride to Wuchang as a Mongol -- and carry my father's flag.

KUBLAI KHAN

You're your mother's son, Jingim. Educated. Patient. Noble. There will be time for all those things in the new dynasty.

JINGIM

I must prepare to ride; I have three wives who each desire a visit before I go to battle.

KUBLAI KHAN

You are your father's son, too...

Jingim bows, starts away...

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

Jingim.

(beat)

You ask, what do I see in the Latin boy? He is my eyes... into Europe. Because after China and Japan... we look to the West.

Jingim considers the utter scope of that statement. A lot to one day inherit. With a nod, he leaves.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

Ride well, Jingim Khan...

28 EXT. CAMBULAC - NIGHT 28

Magnificent. Lantern-lit. Foreboding.

MARCO (V.O.)
The City of the Khan is laid out by
squares, as a chessboard is...

29 INT. MARCO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT 29

Simple digs, mahogany walls. Marco sits by a paper lantern,
writing into his leather-bound journal.

MARCO (V.O.)
Gates can be swung to close off an
entire street at a moment's
watch...

INSERT: In his journal, Marco is sketching a map of
Cambulac's grid. Exotic marvels for his journal? Or an escape
plan?

30 EXT. CAMBULAC - NIGHT 30

Marco walks the street in front of his quarters, notes a LONE
GUARD standing in the shadows, watching him...

MARCO (V.O.)
The great clock strikes six bells
each night so that none may go
about the town after it has
sounded...

Marco is studying the GREAT CLOCK, but then -- at the SOUND
OF HOOFBEATS ON PAVEMENT -- he draws back quickly to allow
the passage of a mounted detachment: Fierce MONGOL GUARDS on
spirited horses.

MARCO (V.O.)
The guards always ride through the
city at night, by thirty and by
forty...

Marco turns down another street, moving along the wall,
calibrating the number of WALL GUARDS armed with halberds.
He drifts in shadows...

MARCO (V.O.)
Any persons caught out after the
last sounding of the bell will
suffer blows of the rod by which
they sometimes die...

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

30 CONTINUED:

30

MARCO (V.O.) (CONT'D)
(beat)
I must learn how to evade the rod.
If I'm to escape.

Marco observes GUARDS at the West Gate, notes a rotation with OTHER GUARDS, and then AN EXPLOSION rocks the night.

Marco, startled, trips back as a SECOND EXPLOSION makes him wheel and see --

POV: The NIGHT SKY bursting with an explosion and what looks like a TREE OF FIRE raining torrents of flame.

31 EXT. CAMBULAC - DOWN A SIDE STRAND - MOMENTS LATER

31

Marco moves curious toward EXOTIC MUSIC AND CROWD SOUNDS. He follows his first view ever of FIREWORKS down the lane lit by paper lanterns when --

A TWELVE FOOT TALL CHINESE WOMAN in white painted face walks toward him, a colorful fan in each hand. She is on the shoulders of a STILT WALKER who strides through the JOVIAL CROWD followed by ANOTHER.

Behind this folk dance, a PLATE SPINNER wheels about and a MANCHURIAN DWARF juggles.

As Marco drifts through the crowd, his eye is caught by something else, appearing for a moment between passerby. It is Kokachin, the stunning young royal he glimpsed in the Khan's throne room.

SLOW MOTION: As she smiles, delighted with the show, Marco watches her.

All around Marco, dwarves juggle, stilt-walkers do fan tricks, and "fire trees" light the sky... but it is the beauty of this young girl that has the Venetian utterly hypnotized.

MARCO (V.O.)
I have seen, with my own eyes,
mysteries and wonders that would
defy the descriptions of a poet...

Kokachin, turning to watch a juggler, spots Marco. She sees him staring at her. Their eyes meet for a powerful, magnetic second. Alchemy, indeed...

Then PASSERBY block the view again. When they clear, she is gone.

32 EXT. CAMBULAC - NEAR A MARBLE FOUNTAIN - MOMENTS LATER 32

Marco drifts through the street crowd, trying to find the girl. A STILT-WALKER nearly tramples him; he gets around the tall legs and spots her again.

33 EXT. CAMBULAC - DOWN A GARDEN COLONNADE - MOMENTS LATER 33

She walks, her hair falling past her hips. Marco pursues. She glances over her shoulder. And then someone blocks his path. ZA BING, the girl's Guard wears a two foot scimitar on his hip, muscular arms banded in gold bracelets.

ZA BING

Ni Hao.

Yet another curiosity: This giant of a man speaks with a voice that lilts somewhere between soprano and contralto, his eyelids darkened with kohl.

ZA BING (CONT'D)

You must be the Venetian. I've heard about you.

Marco's eyes drop to the imposing sword at his hip.

ZA BING (CONT'D)

No man follows the colonnade to the Hall of Fragrance. It is a house for Mongolian royalty; young girls far past the reach of a foreign merchant's son.

MARCO

Forgive me. I followed the wrong path.

ZA BING

Indeed you did.

Tense. And then the CLOCK SOUNDS ONE BELL. The CROWD DISBANDS in all directions, beginning.

Marco starts away, but tempts the fates with a look over his shoulder. SECOND BELL...

There she is on a vine-wrapped balcony, watching him. She turns away, enters her quarters. Closes the door.

34 EXT. CAMBULAC - NEXT MORNING

34

In the shadow of the Imperial Palace, Marco accompanies SANGA, the tax collector, through the thriving marketplace, the collections wagon ahead. Sanga is round, jolly --

SANGA

Vendors are easy to collect from.

A SEA OF PEOPLE, vibrant, diverse, clots the city artery. Marco struggles to keep up with Sanga, dogged by NINE STREET URCHINS, as the tax collector educates --

SANGA (CONT'D)

They pay a fee for their stalls and their space -- higher fees for more traffic and more customers.

(rubs his fingers
together)

More money.

MARCO

Are there ever holdouts?

SANGA

Inside the Imperial Wall?

(chuckles)

Very rare. Too good a thing they have here, Master Marco. The vendors know better. They cheat on tribute -- they end up peddling outside the wall. No market, no stall. Much more work, much less money on the outskirts. A lesser people in the yurt villages.

(pointed)

Don't go there. Very dangerous.

MARCO

In Venice those who don't meet their obligations are imprisoned as paupers. Is it the same here?

SANGA

Thieves are branded thieves. Not to be trusted. Marked, they struggle. Their sons beg, their wives and daughters whore. They live off Lady Chabi's charity loaves.

MARCO

But they live.

SANGA

Sometimes. Severity of punishment, this is not for me to comment on.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SANGA (CONT'D)

That is for the Vice-Regent Yusuf
and the wisdom of his Secretariat.
Death is often declared.

(off Marco's pale)

The Great Khan's laws are fair,
Marco, but they are strict.

Sanga says this as he does official business with a vendor,
an oval-faced JURCHEN WOMAN, manning a stall. She speaks an
EXOTIC DIALECT with Sanga then hands him several strips of
linen...

MARCO

What is the fabric?

SANGA

Linen. These Jurchen make it in
Manchuria. They do not have the
copper coins to pay this month. So
they pay with what they have...

The Jurchen Woman peers suspiciously at Marco, resumes work.
As Marco and Sanga head to the collection wagon, the
persistent group of children cling to the Latin, laughing at
his every move.

MARCO

Is there any way to rid us of these
little pissants?

SANGA

Those are my children.

Marco reacts. Sanga laughs, delighted.

SANGA (CONT'D)

They are proud of my Imperial
position, they follow me like I am
king.

MARCO

King of a fine brood, Sir.

SANGA

With my own Venetian slave.

He nudges Marco, joking. Then Sanga barks at his kids and
they scurry off into the alleys.

SANGA (CONT'D)

Pissants! I love that.

Onward they go, collecting taxes.

35 INT. XIANGYANG - JIA SIDAO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

35

The Chancellor Jia Sidao is sitting in a small, royal chamber full of porcelain. He admires the glazing on a rice bowl, turning it over in his hands.

JIA SIDAO

The Governor said the songs they
sing about you, south of Hangchow,
are true. You must have pleased him
greatly.

Mei Lin stands at the door in her imperial silk robe, her hair once again perked in an elegant conch.

MEI LIN

Our Emperor will soon die. You must
honor his wishes.

JIA SIDAO

Anything he wants.

MEI LIN

Make a truce with the barbarians.

JIA SIDAO

Except that.

MEI LIN

Kublai is too strong. Too many men.
I worry for my daughter if the
barbarians take our city.

The Chancellor polishes a plate with the voluminous sleeve of his blouse.

JIA SIDAO

When the strike of the praying
mantis breaks the body of the
cricket, it is because of its
timing. Timing, Sister. Trust me.
Like my soldiers do.

She lingers in the doorway.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

Don't worry, Mei Lin. When our
Emperor is gone, you will still be
esteemed in this court.

She looks at all that porcelain, the riches her brother is accruing as a dynasty crumbles. And she leaves.

36 INT. SANGA'S HOVEL - NIGHT

36

Marco sits in Sanga's dark little dwelling, a place crowded with his nine children and his TAJIK WIFE. As Marco eats and drinks wine with the family, Sanga still hasn't stopped talking --

SANGA
Spices? You want to talk about
spices!

Marco laughs, two children on his lap, competing to feel his white skin. The Tajik Mother ladles Marco more stew.

SANGA (CONT'D)
The spiceries pay three and a third
percent, and from the wine they
make --

MARCO
(toasting)
Salute'.

SANGA
(toasting)
Salam ati! From the wine they make
of rice they draw a very great
revenue, and thus they must pay
duty. Untold money to the Khan!

MARCO
And the Silk Road? Do we ever
travel there to collect taxes?

Marco feigns innocence as he sips his wine but the hovel grows silent with his question. Sanga studies Marco --

SANGA
We, no. I travel to collect. Once a
fortnight. You are not yet
permitted to travel outside
Cambulac. Not yet. The wonders of
the Imperial City are plenty.
Please don't even speak this --
because I like you. My slave.

Marco takes in the warning, then smiles --

MARCO
Am I permitted to have another cup
of rice wine?

Relieved, Sanga lunges and pours, and chases another
"pissant" off his young friend's lap.

(CONTINUED)

36 CONTINUED:

36

SANGA

Salute'!

MARCO

Salam ati.

They drink; they laugh.

37 EXT. SOUTH CHINA - WUCHANG VILLAGE - NIGHT

37

A small community of huts, lit by Chinese lanterns.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL Jingim on horseback, dressed in the boiled leather plates and cone-shaped helmet of a light archer. TWO OLDER GENERALS in heavy armor flank the young prince. They are on high ground overlooking --

MOUNTED MONGOL SOLDIERS organized by the decimal system: groups of 10 forming 100, forming 1,000...

JINGIM

It is quiet.

MONGOL GENERAL

As it is... before a typhoon.

Jingim looks at him, reads his older, wiser eyes. Then a young warrior rides up alongside them -- BYAAMBA, young, handsome, fierce-eyed. Wears his sparse facial hair "Genghis style."

BYAAMBA

By the Eternal Blue Sky, let's sing
from our throats and let them hear
the devil they are about to meet...

One of the Generals makes "breath talk" and Byaamba reluctantly reins his horse and goes back to his group.

JINGIM

The sons of my father's concubines
always speak the loudest.

The General suddenly raises a hand. This triggers the raising of signal flags in the line behind him.

MONGOL GENERAL

As I said, Prince Jingim...

Here they come: 3,000 SONG TORCHES, a great foot patrol with mounted divisions behind them. They are armed with the weaponry of China -- a sight just as intimidating as the Mongol horde.

(CONTINUED)

37 CONTINUED:

37

JINGIM reacts; he does well at concealing his mix of emotions. For now...

JINGIM

By law of the Khan: spare the artisans and engineers. We will advance, engage, then feign retreat... into the Wuchang Valley. My Uncle Ariq will lead the Golden Horde between the Two Tiger Hills.

MONGOL GENERAL

'Crow and Wolf' formation.

JINGIM

We ride Wolf, Ariq rides Crow -- from each flank.

But then the platoon parts and allows a MONGOL EXPRESS RIDER through. With his exhausted horse frothing, he comes to the front.

EXPRESS RIDER

(breathless)

Ariq Boke... he is not there.

Jingim's eyes betray a touch of concern.

JINGIM

What do you mean he is not there?

EXPRESS RIDER

Another rider met me from three hundred miles out. No Ariq. No Golden Horde. Nothing but grass and sky...

Now, the Chinese Rebels are advancing. STILL MORE are emerging from the huts and structures -- they've been waiting.

Jingim tries not to panic...

38 EXT./INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - NIGHT

38

ARMED GUARDS lead Marco, on foot, up to a red imperial structure, glowing with lantern and candles inside.

MARCO

I thought I was to report to the Great Khan...

(CONTINUED)

38 CONTINUED:

38

MONGOL GUARD

Indeed. Here, in the Hall of Five
Desires.

Marco is met by an IMPERIAL EUNUCH in silk robes and regal
cap.

IMPERIAL EUNUCH

Advance down the hall. At the
indoor lake, continue toward the
east... there, you will receive
your next instructions.

Marco doesn't get it.

IMPERIAL EUNUCH (CONT'D)

Proceed.

As Marco begins to enter the dark, incense-filled hall, he
can hear MUSIC that suggests the blend of exotic cultures
from the Silk Road...

IMPERIAL EUNUCH (CONT'D)

And Master Marco...
(beat)

You can look... but do not touch.

Marco studies the eunuch, intrigued now.

39 INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - MOMENTS LATER

39

In an enormous candle-lit bed of silk and oils, three of the
Khan's four wives lay with EXOTIC 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.

He runs a hand through his shock of hair as if to stay
focused on his path -- a maze of MORE BEDS, MORE GIRLS...
MARCO WALKS ON...

AN EAST INDIAN EUNUCH meets him at an indoor waterfall and
points him south, down another erotic passage into --

40 INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - THE ROOM OF THE FIFTH DESIRE - 40
CONTINUOUS

Kublai lies on a silk lounge with Lady Chabi, drinking plum wine. The First Lady, attractive in red silks, her hair down, is mixing some powdered substance in a lacquered bowl.

CHABI

Young Polo... do you still believe
that the sweetness of wine is but
one flavor?

KUBLAI KHAN

Come sit.

Marco looks around for a chair, then realizes that he's being invited onto the lounge with the Great Khan and the Empress.

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

CHABI

Horn of the unicorn. His Majesty
has a busy three nights ahead.

KUBLAI KHAN

Tell me of my subjects out beyond
this Imperial Palace. Do they
despise their king?

MARCO

To the contrary. Those who can pay
taxes do so willingly. I see none
without a home, none without a
daily meal. Everywhere is talk
about a...

(distracted by sweet
moans)

-- everywhere is talk about locusts
that destroyed crops in Xian, and
how the Great Kublai forgave the
farmers taxes, sending wagons of
grain instead.

KUBLAI KHAN

Is that how your Pope at home
treats the poor?

A beat.

MARCO

Suffering lights the path to
heaven, Sire. They say.

(CONTINUED)

40 CONTINUED:

40

Kublai reflects on that as Chabi dabs some plum wine and rhino dust off his bottom lip. Seductive music beckons from the candle flickers and incense.

KUBLAI KHAN

You will now walk back down the Hall of the Five Desires. These girls from Kungarut are highly skilled in the arts of love. A man who proves loyal to me can take what he wishes...

Marco isn't sure if this is a test, a reward, or part of his training. Chabi studies him with great interest.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

The walls have eyes, Master Marco.

Marco finishes his wine. He bows...

41 EXT. SOUTH CHINA - WUCHANG VILLAGE - NIGHT

41

Jingim is sweating under his helmet as he stares into the sea of torches and weapons.

JINGIM

Five hundred to the left... five hundred to the right...

MONGOL GENERAL

Prince Jingim, as your general, I am advising retreat.

Jingim surveys his men, struggles with the decision.

JINGIM

We lure them to the valley, attack from the flanks. Like Mongols.

MONGOL GENERAL

Without Ariq's troops?

JINGIM

There is no going back without taking this village. Give the command.

The General hesitates... then gestures; flags sweep the air, signalling the deep ranks of mounted Mongols. The NACCARA DRUMS begin and THROAT SINGING RISES UP out of the night, out of the earth...

The SONG REBELS prepare lances...

MONTAGE BEGINS/MUSIC UP.

42 INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - NIGHT 42

Marco walks the sexual gantlet, CONCUBINES now snaking their jeweled arms out at him, touching, teasing. A CHINESE GIRL snaps open a bamboo fan with a puff of perfume... INTO OPIUM MIST he finds himself...

PASSING BETWEEN TWO BEDS OF SILK, CONCUBINES on each side, stroking his belt, cooing at his hip...

Four, five, SIX GIRLS are teasing, demonstrating "The Forbidden Cicada Dance." Marco takes a kiss and weakens. Drawn to the flesh, young loins aching. *The walls have eyes* the Khan said. Marco seems to be deciphering that now as he continues his slow, disciplined passage through the sensual maze...

43 EXT. SOUTH CHINA - WUCHANG VILLAGE - NIGHT 43

Jingim's TROOPS COLLIDE with the Song Rebels, metal against metal, MONGOLS SCREAMING wildly...

44 INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - NIGHT 44

Marco, feeling the opium smoke around him, is pulled to a bamboo swing where a pair of KUNGARUT TWINS demonstrate "Tiger's Crawl" for one of the Khan's younger wives who lays naked with them. One of them kisses his eyelid, then gently blows smoke in his face. Hard as it is, he moves past the swing...

45 EXT. CAMBULAC - GRASSLANDS - NIGHT 45

Under a new moon, Hundred Eyes is "circle walking," a Taoist form of martial arts meditation. With his hands held out in "Dragon Claws," he flows around an object in the middle of the circle...

A COBRA, coiled and threatening...

46 EXT. SOUTH CHINA - WUCHANG VILLAGE - NIGHT 46

THE MONGOLS ARE RETREATING into the Valley Between Two Tiger Hills when Jingim suddenly shouts an order. The GENERAL repeats it, louder. FLAGS ARE HOISTED AND SWEEPED from galloping horses... a HORN BELLOWS...

(CONTINUED)

46 CONTINUED:

46

THE MONGOLS NOW SPLIT INTO THREE, the center unit making an abrupt turn, UNLEASHING ARROWS. They meet the stunned charge of Song Rebels. Byaamba gallops past Jingim, retching a war cry from his belly.

On foot now, and drawing his sabre, Jingim fights with the highly-cultivated skill and elegance of a scholar with a paint brush -- noble poetry in motion... while around him, his men, like half-brother Byaamba, fight more like mace-wielding barbarians...

Jingim impales a Rebel, spins and slices two more in one move. He ducks a swing of a pudaο and fires a dance-like spinning back kick that crushes an ATTACKER'S throat.

TWO OF HIS MEN go down beside him. Then another. SONG REBELS are spilling into the valley like floodwaters... a BRUTAL MARTIAL ARTS SPECTACLE.

As Jingim stares horrified, a BLADE CUTS his leather armor. Quickly he reacts, wheeling. Leaping. And driving his sabre down into the heart of a rebel with a PLUME OF BLOOD...

47 INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - NIGHT

47

A CONCUBINE MOANS under the lips of another as MORE GIRLS undo Marco's shirt, tease his nipples with feathers. One kisses his torso all the way down while his head swims in incense and perfume. He makes it past her...

48 EXT. CAMBULAC - GRASSLANDS - NIGHT

48

Hundred Eyes reverses his circle walk, hypnotizes the Cobra. But then it strikes!

49 EXT. SOUTH CHINA - WUCHANG VILLAGE - NIGHT

49

Jingim is driven back by a WALL OF REBEL FIGHTERS and Chinese weaponry. No choice now. He grabs a runaway horse, not his own, and mounts on the fly.

MONGOL GENERAL

Avvi! Avvi!

The General's left arm is cut off. Jingim, bloodied, now shouts the retreat command, GALLOPS out of the valley...

50 INT. HALL OF FIVE DESIRES - NIGHT 50

Marco reaches the door out, sweat-soaked. He nearly collapses.

MARCO
Madre di Dio...

51 EXT. CAMBULAC - GRASSLANDS - NIGHT 51

Hundred Eyes catches the Cobra in the air.

MONTAGE ENDS/MUSIC DOWN.

52 EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE - DAWN 52

CLOCK BELLS ring as the sun comes up over the Imperial City. MOUNTED SOLDIERS patrol...

AT THE HALL OF FRAGRANCE Kokachin stands on her balcony in her silk robe, a cup of cha already prepared for her. While Za Bing plaits her hair, more like a giant nanny than a guard, she gazes out beyond the walls, toward the Steppe. Toward freedom, perhaps.

53 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - MAGIC HOUR 53

Marco is blindfolded before Hundred Eyes. Together they practice *chi sao* or "sticking hands," training Marco to sense changes in pressure, momentum and "feel."

HUNDRED EYES
Do you feel the darkness that I
live in? Long ago, in my darkest
hour... my life was saved by a
lamb.

MARCO
How so?

HUNDRED EYES
I ate the bastard. With some cooked
rice and a cup of plum wine.

With that distraction, Hundred Eyes tries to sweep him. Marco moves into "Dropping Horse" taking the weight off the swept foot and avoiding the "Cutting of the Roots."

(CONTINUED)

Hundred eyes sweeps the other foot; Marco moves into "Rooster Stance." Not bad. Basic, but not bad. Hundred Eyes taps him between the eyes and he removes the blindfold, relieved to see again.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
You did the right thing. In the
Khan's Pleasuredome. He was testing
your strength of will.

MARCO
It was like walking hungry through
a feast. A most remarkable feast.

HUNDRED EYES
Of course.
(beat)
But build up virtue and you master
all. Without discipline, you will
tumble constantly back into the
dark.

Hundred Eyes makes to leave.

MARCO
Where you going?

HUNDRED EYES
To get drunk.
(beat)
Remarkably drunk.

Marco looks after him, bemused. Then he glances down at a short sword in the monk's small training arsenal. He steals it. Hides it in his nearby saddle scabbard.

Hearing HOOFBEATS, he turns.

MARCO'S POV: A small ROYAL PROCESSION is passing. Led by Za Bing the Eunuch, Kokachin is seated on an open litter carried on the shoulders of SERVANTS. She is dressed in Mongolian beadwork, felts, and ermine tails, and atop her head is a tall bejeweled *boqta*.

CLOSE ON KOKACHIN -- she keeps her proud face forward, but her pretty Asian eyes look out the corners toward the training field. Toward the young foreigner.

MARCO reacts to the hard gaze of Za Bing. He casts his eyes downward. When the Princess has passed by, he recovers, prepares another arrow...

54 EXT. CAMBULAC - CALLIGRAPHY TREE - LATER 54

Marco sits with his ancient Confucian Calligraphy Tutor under a dragon spruce. He observes the meditative state the scholar enters as he brush strokes a character:

MARCO

Sifu...

(Mandarin; Subtitled)

How does one make the character for beauty? Sublime beauty...

The ancient artist turns his wizened, 104 year-old face to the young Westerner. He reads the young man's eyes. He smiles...

55 INT. MARCO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT 55

Marco sits by his lantern, sketching calligraphy into his journal. A figure appears in his open door, a SLAVE from Lesser India.

SLAVE

Master Marco. You requested more salt cakes?

Marco gestures to his bedding and the Slave sets the bundle down.

MARCO

(thank you in Hindi)

Sukriya.

Marco waits for the slave to leave. Then he gets up quickly, takes the bundle of salt cakes and hides them, with a second bundle, in a secret satchel.

He hears HOOFBEATS now. A FEW DOGS BARKING...

56 EXT. CAMBULAC - MARCO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT 56

A shirtless Marco steps out onto his porch. The defeated Mongol War Party, led by Jingim, rides back into the Imperial City. The Prince is bloodied, mud-caked.

Marco watches him ride slumped toward the Imperial Palace...

57 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - CHESS ROOM - NIGHT

57

Kublai sits at a marble chess table in an open garden off of his inner sanctum. Jingim sits across from him, freshly bathed and bandaged, back in the Chinese silks of a royal.

JINGIM

My First General advised retreat. I gave the order that we turn and fight. Like Mongols.

KUBLAI KHAN

Mongols do not lose.

He moves an "elephant" piece. Jingim watches it, an excuse to lower his eyes.

Chabi comes out of the shadows in her night robes. In this moment, the powerful First Lady is simply a concerned mother. She checks on her son's wound, and he responds to the affection --

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

Chabi...

Chabi defies her husband for a moment, wants to see for herself that her eldest son, Heir to the Throne, is all right. Finally, she leaves...

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

How bad is the wound?

JINGIM

A scar... that will always remind me of Wuchang. And all the men and horses that died. That's the only wound, Father.

KUBLAI KHAN

You will ride to the old Capitol and find my brother Ariq. I want to know why he pledged his horse and bow... but then did not arrive to support my army.

Jingim sits there for a time, listening to the peacocks in the Khan's ornate aviary.

JINGIM

A horse messenger can cover three-hundred miles in --

Kublai lashes out and sweeps the stone chess pieces to the floor --

(CONTINUED)

KUBLAI KHAN

-- your horse messenger did a fine job at Wuchang, didn't he? Did you even send a falcon to my brother?

JINGIM

Of course, I did. Something went wrong.

KUBLAI KHAN

You ride to Karakorum in the morning. As Prince and emissary, return to me the truth.

Chabi is standing off, pretending to be watching the moon. But now she turns and watches her husband and son, troubled. Kublai feels her eyes.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

Go see the Chinese healer. Have your wounds looked after...

Jingim leaves the chess table. The Khan sits there in dark rumination.

58 EXT. XIANGYANG - THE WALLED CITY - NIGHT

58

The Chancellor Jia Sidao knocks on a red lacquered door in the Imperial Quarters. Mei Lin answers, wrapping her robe.

JIA SIDAO

The Emperor is breathing his last. He has requested the presence of his Imperial Consort...

For a second she appears to appreciate the gesture. But there's always so much more behind her brother's eyes.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

Did you hear? My men turned back Kublai Khan's devils at Wuchang.

MEI LIN

But he still has soldiers outside these walls.

JIA SIDAO

Not for long. He will soon learn that his own people want him dead as much as I do.

MEI LIN

No glorious battle?

(CONTINUED)

JIA SIDAO

The battle will come. When I want
it. And the war will be won.

MEI LIN

(off his confidence)
Who among the Mongols do you
conspire with?

The Chancellor teases her with a quiet smile.

JIA SIDAO

Men will one day sing songs about
Jia Sidao, the minister who saved
the Song Empire.

MEI LIN

I will bring my daughter to say
goodbye to her father... and to the
Song Empire.

This last nuance burns the Chancellor. He is about to reply
when the girl child, LING LING, appears at her mother's hip.
A pampered Imperial Daughter of a concubine. The Chancellor
softens.

JIA SIDAO

Ling Ling.

He lowers to a knee, hides a hand, magician-like, within his
billowing robes.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

Uncle's most precious. Born in the
Year of --

He produces a tiny figurine, terra-cotta.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

-- the Monkey.

Ling Ling smiles, accepts the figurine.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

That's why you're so clever.

Jia Sidao looks up at Mei Lin. It's an opaque look, somewhat
chilling for that reason.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

Precious and clever.

He gently kisses the child's head then leaves...

59 INT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE - BATHE - DAY 59

Kokachin is in her bath, pampered by THREE FEMALE ATTENDANTS. One does her feet, one treats her ears with oils, the third does her hands.

Za Bing enters, speaking Mandarin, and the Attendants leave. Alone with the girl, Za Bing hands her some folded parchment. She stares at it, does not take it.

KOKACHIN
A proposal? The Prince of Bukhara?

ZA BING
No. Someone left it on the garden wall.

Curious, she takes it, unfolds it. She studies the calligraphy, barely dry.

KOKACHIN
The calligraphy is terrible. I can't even read it.

She shoves it back at him. Za Bing reads it in the light.

ZA BING
'Sublime Beauty has a truth all it's own.'

Kokachin isn't sure how to react, but Za Bing fairly swoons. He needs to open his bamboo fan and cool himself.

Kokachin takes the parchment again and looks at it.

60 EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE - NIGHT 60

Marco rides his horse down the paved streets, seems to be checking the GUARDS rotation again. He looks up at the Great Clock as he slows his pace near -- THE HALL OF FRAGRANCE.

Which is lit dimly by the soft flicker of candles.

MARCO'S POV: Kokachin's silhouette in the upstairs quarters. TWO ATTENDANTS are undressing (or perhaps dressing) her.

MARCO tries to look away. He can feel the danger...

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

The big eunuch steps out of the shadows, hand on the hilt of his scimitar.

(CONTINUED)

ZA BING (CONT'D)

Out for a night ride, Master Marco?
It's getting dangerously close to
curfew.

MARCO

The Minister of Horses has
instructed that I ride in the dark
each night. So that Ba-Tu and I
gain trust of each other.

ZA BING

You look most regal in the saddle.
You have what horsemen call a fine
seat.

(beat)

Now, take Ba-Tu and go... before
the curfew bells ring and I find
myself forced to uphold my
pledge...

When Marco just sits there for a moment, Za Bing unsheathes
his blade with the sound of singing steel.

ZA BING (CONT'D)

I can very quickly make you a
member of the elite vanguard to
which I belong.

Marco kicks Ba-Tu's flanks and trots away...

TROTting ACROSS CAMBULAC, he becomes aware of HOOFBEATS
behind him. Quickening. Gaining. Overtaking him, and nearly
knocking him from his saddle, as a NIGHT RIDER gallops past,
making a strange whistle. Marco's horse bolts, chasing --

MARCO

Ba-Tu!

THE HORSE RACE is on! Down the paved path toward the south
gate. The hooded rider leads Marco out the gate.

Out on the moonlit grasslands, the Night Rider finally reins
to a stop, spins his frothing horse in a circle around Marco
who tries to recover from the full-out stampede.

He drops his hood and reveals himself. No he. It is Kokachin.

KOKACHIN

You have a fast horse. But you need
to allow him his head and put more
weight in your heels.

Marco looks over his shoulder, back at the walls of Cambulac.

MARCO
I did not expect --

KOKACHIN
-- What? The Blue Princess to ride
like a Mongol? All Mongol women are
born to the horse and the bow.

Marco digests this, makes a study of her in the saddle.

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)
There are some nights when Za Bing
looks the other way... so that I
might remember what it feels like
to ride the Steppe. Four nights
ago... I killed a deer.

She says this with the pride of a huntress.

MARCO
Why did you lead me out here?

KOKACHIN
Why did you come to the Hall of
Fragrance, where men are not
permitted?

MARCO
I came to see if my eyes had told
the truth, the first time I saw
you...

She studies him, intrigued. The CLOCK BELL RINGS once. He
comes closer.

MARCO (CONT'D)
They did not lie.
(beat)
Forgive my calligraphy.

KOKACHIN
I saw how your father left you. It
made me remember.

Marco moves closer still...

MARCO
Remember what?

KOKACHIN
How alone I felt... when I was
brought here...

SECOND BELL...

(CONTINUED)

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)

I am of the Kerait Tribe, up that way --

(points her chin toward the north)

My clan was massacred by Sultan's men. The Great Khagan Kublai crushed those raiders... and brought me here. Because my mother was Queen of the Kerait.

MARCO

You are an orphan.

KOKACHIN

Like you.

THIRD BELL.

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)

If we are not back in the gate by six bells...

MARCO

Have you ever thought of running?

KOKACHIN

Where would I go? This is my home. And yours now.

Their eyes meet. Marco tries to read her. FOURTH BELL.

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)

But I am kept for royalty, and you are a servant of the Khan. The words we share tonight must be our last.

She turns her horse, prepares for a desperate run.

KOKACHIN (CONT'D)

Heels down, allow him his head. But I will still beat you....

She puts her hood back up... then slashes a Mongolian wrist-whip and EXPLODES from the Steppe. Ba-Tu rears, excited, but before setting chase, Marco dismounts quickly.

Urgently, he pulls the two wrapped bundles of salt cakes from his saddle bags and stows them in the ruins of a rammed-earth wall on the Steppe.

He athletically mounts Ba-Tu and sets chase, catching the tempo. FIFTH BELL...

62 EXT. CAMBULAC - THE SOUTH GATE - CONTINUOUS 62
SIXTH BELL...

The two riders clear the gate, make it in...

63 EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE - NIGHT 63

Kokachin, hooded again, turns the corner on her horse. She dismounts, handing the reins to Za Bing. He is sweat-soaked with worry and not pleased with his charge.

ZA BING
It won't be you who gets cattle-
branded, Princess.

She ignores him, slips in through the gate.

64 INT. MARCO'S QUARTERS - DAWN 64

A DOOR KNOCKER wakes Marco from a deep sleep. As he gets up, pulls trousers on:

MARCO
Sanga? Is it tax day?

Marco opens the door to see THREE MONGOL GUARDS. They stare daggers. Marco feels the color leave his face.

65 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - THRONE ROOM - DAY 65

Marco stands before the Great Khan, nervous. Again, the Khan presides with a cruel silence.

KUBLAI KHAN
How goes your horse riding?

Marco is already imagining the fifty blows of the rod, or worse.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
What? You hold your tongue from me
again?

MARCO
How shall I tell of the Mongolian
pony, Sire? He is a fine and hardy
breed.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

65 CONTINUED:

65

MARCO (CONT'D)
Quite small, but unlike some steeds
in Europe, he does not tire and
does not need coddling.

KUBLAI KHAN
Good. Because you are riding to
Karakorum with my son Jingim today.
Now.

Beat.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
You will visit the old Capitol of
the Mongols and bring me back a
report with fresh eyes. Make me
see, Master Marco, the way things
truly are in the kingdom of my
brother Ariq Boke.

MARCO
By your will, Sire.

Kublai nods, barely. Sends him out.

66 EXT. CAMBULAC - LATER

66

Jingim rides at the head of a SMALL SCOUTING PARTY. When he
sees Marco approaching on horseback, gerfalcon on his wrist,
he does not bristle. Jingim is too composed for that.

JINGIM
I understand that you are to join
my caravan, Latin.

MARCO
If it pleases the prince.

Clearly it does not. Marco offers a look that says: "Fuck
you, too."

JINGIM
You will ride at the rear of my
march. With the astrologers and the
camel skimmers.

Byaamba, that tough son of a Khan concubine, rides up on
Marco's other side.

BYAAMBA
Far at the back, White Face! Where
the horses shit and piss!

(CONTINUED)

66 CONTINUED:

66

Marco gives Byaamba a testy look, but controls his temper; maybe Hundred Eyes's teachings are taking root. He turns his mount and heads to the back.

Jingim is now staring at Byaamba.

JINGIM

You, too.

Byaamba pretends he didn't hear his half-brother, rides toward the back by his own accord... with Marco Polo, the Venetian.

67 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NORTH OF CAMBULAC - DAY

67

Jingim's procession rides north at a steady trot. When they reach a stream, Jingim orders all to water their mounts. Marco rides his way forward, comes alongside the Prince.

MARCO

How far to Karakorum?

Beat.

JINGIM

Another day.

Jingim studies Marco as the foreigner lets Ba-Tu drink.

JINGIM (CONT'D)

What instructions did my father give you?

MARCO

To accompany the Prince to the old capitol. To report on what I see.

JINGIM

Of course. The court storyteller. My father's latest amusement.

MARCO

Not by choice.

JINGIM

Then be careful how you weave your tales, Polo. We're not going into the bath houses of Hangchow to get our swords polished. We're going into the heartland of Lord Genghis. Beware...

(beat)

Your words can get you killed.

(CONTINUED)

67 CONTINUED:

67

Marco digests this as Jingim leads his horse away. Looking out, Marco spots a song bird in the sky. Inspired in the moment -- perhaps wanting to show his skills in front of Jingim -- he turns his horse and prepares his gerfalcon. Jingim watches him. So does Byaamba.

Marco casts the hunting hawk skyward. Impressive. But it doesn't go after the bird. It flies away. Home.

LAUGHTER from the streamside Mongols. Jingim smiles.

BYAAMBA

Your hawk went home. Don't worry.
We will hunt for you.

Jingim reins his horse in a tight circle, shouts an order to press on.

Marco's hawk-glove looks naked, his pride wounded. But he recovers and catches up with the procession.

68 EXT. KARAKORUM - DAYS LATER

68

A world away from the opulence of Cambulac, this is the old capitol of the nomads. Pastoral. Hundreds of yurts. Adobe-like walls and huge stone turtles at the gate.

TRADITIONAL MONGOLS go about their business... then react to approaching HOOFBEATS. From the walls, GUARDS shout "Khagan Kublai." A primitive horn is sounded...

POV: Jingim leads the procession in, the flags of the House of Kublai (sun and moon insignia) held high.

REVERSE: Ariq emerges from his dwelling, eating *borts*. The Khan's powerfully-built younger brother watches his ROYAL GUARD hem in and escort the Prince.

When Jingim dismounts, TWO GUARDS take his horse...

ARIQ

My nephew. I see you still ride the
horse I gave you on the White Moon.
Your eighteenth year, yes?

JINGIM

Uncle...

Jingim approaches. Ariq offers his arms; Jingim grips them just below the elbows. Marco observes the custom as he dismounts, his curious eyes taking in the tribal city...

(CONTINUED)

ARIQ

I'm honored that my older brother has sent you and not some messenger. We will kill a sheep and drink *kumis*. Come.

As Jingim and a small entourage follow Ariq toward the huge Royal Yurt at center, Marco follows...

But at the door Jingim stops, gives him a look. The Prince speaks Mongolian and the door is closed to keep Marco out. The small entourage guards the yurt.

With CHILDREN gathering around him, curious, Marco remains out in the yurt camp. HARD-EYED GUARDS keep watch on the foreigner.

69 INT. ARIQ'S ROYAL YURT - DAY

69

Ariq and Jingim walk clockwise in the vast circle of the great yurt, its walls lined with snow leopard pelts and ornate wooden saddles. Primitive elegance.

ARIQ

...this one they call the Cricket Minister, he is a snake in the grass. How many soldiers did he have laying in wait at Wuchang?

JINGIM

Not too many for a Mongol army. If only our reinforcements showed up.

ARIQ

Jingim. You did not attack without me --

JINGIM

-- You almost got me killed! My General Aruka is dead!

Jingim steadies himself, the Confucian and the Barbarian at war inside him. Ariq remains composed.

ARIQ

The spring rains cut off passage of the Blue Horde. East of Volga. I did not have enough horses to make the journey.

JINGIM

You could have sent a messenger.

(CONTINUED)

69 CONTINUED:

69

ARIQ

I did. My best rider -- Duwa.

As they stroll the circumference, Ariq reaches into a basket... and lifts a human head; a distinctly Mongolian face frozen in death. Jingim almost retches.

ARIQ (CONT'D)

He never made it. They captured him one hundred miles outside of Wuchang. Tied his head to his horse, let it run home. Right to his yurt... and his children.

He resentfully returns the gruesome head to the basket.

70 EXT. KARAKORUM - GRAIN STORAGE - DAY

70

Marco is wandering casually, taking in the sight of HUNDREDS OF HORSES pastured close to the city. As he moves past one, he pats it, feels its ribs.

Now he moves over to large adobe cisterns of grain. He surveys, touches some. Scoops a handful, lets it sift through his fingers...

71 INT. ARIQ'S ROYAL YURT - DAY

71

Ariq and Jingim reach the horse-hide crocks of *kumis*. Ariq pours graciously. Looks his nephew in the eye.

ARIQ

When you were a child, I called you *Altai*. After the mountains me and your father hunted as boys. Kublai insisted on a Chinese name. Jingim. I forget its meaning...

JINGIM

Golden.

ARIQ

Golden...

(beat)

You are his golden one, Nephew. One day they will call you Jingim Khan. But beware. My big brother is too trusting of outsiders. Persians and Chinese and all kinds of religions. You and me, *Altai*, our blood is the Wolf and the Deer.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

71 CONTINUED:

71

ARIQ (CONT'D)
Open the gates to outsiders and
secrets will spill.

He drinks from a saucer with his right hand; Jingim mirrors
with his left.

ARIQ (CONT'D)
Who is the Christian who rides with
you?

72 EXT. KARAKORUM - GRAIN STORAGE - DAY

72

Marco is walking back through Ariq's vast herds when he stops
and examines. A MONGOL HERDSMAN stands by, watching the round-
eye with suspicion.

MARCO
(Mongolian)
Mongolian ponies. Finest in all the
world.

The Herdsman flinches when the white boy speaks native
tongue. But the comment makes him beam.

MARCO (CONT'D)
(Mongolian)
To run three hundred miles in a
day, with no irons on their hooves,
these are uncommon beasts. May I
see?

The Herdsman proudly allows Marco to poke below the loin of a
horse, then lift its leg to examine a hoof.

Then a GREAT COMMOTION draws his eyes to --

TRADITIONAL DRUMMING and festivity. Jingim is outside the
Royal Yurt with his uncle; all is jovial.

MARCO lowers the horse's leg, dusts his hands off and makes a
"fine horse" breath sound to the Herdsman who returns it.

HERDSMAN
(Mongolian)
What are you?

MARCO
(Mongolian)
Europa.

The Herdsman edges closer and sniffs at his tunic, scents him
like an animal.

(CONTINUED)

72 CONTINUED:

72

MARCO (CONT'D)
(Mongolian)
Yes, I know. I am an ugly bastard.

Marco smiles, handsome. But the Mongolian Herdsman agrees.
Ugly bastard. They laugh together.

73 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - WEEK LATER

73

Hundred Eyes stands before a SMALL ARMY OF KHAN SOLDIERS,
training them in Wudang weapon attacks. At the sound of
HORNS, DOGS BARKING, and THREE BELLS FROM THE CLOCK, the monk
grows silent.

HOOFBEATS announce the return of Prince Jingim and his
Entourage, Marco among them.

HUNDRED EYES
Peace returns to Cambulac.

SOLDIER
How do you know, Monk?

HUNDRED EYES
Thirty-one horses left here. Forty-
nine return. The dogs are
barking... at a hunting cat, a
female cat, at the rear of the
procession.
(beat)
Ariq has sent tribute to the Khan.

The Soldiers see that he's correct, but before they can react
in any manner, Hundred Eyes SHOUTS a martial command and the
Soldiers all "stab" their two-pointed ox horn forks from
"cross stance." Another command, they twirl and "sting"...

74 INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ROYAL PORTICO - DAY

74

The Khan strolls thoughtfully with Jingim...

JINGIM
The Blue Horde was cut off by the
spring rains.

KUBLAI KHAN
East of Volga, no doubt. They've
had floods.

JINGIM
He sent a horse messenger, but the
rebels intercepted.

(CONTINUED)

KUBLAI KHAN
Master Marco?

Marco trails behind Khan and Prince....

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
What was your impression? Of the
old capitol...

MARCO
I found the Great Khan's brother to
be a gracious host and honorable
man. Just as Prince Jingim says.

Jingim seems to appreciate that as they stroll past imported
plants and rare peacocks.

KUBLAI KHAN
Four wives, yes?

MARCO
Five. He also keeps a large harem,
quite young.

KUBLAI KHAN
But not as vast as mine.

MARCO
And nowhere near as charming --
certainly no girls from Kungarut
schooled in the arts of love.

The Khan likes that; Jingim pretends to be game.

KUBLAI KHAN
(back to Jingim)
Ariq and the Golden Horde will add
their horses to my men in South
China. He pledges?

JINGIM
And the Blue Horde, too. And cousin
Berke's men. I've seen my uncle's
army, Father, and they are ready.
This will not be another Wuchang.

Marco listens...

KUBLAI KHAN
Then let us prepare to take the
walled city.

MARCO
There is only one problem...

(CONTINUED)

Kublai stops in the long portico. Jingim stops, too. Marco hesitates, seemingly weighing what he can say and what he can't.

MARCO (CONT'D)

Ariq's horses are in the many thousands, true. Quite fit. More than enough to take any city...

Jingim stares at Marco, watches the Latin make his fateful decision.

MARCO (CONT'D)

But I will tell you as the son of a merchant... they do not have the grain supplies to move that many horses down to Xiangyang.

KUBLAI KHAN

My son Jingim just stated before you that they are ready to ride into battle.

MARCO

They are ready for war, yes Great Khan...

(too late to retreat)

...but a war closer to home.

Kublai digests this, deeply troubled. Jingim seethes --

JINGIM

Do you accuse my uncle, the Khan's brother, of treason?

MARCO

I do not. I only describe what I see, as I saw it.

Chillingly quiet. Jingim lays his hand on the hilt of his sword. The Khan steadies him, says slowly --

KUBLAI KHAN

I will send a night rider to verify your report.

A COURT EUNUCH, draped in jewels, appears in the portico.

COURT EUNUCH

My Royal Khan. Wu Gong the Healer is here. To treat your ankles.

Kublai, distracted by dark rumination, walks off. Jingim stands alone with Marco. Stares.

(CONTINUED)

74 CONTINUED:

74

JINGIM

If you are wrong... the punishment
for bearing false witness against a
grandson of Genghis is most severe.

MARCO

How severe?

JINGIM

Let us put it this way: You won't
be gaining favor by your charming
stories any more.

(beat)

Not without a tongue.

Jingim turns on his heel and goes.

OFF Marco, pale and reeling --

75 INT. MARCO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

75

Urgently, Marco digs under his bedding, grabs two horse-hide
canteens. He shoves them into leather saddle bags. He
uncovers the stolen sword, rusted at the hilt.

He goes to the lute-shaped window.

MARCO'S POV: The Lone Guard always shadowing his quarters is
slowly walking off his boredom, first to one corner of a
wall... then down to another. It's when he is down to the
other and stops to question some PASSING CONCUBINES that --

MARCO makes his move.

76 EXT. CAMBULAC - STABLES - NIGHT

76

Marco silently, quickly, slips a bridle over Ba-Tu's poll. He
tightens the leather cinch on the wooden saddle...

77 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS/SOUTH GATE - SHORT TIME
LATER

77

Marco trots urgently, taking shortcuts. He glances up at the
Great Clock as he doglegs down paved lanes toward --

THE SOUTH GATE

Where he nods to a PHALANX OF GUARDS. It is not yet curfew,
they permit passage.

78 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NIGHT

78

Marco trots out steadily... looks over his shoulder... then swings his Mongolian wrist-whip over and under. Ba-Tu bolts!

Marco leans forward in saddle, making an escape. Breathless, he BUSTS OUT onto the open grasslands, whips Ba-Tu harder. He's going for it.

But now OTHER HOOFBEATS pound earth. Gaining. A LONE RIDER pursuing. Whipping faster, harder, Marco drives Ba-Tu at a full canter. But --

In seconds, the Lone Rider overtakes him, lassos Ba-Tu, yanks hard. Marco is thrown ass-over-stirrups to the ground.

The Lone Rider circles him.

HUNDRED EYES

The sword you stole is weak. Your water won't last you two days. But the salt cakes you hid were delicious.

Marco gazes up, winded. He finds his feet, desperate --

MARCO

I challenged the word of Ariq the Strong tonight.

HUNDRED EYES

That was foolish.

MARCO

I have to run.

HUNDRED EYES

Were your words true?

MARCO

Yes.

HUNDRED EYES

(considers; then)

Run now, they will find you. And you will die. Stay, I can train you. So that you might one day escape. And live.

Hundred Eyes frees Ba-Tu. To the horse's credit, he goes to Marco, stands by him.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

You have six bells to decide.

(CONTINUED)

78 CONTINUED:

78

Hundred Eyes turns his horse, starts back for Cambulac, calm in the saddle.

Marco watches him go, torch light of Cambulac beyond him, debates. Ba-Tu noses him.

MARCO
Jesu' Christo...

FIRST BELL...

79 EXT. CAMBULAC - TRAINING GROUNDS - NEXT DAY

79

Marco is going spear against sword versus Hundred Eyes, but the 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. HOOFBEATS. Steady, intent. Jingim rides up, dismounts.

JINGIM
He's advanced quickly to the broadsword. You train him well, Hundred Eyes.

HUNDRED EYES
I must. If any harm befalls him, I am held accountable.

JINGIM
May I join practice?

HUNDRED EYES
You're the Prince. You may 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 -- a la Venetian fencing style. Hundred Eyes senses something, or hears it in the breeze.

(CONTINUED)

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.

Jingim is playing with him; taunting him. And then he brings it. Hard. Marco slides into "dropping horse" then wheels and slashes, almost catches Jingim off-guard. The Prince drives Marco backward, baffles him with footwork, then delivers an utter BEAT DOWN.

Hundred Eyes, even in his detached state, almost moves in. But it's over. Marco is on his back, swordless. Jingim's "scholar's blade" is at this throat. Precisely.

JINGIM

If you ever humiliate me in the eyes of the Khan again...

MARCO

I only told what I saw.

Jingim composes himself. Gathers his breath.

JINGIM

You were right.

Marco reacts. Wasn't expecting that.

Jingim starts to his horse, half-turns; a true scholar-warrior, he bows to Hundred Eyes. Hundred Eyes gives a slight, informal head bow in return.

As Jingim mounts and rides off --

HUNDRED EYES

I'd hate to see what he'd do if you were wrong.

Marco touches his chin. A little blood. Or is that dirt?

Kublai sits on a gilded bench, admiring a magnificent GOLDEN EAGLE on his gloved wrist.

KUBLAI KHAN

Ariq remembers how much I love the golden eagle, king of the hunters.

CHABI

Ariq is a dog... that would eat its
own afterbirth.

Chabi, elegant in her robes, is seated in meditation posture
at the edge of the water. But her mind is far from peace.

CHABI (CONT'D)

He has always believed that he
should be Khan of Khan's. Not you.

KUBLAI KHAN

Before the sun sets today, I will
close down the Gobi trade routes
and starve Karakorum. My younger
brother will have no place to go
but Siberia.

CHABI

So forgiving, Great Kublai.

KUBLAI KHAN

Isn't that what you and your
Buddhist nun are always advising?

CHABI

You slaughter entire cities... yet
you allow Ariq to run to Siberia.

KUBLAI KHAN

I know how to punish my brother --

CHABI

-- your brother... almost killed
your son.

Chabi has not compromised her straight-backed meditation
pose.

CHABI (CONT'D)

How can you unify China when there
are divisions growing in your own
house?

She breathes in calmly, stares across the water, eyes half-
closed.

CHABI (CONT'D)

The Mongols think you're getting
old, Kublai. Too fat with food and
wine. Soft. Ariq thinks he can
please your women better than
you.

KUBLAI KHAN

Does that excite you, Empress?

(CONTINUED)

80 CONTINUED:

80

CHABI

I know you would never spill your own brother's blood before the eyes of the Eternal Blue. But Ariq needs to have his throat stuffed with hot stones and the shit of pigs. He needs to be trampled by one thousand horses and left on the Steppe to rot.

She gets up now, suddenly, too angry to sit still any longer.

CHABI (CONT'D)

Give me my bow and my horse and I will do it myself -- as the mother of the son he left to die.

(beat)

Now that would excite me...

Fixing her silk robe, she goes inside.

KUBLAI KHAN

(to the eagle)

Tell me, Eagle. Is not my Buddhist wife the most beautiful woman you have ever seen?

81 EXT. XIANGYANG - THE WALLED CITY - DAY

81

Excitement on the battlements. General Red Brow assumes a vantage point..

RED BROW'S POV: In the distance, the Mongol Troops are withdrawing; a slow march home in a shroud of humid haze and dust. A miracle...

GENERAL RED BROW (V.O.)

They are withdrawing...

Chancellor Jia Sidao appears. Looks out, containing his joy.

As OFFICERS GATHER to watch, one of them approaches the Chancellor, whispers at his ear.

82 INT. XIANGYANG - EMPEROR'S CHAMBERS - DAY

82

Chancellor Jia Sidao enters, regards the grieving Empress. It is clear that the Emperor has finally expired.

(CONTINUED)

JIA SIDAO

Men grow old; pearls turn yellow;
there is no cure. My condolences,
Dowager Xie.

EMPRESS XIE

Eventually we all become white
ashes, Sidao. But my husband has
left a nephew. Bow to the new
Emperor, Zhao Xian.

The Chancellor looks over at the five year-old boy playing on
the floor. It's the same precocious child that once tried to
abuse his crickets.

It takes everything the Chancellor has to dip his chin
slightly to the heir.

JIA SIDAO

With sad news, Empress, there also
comes good. The devil Kublai has
withdrawn his troops.

The old woman gazes up, surprised, tears in her cataracts,
but hopeful.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

The barbarians know that your
Chancellor will never surrender the
Song Dynasty. But Kublai will be
back. We can count on that.

EMPRESS XIE

I fear you do count on it, Sidao.
I fear you thirst for it.

She turns away. Sidao again bows to the child. The child
throws some pottery shards at the floor, fascinated by how
they break.

Mei Lin sits on the edge of her bed, embracing her young
daughter. She sings a Chinese children's song, soothes the
girl softly. Together they mourn the Emperor.

Then her door opens. THREE SONG SOLDIERS enter. Filthy,
sleeveless, and baring Song Dynasty tattoos. They just stand
there, looking Mei Lin over. The concubine gently whispers in
her daughter's ear. The girl grabs a doll and leaves. When
she's gone, a Soldier closes the door.

SONG SOLDIER

The Chancellor Jia Sidao has
granted us permission...

MEI LIN

My Emperor is dead, but I am still
an Imperial Consort. I do not bed
soldiers.

The Soldiers must have heard differently from the Chancellor;
they smirk and begin to unfasten their sword belts, lean
their halberds in the corners. One of them gestures to her
roughly with a wing sword.

Cornered, Mei Lin wisely considers her choices. She rises
slowly, elegantly. She stands before them in flickering
candle light... and lets her silk robe slip off one shoulder.
She unbelts her robe and lets it open, revealing a view that
excites the hungry warriors.

Slowly she turns, playing the candle light, reaches up to
undo her bun.

MEI LIN (CONT'D)

Two Eels, One Cave... do you know
this forbidden game?

They are captivated by the promise, by her tai chi-like
movements as she removes the jade pin, lets her hair drop
long...

MEI LIN (CONT'D)

It will cost you.

She wheels and --

UNLEASHES THE JADE PIN

Across the room, dead-center into the swordsman's throat.

Mei Lin whirls in silk, undulates, and kicks a Second Soldier
brutally against the wall. As she re-chambers, she toe-flips
a sword up from the floor into her left hand -- even as she
pirouettes -- and impales the Third Soldier. Effortlessly.

The Second Soldier recovers, grabs his bladed halberd. But
Mei Lin side-steps and cuts his windpipe with the wing sword.
His eyes stare at her in utter shock...

With all three dead, the quarters resume a hypnotic candle-
flicker. Mei Lin belts her robe.

84 INT. HALL OF HARMONIOUS PURCHASE - LATE DAY

84

A PURSE OF COINS clanks onto a table. Marco helps Sanga unload saddle bags of coins and paper notes on a long table before Ahmad, the Minister of Finance.

An impish IMPERIAL AIDE beside him records figures in the royal books.

AHMAD

Marco Polo. The Khan speaks highly of you.

Marco just keeps unloading bags.

AHMAD (CONT'D)

What is this gift I hear of? The foreign messenger who can paint pictures with his words...

As Marco returns to the saddle bags to help Sanga haul, he notes: Sanga lays a hand on the linen payment... then covers it covertly with a flap of leather. He then hands Marco a bundle of paper notes to bring to the accounting table.

Ahmad scans the ledger, reviews the deposits, then looks Sanga directly in the eye.

AHMAD (CONT'D)

Have you reported all?

SANGA

I have, Good Minister Ahmad.

Ahmad speaks UZBEK to his Aide and the Aide closes the tax book. Sanga bows, turns. But as Marco begins to follow...

AHMAD

Master Marco. Stay.

Sanga hesitates, looks at Ahmad... then at Marco.

SANGA

Goodbye, my Venetian slave. *Ciao*.

With a nudge and a laugh, Sanga leaves. Ahmad smiles, amused by the eccentric tax man.

AHMAD

When you report your observations to the Great Khan, how do you describe the manner in which the Uighurs pay their taxes?

(CONTINUED)

MARCO

Always as a form of ceremony it seems. On their knees, a humble offering more as to a God than to a King.

AHMAD

Marvelous! Indeed, it is like you paint pictures. And the Jurchens?

MARCO

A clever and resourceful people. Paying with the work of their hands when they don't have the coins.

AHMAD

Masters of making linen as I understand it.

MARCO

Coarse to the touch, but as pliable as silk.

AHMAD

So if the Jurchens have been paying in linen... why hasn't Sanga deposited any such tribute?

Beat. Marco recovers quickly.

MARCO

I didn't say that Sanga collected any linens, I said that the Jurchens are a clever and resourceful people.

Longer beat. Ahmad studies him, calmly.

AHMAD

You are not the first young foreigner who had to learn to survive here.

(counting money)

What has kept me alive is this: I speak the truth. There's nothing Khagan Kublai values more, and that is why you hold favor in his sight. You make him see the invisible truths in the grand stories you tell. Like the truth about his brother Ariq Boke.

Ahmad studies Marco's face.

AHMAD (CONT'D)

So I must ask you again. Did the Jurchens, at any time, pay their taxes in the form of linen?

MARCO

How does one even manage to keep order of thousands of payments in various currencies and tributes and sheets of paper worth ten bezants of gold? Perhaps Sanga simply forgot.

AHMAD

Quite possible. Indeed. Me? I can balance the books of the richest empire in the world, but I'd forget my balls if they weren't attached to my *dool*. That's a Farsi word. Ah -- the things a Latin learns in the Court of Kublai Khan...

Marco can't help but smile, can't help but like the charismatic Uzbek. Business done, Marco starts out.

AHMAD (CONT'D)

See you at the horse games.

Marco half-turns, unsure of what that means.

85 INT. XIANGYANG - JIA SIDAO'S QUARTERS - SUNSET

85

Chancellor Jia Sidao sits at his table, training his praying mantis and cricket champions. SIX SONG SOLDIERS escort Mei Lin to him, a cold and detached look in her eye.

At a signal, the Soldiers leave him alone with his sister.

JIA SIDAO

For what you did, Mei Lin, you can be tied to a post and have your skin sliced from your body.

MEI LIN

I have bartered for your political advantage, Brother. I will not barter for the loyalty of your soldiers.

JIA SIDAO

Nor should you. Your greatest skill is getting close to men in high positions. True?

(CONTINUED)

85 CONTINUED:

85

She narrows her eyes, tries to read him.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

The barbarian troops that withdrew
are now in Wuchang. Rounding up our
scholars and our artists... and our
women. You will go there, Sister.
They will see your uncommon charms
and they will put you in a wagon...
and you will go north with them. To
the Imperial City of Kublai Khan.

She turns her face away.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

Just as you won the favor of the
Emperor of China, you will win the
favor of the Devil.

Now, the Chancellor can see something in her eyes. He can
hear the laughter of children, sees her trying not to look as
her daughter and the five year-old Boy Emperor run by. The
Empress Dowager scolds the boy and leads him back to his
Imperial Chambers...

Mei Lin moves her eyes back to her brother.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

I will take very good care of my
precious niece...

The girl, standing off now, can see her mother engaged in an
intense moment with her uncle.

MEI LIN

How can you do this?

JIA SIDAO

We do it, Sister, for the Song
Dynasty.

The Chancellor turns back to his cricket table. Mei Lin
starts for her chambers, then stops, looks back at him.

MEI LIN

Your men, they laugh at you, you
know. They call you the 'Cricket
Minister.'

With that last stab, she leaves. The Chancellor watches her
go, then looks down at the military courtyard.

86 EXT. XIANGYANG - MILITARY COURTYARD - MOMENTS LATER

86

The SONG REBEL ARMY stands amassed on the military floor, a frightening sight. They REPEAT A FIERCE CHANT at the command of General Red Brow. Then the fortress town falls chillingly silent.

The Chancellor appears before them, dandified in his ornate robes.

JIA SIDAO
A more fierce army I have never
seen. It is no wonder the
barbarians fled.

MASS MILITARY CHANT. Then deep silence again.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)
But it's come to the attention of
your Prime Minister that some of
his great soldiers have questioned
the political order of the Song
Court now that the Emperor has
died.

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

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)
General. Who is the best fighter in
your esteemed army?

GENERAL 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 --

GENERAL RED BROW (CONT'D)
In Shantung Province, he is called
Whirlwind Tiger. He has mastered
the Five Animal Styles of Shaolin.

Whirlwind Tiger bows deeply, every sinew rippling.

JIA SIDAO
Whom do you serve?

WHIRLWIND TIGER
May Song Dynasty endure ten
thousand years!

(CONTINUED)

JIA SIDAO

The walls have ears, my friend.
What do the men say about my study
of crickets? My Praying mantis
games...

Uncomfortable beat.

WHIRLWIND TIGER

With humility and respect, some
have spoken of the Chancellor's
insect games as a... curious hobby.

Chancellor Jia Sidao digests this.

WHIRLWIND TIGER (CONT'D)

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.

JIA SIDAO

Show me your Five Animal Kung Fu.
Defeat me and 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.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

However... if I defeat you, you are
my chamber boy.

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

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)

Insult me, you die. Show me why
they fear you here and why the name
Whirlwind Tiger is famous.

Jia Sidao throws a finger jab; Whirlwind Tiger blocks it,
effortlessly. Jia Sidao smiles. Game on, he circles faster.
Tiger drops low into a "Coiling Dragon" stance and deftly
establishes his fighting measure.

(CONTINUED)

The entire army stands rapt as the two square off. Then Jia Sidao lunges at the soldier with a flurry of strikes and kicks. Whirlwind Tiger deflects them all and lands a "Crane Strike" (his hand held beak-like) 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 an uncanny imitation of a praying mantis snatching an insect. Whirlwind Tiger spins free and attacks with a flurry of "Snake Strikes"...

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

A GREAT HUSH of awe spreads through the fortress.

ANGLE ON: THE FORTRESS BRIDGE -- Mei Lin, being escorted out, stops to watch.

BACK ON the Chancellor standing over the fallen soldier.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)
On your feet. You may take a
weapon.

Whirlwind Tiger rolls to his feet, sweating even harder. He cannot believe what he is tangling with.

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 doesn't simply emulate a praying mantis, he seems to channel its essence (hands held up like mantis claws, his torso rocking and swaying) as he lures in his opponent's force, clasps the sword arm in a "hooking hand," 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, shooting a Mantis Hand at a vital meridian point under the big man's arm and paralyzing him.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)
Praying Mantis Kung Fu. Curious
little 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").

(CONTINUED)

86 CONTINUED:

86

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.

JIA SIDAO (CONT'D)
One rotten log can weaken the forest.

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

FROM THE FORTRESS BRIDGE: Mei Lin watching. But it's time for her to leave.

87 EXT. CAMBULAC - ARENA OF THE HORSES/PAVILION - DAY

87

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.

ANGLE 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 toward -- THE FORMATION...

Where Jingim looks at the next horseman over. It is Marco, wearing leather plated armor and helmet.

JINGIM
If you've been invited to the horse games, it can only mean one thing, Marco. You will be riding into battle with us. To give your accounts, I assume.

MARCO
Don't worry, Jingim. I was told I'll be riding at the rear.

JINGIM
Count your blessings.

BYAAMBA
Where the horses shit and piss!

(CONTINUED)

87 CONTINUED:

87

Here he is again! In tag-team fashion, A RIDER touches the poll of Marco's horse. Ba-Tu rockets forward, Marco 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 Byaamba.

BYAAMBA (CONT'D)
Behold me, Foreigner. I am
descended from the line of Genghis.

88 EXT. CAMBULAC - PAVILION - CONTINUOUS

88

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 Möngke. Good rider.
Distinguished with the lance. Who
does he fight?

CHABI
Young Polo.

The Khan watches, intrigued. KOKACHIN stops fanning herself, and takes interest.

89 EXT. CAMBULAC - ARENA OF THE HORSES/PAVILION - DAY

89

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 his saddle 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...

(CONTINUED)

89 CONTINUED:

89

ANGLE ON: THE PAVILION -- Kokachin stands in worried reflex. All eyes go to her. Slowly, she sits again, fanning herself. Za Bing, standing guard, looks at her for a long moment...

DOWN IN THE ARENA -- A KETTLE DRUM is booming now. Marco, getting back into saddle, feels a horse trot by closely.

MONGOL GENERAL

You. Latin. We need you at East
Flag.

Marco quickly mounts Ba-Tu 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, crushing 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? I don't understand...

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

JINGIM

His tax deposits did not balance.

Jingim and Marco watch as the carpet is unrolled and the broken body of Sanga rolls out into the dirt.

JINGIM (CONT'D)

He was given an honorable death.
Rolled in a carpet so that Tengri
the Sky God, did not see his
blood...

But the look in Jingim's eyes is no more hardened than Marco's. He doesn't like it. But he 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 --

(CONTINUED)

89 CONTINUED: 89

THE PAVILION -- To see Ahmad sitting with Yusuf, Vice-Regent of the Secretariat Council. Ahmad rises... and leaves.

90 INT. MARCO'S QUARTERS - NIGHT 90

Marco destroys his quarters, turning things over. He punches the mahogany wall, knocks over his calligraphy board. Then he looks at his self-ransacked belongings and spots something; the silver cross given to him by his father.

He sits on his bed, picks up the cross. Closes it in a fist. Mourning Sanga; praying; soul searching. The eerie drone of MONGOLIAN THROAT SINGING rises up...

91 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NIGHT 91

Marco stands alone, under the vast night sky, Ba-Tu grazing near. He studies the stars for compass and direction. Should he make a run for the Silk Road? Or risk death going into battle with the Khan's men?

Then he spots a Night Rider moving secretly toward a lone tree.

POV: Kokachin drops back her head, looks around. She dismounts and approaches the tree, kneels. From a woven bag, she removes a jewel -- looks around again -- then buries it.

Now she ties some kind of silk ribbon in the tree...

Marco watches her lope back to the gates of Cambulac. He wonders. But now the MONGOLIAN THROAT-SINGING is rising louder...

MARCO (PRELAP)
There is no word for 'soldier' in
Mongolian...

92 EXT. CAMBULAC - DAY 92

A great MOUNTED MARCH of ARMORED CITIZENS is leaving the Imperial City.

MARCO (V.O.)
Every man becomes a warrior when it
is time to fight. Every man and
woman become bonded by the blood of
the wolf and the deer...

(CONTINUED)

Marco, armored -- sword at his hip, quiver and bow at his back -- slowly rides Ba-Tu (the horse is armored, too) at the rear of the march. He does a take when he sees --

Jingim, riding in a division of "10" closer to the rear than to the front. Demoted to quartermaster, he is no longer leading a detachment. He leads a group that includes his half-brother Byaamba.

As Marco studies this uncomfortable dynamic:

JINGIM

What is General Bataar doing with
the lancers? Who leads us north?

That seems to be the prevailing question throughout the mass of troops. Then NACCARANA DRUMS begin to boom. The LIGHT INFANTRY BEGINS TO PART, clearing a path.

Riding out from the Imperial Palace, flanked by MOUNTED GUARDS is Kublai Khan. He might be overweight, beginning to age, but in his leather-plated armor and iron-spiked helmet, he looks every bit the warrior king, grandson of Genghis.

ALL OF CAMBULAC GOES PRIMAL. Deafening THROAT SINGING and DRUMMING...

ANGLE ON: A PAVILION -- Chabi stands, wearing her royal *boqta*, flanked by her GUARDS and BUDDHIST ADVISORS (who burn incense). The Other Three Wives are there, too, watching the Khan ride to the front.

NEAR THE REAR OF THE MARCH -- Jingim bows his head with the others as his father rides fiercely toward the front.

JINGIM (CONT'D)

His health hasn't been good enough
to hunt. How can it be good enough
to go to war?

BYAAMBA

Blood of Genghis...

Byaamba keeps his head bowed. A true believer.

AS THE HORSE SOLDIERS MOVE OUT --

Marco looks up at the HALL OF FRAGRANCE.

ANGLE ON: Kokachin on her balcony, watching him go. Their eyes meet. He tries to keep her in view but he is swept along with the great army...

ZA BING (O.S.)

Marco...

(CONTINUED)

92 CONTINUED:

92

The gigantic eunuch hurries alongside Marco's horse, offers something up to him.

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

Marco receives a Chinese fan, painted and perfumed. He opens the ivory spine and it accordions into a delicate image of two flying cranes.

MARCO
Please send my gratitude to Her
Kindness.

Marco closes the fan gently.

ZA BING
Master Marco. It's from me.

Za Bing gazes up with his kohl-painted eyelids. Then he offers up something wrapped in silk.

ZA BING (CONT'D)
This is from the Blue Princess.

Marco unwraps a small dagger with an ornate hilt, jeweled at the top.

ZA BING (CONT'D)
It is from her tribe. Carried in a
man's boot, it has saved many a
life.

Marco sticks the dagger into his boot sheathe as the surge of moving horses, pushes him toward the gates.

He realizes now that Hundred Eyes is riding with him. The monk wears no armor -- just his Taoist robe and his topknot drawn long.

HUNDRED EYES
By order of the Khan. If anything
happens to you, I am beholden.

Onward they go.

93 EXT. KARAKORUM - DAY

93

A golden eagle descends from the Mongolian blue, lands on the crumbling ruins of a stone turtle.

A MONGOL GUARD spots it, rides his horse over to investigate.

94 INT. ARIQ'S ROYAL YURT - SHORT TIME LATER 94

The golden eagle is brought before Ariq who sits in a fur-draped throne. It is the same eagle that he gifted to his big brother; he stares confused for a second.

Ariq unties the small leather pouch laced into the eagle's anklet. He opens it and spills out: An iron arrow head, broken off from the bamboo shaft.

Ariq studies it for a moment, then closes it in his fist. He makes a guttural breath sound. Whatever it means is animal...

95 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - DAYS LATER 95

Coming over a grassy crest, backlit by a fireball of sun: TEAMS of WHITE OXEN pull a Royal Yurt on a cart.

PULLING UP TO ARIEL VIEW: A great mounted march of THOUSANDS OF MONGOL HORSE SOLDIERS, some of heavy armor and artillery, some of light.

BEHIND THE MARCH: ANOTHER WAVE OF MOUNTED HORSEMEN, the lance-carriers; and BEHIND THEM: Camels and pack-horses, DRUMMERS, and the Venetian, Marco Polo.

MONGOL WOMEN and BOYS ride in a great squadron at the back, moving with HERDS OF SHEEP (portable commissary).

96 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - FRONT OF MARCH - CONTINUOUS 96

RIDING UP FRONT -- WITH THE LIGHT CAVALRY: Kublai Khan, his eyes forward. He is sweating. Pale. The march is putting a strain on. When he stops riding, the ENTIRE ARMY STOPS. The Khan seems to drink in the silence on the Steppe.

There it is: a distant hum like a great swarm of bees.

97 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - REAR OF MARCH - CONTINUOUS 97

AT THE REAR OF THE MARCH -- Marco steadies Ba-Tu, listens. Hundred Eyes hears it, too. Unnerving.

98 EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF KARAKORUM - SUNSET 98

ARIQ'S MASSIVE ARMY, just as large, trots steadily from the north, Ariq at the helm, an armored warrior-beast.

ARIQ
When we destroy Kublai, we ride to
Cambulac. Burn it.

Ariq scans a deep grassy valley. With chilling fluidity for a big man, he nocks an arrow. Aims. Fires.

The arrow is called a "screamer," has a hole through the iron head so that it banshees on trajectory, arcs long, whistles downward... plants deep in the earth, a hundred yards south.

ARIQ (CONT'D)
No further.

ARIQ'S GENERALS nod and signal the raising of flags.

99 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - DUSK 99

Kublai's Army is pitching yurts and pasturing horses on a golden slope. As Marco helps, he sees Jingim, relegated to the same. Then he looks out to see --

Kublai standing alone, staring into the distance. General Aju stands off a few yards behind him.

KUBLAI KHAN
Put up a *ger*. Out there. By itself.
Light a fire.

Aju passes this order down the line...

100 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NEAR THE LONE YURT - NIGHT 100

Under a full moon, Ariq looks out at the sound of THREE DEEP DRUM BEATS.

POV: THREE RIDERS are coming out of the distance toward the lone yurt pitched in the middle of the Steppe. The rider in the middle is clearly a huge figure. The Khan.

ARIQ
He is so fat and old I am surprised
they're not pulling him in a cart.
Get my horse...

101 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - THE LONE YURT - SHORT TIME LATER 101

Ariq, on horse, and flanked by TWO SOLDIERS, rides up to face TWO KHAN SOLDIERS sitting motionless on horseback. The horse between them is riderless now...

Ariq looks at the yurt.

102 INT. LONE YURT - MOMENTS LATER 102

Kublai and Ariq sit on the ground, facing each other. A fire warms the space nearby. Kublai rattles his fist and tosses several little bones to the ground. It is the traditional Mongolian game of "horses" played with the ankle bones of a sheep.

ARIQ

Do you remember, Older Brother, the summer you chased a deer for six days. You were gone so long our mother thought the wolves got you.

Kublai's eyes glint as he watches Ariq roll the bones.

KUBLAI KHAN

She made me grind *borts* with the women for six more days...

ARIQ

Our father woke up out of a drunken stupor and said, 'Kublai why are you grinding *borts* like a girl when you should be out hunting deer?'

They laugh. Like brothers. Kublai rolls the bones now.

KUBLAI KHAN

Sorkaktani was a fine mother.

ARIQ

A great mother. Queen of Mongolia.

They lift copper saucers, drink to her.

ARIQ (CONT'D)

It was she who taught us the code of Grandfather Genghis, yes?

KUBLAI KHAN

It was she who taught us that a true ruler must not lose the loyalty of allies and subjects.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Whether Chinese, Saracen,
Christian, or Hindi. A wise leader
allows his people their ways.

ARIQ
Our father, son of Genghis, did not
agree with such open gates.

KUBLAI KHAN
And he drank himself to death.
Behind closed ones. All alone.

Ariq grows quiet.

ARIQ
Do you know where I was those six
days when you were off chasing that
deer?

Kublai rolls the bones.

ARIQ (CONT'D)
I was sharpening my arrows... to go
after the wolf I thought had gotten
my brother. I was four years old.

Kublai smiles, almost sadly.

KUBLAI KHAN
When our brother Möngke died,
Mongolia elected me Khan of Khan's.

ARIQ
Not all of Mongolia, Brother. Not
the Princes of the Golden Horde and
not the Chaghadai of Persia --

KUBLAI KHAN
-- That is called rebellion --

ARIQ
-- We can argue that all night,
Brother.

Kublai stares at him, undaunted.

ARIQ (CONT'D)
I do not want to be Emperor of
China. I do not want to be Ruler of
the Face of the Earth. I just want
to be Khan... of Mongolia.

Beat.

KUBLAI KHAN
I'll see you at sunrise.

102 CONTINUED:

102

They lock forearms, touch foreheads. Then separate.

103 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - REAR OF THE MARCH - SUNRISE

103

It begins with a single drum, the war pulse of the Naccarana drums. The THROAT-SINGING begins to DRONE...

Two massive armies, five ranks each, face each other from across the golden valley.

AT THE REAR OF THE KHAN'S FIFTH RANK, Marco takes in the sight, lifts his eyes toward higher ground.

POV: The Khan is up there, on a horse, with a General and Guards. An iconic silhouette.

MARCO and HUNDRED EYES sit side-by-side on their horses.

HUNDRED EYES

Tell me.

MARCO

All the way to the horizon. Five ranks of men and horses. Like a sea, building in waves. Ready to break ashore...

Hundred Eyes slowly reaches over and probes, feeling the placement of Marco's sword. Just checking...

HUNDRED EYES

The Khan is up there, on high ground, yes?

MARCO

Yes.

HUNDRED EYES

You can't even see the thousands of men behind that hill... who will encircle Ariq's horses, hidden in the valleys and mist.

Marco turns in his saddle, tries to see. Mist indeed.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)

But this is not the Mongols fighting the Chinese or the Turks. This is Mongol against Mongol. While Kublai's men encircle Ariq, Ariq's men will encircle Kublai.

MARCO

What are you saying?

(CONTINUED)

HUNDRED EYES

There is nowhere to run.

MARCO

I wasn't thinking that.

HUNDRED EYES

I was.

Marco looks out toward distant hills now, sees birds coming up out of the fog. That's what Hundred Eyes seems to be listening to; invisible warriors everywhere.

Then the THROAT-SINGING ENDS. The DRUMMING STOPS. The silence is death-like. Suffocating. From the hill, Kublai nocks an arrow. He draws back the bow... he FIRES A SCREAMER.

This triggers the raising of BLACK FLAGS from the next hill over. What follows is done in eerie silence:

104 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY

104

THE KHAN'S TWO FRONT RANKS OF HEAVY CAVALRY -- Mounted on heavily-armored horses remain motionless as the remaining THREE RANKS OF LIGHT CAVALRY come galloping through the gaps in the Front Ranks and FIRE A VOLLEY OF ARROWS into the sky (into a predetermined "killing zone" to break up the enemy formation).

Jingim is one of these Light Archers, just one of the soldiers now. He launches his arrow skyward, then wheels his speedy horse, gallops back.

ARIQ'S SECOND RANK -- Catch arrows in their shields, or in their bodies even as their own LIGHT ARCHERS storm through their own gaps, doing the same.

JINGIM -- Turns in his saddle, completely around, and times his next arrow (and breath) with the split second that all four of his horse's hooves are off the ground.

The entire wing of Light Archers does the same, all in harmony. The "Parthian shot." And as they race back, they now begin an encircling sweep toward the enemy flank.

AT THE REAR OF THE FIFTH RANK -- Marco raises his leather shield as ARROWS RAIN DOWN. He catches several concussive hits, then lowers the shield. Suddenly, Hundred Eyes moves his own shield at an angle and catches two more "heavies" that would have planted in Marco's neck and shoulder.

ALL AROUND MARCO now, NACCARA DRUMS are beaten from the backs of camels. No more silence. The KHAN'S FRONT TWO RANKS scream like demons loosed from Hell... and surge forward.

(CONTINUED)

104 CONTINUED: 104

ARIQ'S TWO FRONT RANKS -- Scream like the devil cousins of the oncoming surge. HORSES GALLOP TOWARD EACH OTHER; LIGHT ARCHERS encircle. THE MONGOLS COLLIDE...

105 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - SOUTH HILL - CONTINUOUS 105

Kublai watches, stoic, from the back of his horse.

106 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NORTH HILL - CONTINUOUS 106

FROM A HILL OPPOSITE, Ariq does the same. Like opponents in a great chess match held on the Steppe of their childhoods.

107 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY 107

IN THE BATTLEFIELD:

-- Byaamba fights from horseback with double broadswords, cutting through Ariq's soldiers. His war cry is chilling.

-- Jingim, in contrast, weaves and carves with precision. When one of Ariq's warriors swings double meteor hammers at him, he catches the chain with his lance, lets it wrap around the shaft, then yanks the warrior off his horse.

-- Byaamba gallops over this fallen warrior, CRUSHING HIS BONES inside his armor. In the same surge, Byaamba swings his blades and opens the entrails of an oncoming warrior...

108 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NORTH HILL - DAY 108

Ariq gives a calm order. A General repeats it and FLAGS ARE RAISED.

109 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - CONTINUOUS 109

A THIRD RANK OF ARIQ'S MEN gallop toward a NEW SURGE OF KHAN HORSEMEN. But the trick is: Ariq's men each transport a LANCE MAN "hitching a ride" on the right stirrup of each horse.

Halfway into the charge, the Lance Men drop off the stirrup and prop their spears as the horsemen wheel around and retreat (firing "Parthian Shots").

(CONTINUED)

THE KHAN'S HORSEMEN plow right into this field of low spears, their horses impaled. One of the ambushed men, the GENERAL in Jingim's wing, pitches from his horse, pierced by a half-dozen arrows.

As the surviving horsemen in the wing fall into disarray, Jingim rides to the wedge point.

JINGIM
Tulughma! Tulughma!

When the men witness Jingim bravely taking over, they fall back in with him. The Crown Prince charges at his uncle's troops, leading his archers.

SUDDENLY: A Lancer comes up out of the grass and Jingim's horse is pierced through the breast. But Jingim isn't pitched from saddle; he times it with a leap....

SLOW MOTION: Jingim goes airborne and double crane-kicks TWO SOLDIERS, runs his scholar's sword through the eye of a THIRD.

In the fray, a wounded but fierce GOLDEN HORDE WARRIOR squares off with Jingim.

GOLDEN HORDE WARRIOR
(Mongolian)
You. Cousin. I laugh at you. You fight like a Chinese.

He attacks with a massive sabre. Jingim blocks, parries, slices his throat like a calligraphy touch.

JINGIM
(Mongolian)
So I've been told.

The Golden Horde Warrior bleeds out on his quivering knees, watching Jingim spin into "Cat Stance" and impale another.

Kublai remains on his horse, motionless. Only his eyes move here and there, always in anticipation of the next strategy. He orchestrates it all via the Flagmen at his left...

POV: FROM THE VIEW OF THE ETERNAL BLUE SKY -- a bewildering sea of blood and men and horses. The concentric circles within chaotic spirals; a roiling mandala of violence...

111 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY 111

AT THE REAR OF THE FIFTH RANK -- Marco is trying to restrain Ba-Tu who smells horse blood and wants to run -- either into battle or away from it, doesn't matter. The young horse just wants to run.

As Marco "bends" his horse into a controlled circle, his eyes pick up SHADOWS in the FOG BEHIND.

MARCO'S POV: Here they come. Ariq's ELITE WING RIDERS, like devils loosed from the mists of Hell.

MARCO
Hundred Eyes...

HUNDRED EYES remains on his horse, facing the opposite direction of the sneak attack.

HUNDRED EYES
I'm wondering. If you live through this, does the Khan want you to describe the battle in all it's glory? Over a drink of wine?

The Elite Death Squad is trotting hard at them...

MARCO
Hundred Eyes...

HUNDRED EYES
Or does he want you to one day tell the story... so the West will know? And his name will live forever? Emperor of the World.

Marco unsheathes his sword with one hand, restrains Ba-Tu with the other.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
I despise the man.

THREE ELITE WING RIDERS come in hard on Marco just as --

Hundred Eyes spins his horse with two handfuls of long mane. Braided into the mane are heavy, rusted, iron points. The monk "chain whips" One Attacker, crushing his eye socket, punctures the throat of a Second then CUTS THE ENTRAILS from the belly of the Third, his broadsword slicing cleanly through the leather armor.

Marco's sword remains clean and unused.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
I do not kill for the Khan. I merely guard his servant --

(CONTINUED)

A FOURTH RIDER EXPLODES from the mist. Marco reacts, blocks a spear attack, slashes the Fourth Soldier's wrist, cuts him so deeply across the neck, he crumples in saddle before being swallowed by the battle.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
Good, Latin.

Hundred Eyes smiles, darkly. Now he HEARS what MARCO SEES: A DOZEN MORE ELITE WING RIDERS coming hard.

HUNDRED EYES (CONT'D)
Retreating shot. Go.

Ba-Tu rockets away. The blind monk turns now, faces the onslaught. His right hand holds a broadsword, his left reaches to a scabbard and pulls out something Ariq's men have never seen: A short spear combined with a dagger-axe.

The blind monk meets the charge of Golden Horde.

THROUGH A NARROW VALLEY OF BLOODY GRASS -- Marco is galloping for his life. He looks over his shoulder, only seeing FOG.

SUDDENLY: TWO HORSES jump him from tall grass, cause his mount to scream and rear. He is thrown, lands hard. Face down.

TWO MOUNTED WARRIORS move in. One is armed with a Turko-Mongol sabre, the Other grips a two-bladed halberd. Asiatic faces, wind-burned and fierce; Nomads of the Steppe.

One Mongol catches the riderless horse, the other dismounts, all business. Still, a THIRD MONGOL WARRIOR rides up now, cold-eyed. He dismounts, draws a mace.

Marco rolls to his feet, his helmet somewhere in the grass, his cowl down.

The Mongols are about to attack when they realize he is a white man. It freezes them for a moment.

The Third Mongol chambers his mace, is about to cave the Westerner's head when --

MARCO
(Fluent Mongolian)
By Tengri the Sky God, may your
herds fatten well...

Now all three balk, weapons drawn. Marco darts his eyes toward the warrior on the horse, takes a cautious step backward... scheming a way out...

(CONTINUED)

MARCO (CONT'D)
(Mongolian)
Peace upon you and the Golden
Horde. Bless Genghis Khan... and
the Eternal Blue Sky...

As he cautiously backs his way toward the high grass, he becomes aware of a FOURTH MONGOL behind him --

THE WARRIORS ATTACK!

Marco ducks a sabre, rolls from the path of the double halberd. It SLASHES at him again. He rolls again, alarmed. Now a hook-scythe comes at him.

Marco slaps at his leather boot and draws Kokachin's Kerait dagger.

The Third Mongol charges with a brutal five-blossom spin of a scimitar. He cuts Marco's leather plates, but the young foreigner "swallows" his opponent's momentum...

SLOW MOTION: Marco spins 180 and impales the attacker with an inverted stab of the blade at the same time he fires a balletic round kick, disabling the Halberd Warrior.

The Fourth Mongol is stunned by this unlikely display of Chinese martial arts. But not as stunned as Marco; competent skill aside, the young man is sweat-drenched and unnerved as --

MONGOLIAN SOLDIERS flood the valley. THROAT SINGING chills his blood...

MARCO SWEEPS A HANDFUL OF SAND at the Fourth Warrior's face. He then grabs the stirrup of his escaping horse, makes a desperate running mount...

BEHIND HIM: That HORSEBACK MONGOL sets chase with Double Fire Meteor Hammers, two spherical weights connected by a chain, filled with fuel and lit afire.

Marco gallops for his life across the Steppe. He rides well, but not as well as the Flying Hammer Rider gaining on him at breakneck speed...

Marco lifts his small, Mongolian-style recurve bow. Draws an arrow from his quiver, nocks it. Turning around in the saddle -- completely around -- he raises the bow.

ALL SOUND FADES. Only MARCO'S PULSE -- in his face.

SLOW MOTION Marco 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...

And it misses. Cleanly.

(CONTINUED)

111 CONTINUED: 111

The Flying Hammer Rider bears down, has Marco dead to rights... when a RED TASSELLED SPEAR IMPALES HIM.

The Horseman who did the job keeps galloping past in the opposite direction. Before he vanishes in the mist, he looks over his shoulder. Jingim. Almost like rubbing it in.

Marco finally breathes.

112 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - SOUTH HILL - DAY 112

Kublai gazes out. A Guard hands him a horse-hide container of drink. He takes a swig, wipes his lips.

KUBLAI KHAN
Ariq believes my gates are too
open. I say this:

He looks into the distance as if hoping to catch sight of his brother.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)
Open the gates.

A flag is raised. Not a black one. Not white. It is a flag with an EMBLEM OF A DRAGON.

113 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NORTH HILL - DAY 113

Ariq sits on his horse, holding himself back from riding down and taking heads. Then he hears the sound. Coming up from behind, over the hills and bluffs, TWO RANKS OF NORTH CHINESE FOOT SOLDIERS, armed with exotic variations on the 18 Weapons of China.

Ariq can't believe his eyes. At a breath sound, his flag men raise a BLUE BANNER.

114 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY 114

Ariq's Heavy Artillery turn and ride back to meet the charge of Chinese Soldiers loyal to the Khan. The collision is epic; the final eruption of the volcano. Mongolian warfare versus Chinese martial arts.

115 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NORTH HILL - DAY 115

Ariq watches, seething. His General observes...

ARIQ'S GENERAL
Feign retreat...

Ariq won't have it. He whips his horse and gallops down the hill. His Guards go with him... and finally the General, drawing his sword.

116 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - NARROW VALLEY - DAY 116

Marco rides out, finds Hundred Eyes trotting toward him. The blind monk collects his charge and the two ride back to the outskirts.

HUNDRED EYES
The Khan is winning... it will soon
be over.

117 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY 117

Ariq is fighting like a rabid bear. In full armor he wields his 2-foot sabre, severing limbs and crushing skulls. He takes out three, four, five at a time.

Still, the numbers are too great; he finds himself overcome, surrounded by the Khan's Chinese and Mongolian warriors. Byaamba is at the helm, breathing like a wounded animal and cursing his uncle in Steppe Tongue...

Ariq curses back, spits, throws his sword down.

JINGIM (O.S.)
Keep him alive...

Ariq looks over to see Jingim, bloodied and on foot, aiming an arrow. TEN MORE HORSE ARCHERS do the same.

ARIQ
Nephew. *Altai*. The horse I gave to
you in the White Moon... did he die
here today?

Jingim spits blood, turns. Walks away.

Byaamba signals for the Soldiers to restrain Ariq on his knees. As they do, he looks up to see someone riding in.

117 CONTINUED:

117

Kublai approaches on his horse, flanked by his General and Guards. He rides up to the defeated Ariq, stares from the saddle.

BYAAMBA

Royal Father! Look! He is yours to kill. Ariq the Liar is on his knees.

ARIQ

Look where it has ended, Brother. The same valley where you and Mōngke used to race horses... and I just watched.

Kublai contemplates. With great effort he dismounts from a creaking saddle and approaches his kneeling, restrained brother. As he walks up on him, he unsheathes his sabre.

ARIQ (CONT'D)

Honor me, Kublai. You know Grandfather's law. Do not let Tengri the Sky God see my blood in the grass.

Kublai appears unmoved. Keeps his sword out.

KUBLAI KHAN

Give him his sword.

No one moves. Even Ariq looks up, not sure he heard right. After a moment, Byaamba who hustles to the task, picks up the bloody steel and brings it to Ariq.

The Khan's Soldiers release Ariq, let him get to his boots. He grips his sword with two hands.

At a gesture from the Khan, the men spread out into a great circle. Riding into that circle to observe is Marco. Hundred Eyes brings up the rear.

KUBLAI KHAN (CONT'D)

We fight, Brother. If you win... take it. Take Mongolia.

IN THE CIRCLE OF MEN AND HORSES -- Jingim leans close to General Bataar.

JINGIM

We cannot let him do this...

GENERAL BATAAR

We cannot stop him. Not now.

IN THE CENTER OF THE CIRCLE -- The two brothers, grandsons of Genghis Khan, circle each other slowly. It is true, Kublai is overweight. Aging.

(CONTINUED)

117 CONTINUED:

117

His breath is heavier, more labored than his younger, more vital brother's. But his eyes are blank, like those of a killer wolf.

Slowly, they circle each other. Bucolic Mongolian blue above; grass slick with blood and horse waste below. The Khan lowers his steel as if the weight tires him, or his mind is elsewhere. This is the "silent stance," trying to draw the opponent out.

Ariq smiles through caked blood and dirt. He won't be spooked by big brother's deceptively-passive method. Instead, he adopts it himself; the two large men encircle each other in an almost sleepy stagger...

MARCO looks at Hundred Eyes. The monk has his face turned down toward his saddle, concentrating on the sounds -- the birds, the breaths of the spectators, the absence of clanging steel...

ARIQ spins suddenly and lunges, Kublai BLOCKS STEEL. Ariq spins again, younger, more lithe. Kublai blocks again... a moment of strength against strength... then the Khan relaxes his blade and lets gravity deliver Ariq. When the Khan goes for a death-swipe, Ariq smacks him upside the helmet with the flat of his blade.

MARCO looks at Jingim as the CROWD REACTS. Jingim closes his eyes for a moment. Sweat beads at his temples...

ARIQ circles, lunges and goes for a beheading. Kublai avoids and slashes his brother's torso, cutting deep through leather plates. Ariq goes for another death-swing. Kublai blocks and slashes Ariq's left arm, drawing blood.

Ariq parries, cuts Kublai's hip, spins and peels the back of his shoulder armor. Smelling blood now, smelling the throne, Ariq turns it on, a frightening Mongol warrior.

The two brothers go sword-to-sword in a flurry that leaves the older Khan staggered. Now, when he lowers his sword and goes flat-eyed, it is clearly not the "silent stance." The man is exhausted. Wounded. Stumbling...

Ariq sees it. Scents it. Hears it in the worried breath sounds of the Khan's own men. And so he launches like a bull yak, swings for the neck.

Kublai blocks it. Not with his sword. With his heavily armored left arm. He takes the cut deep through the leather plates, into bone.

With his right arm, he swings his sabre and cuts Ariq nearly in half. The leader of the Golden Horde tries to spin, but falls numbly to his knees. Across his rib cage, his lamellar armor is turning black with the blood seep. Organ damage.

(CONTINUED)

117 CONTINUED:

117

The sun glints off his sword, in the grass, a short distance away. The sun glints in his eyes as he takes in the bear-like silhouette of his older brother. Hovering.

ARIQ

Please. Older Brother. Let me leave
Karakorum. You will hear my name no
more...

Kublai hoists his blade high... and cuts his brother's head off. As Ariq's torso topples and the Steppe drinks blood, Kublai looks out at the surviving, wounded warriors from Ariq's army. The Golden Horde.

There is little doubt now. Word will travel. Tengri the Sky God has witnessed it. Kublai is Khan of all Khan's. Kublai is still a Mongol.

He takes a few steps away in silence. For a moment, it appears as if he might topple. Instead, he hands his sword to Byaamba who cleans it on the grass. The Khan walks to his horse.

For one moment -- one fleeting moment -- he catches sight of young Marco Polo on his horse. The look the Khan gives seems to say: *"This is how I roll, Latin. Write it down."*

Jingim watches his wounded father helped up into his saddle. The Crown Prince's eyes betray his burdened thoughts.

Marco is looking across the circle at Jingim now. He sees that look. Maybe he feels for him. He sees it all...

DISSOLVE TO
MONTAGE:

118 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY

118

MONGOLIAN THROAT SINGING rises as we begin our CLOSING MONTAGE. CLOSE ON KUBLAI, JINGIM -- then MARCO, dirty and bloodied and changed.

MARCO (V.O.)

Look outward says the Khan...

The Great Khan leads his triumphant procession away from the field of battle, toward home. Determination in his eyes, but no triumph.

MARCO (V.O.)

Look outward to new horizons. New
mysteries to unravel, new rivers to
follow...

(CONTINUED)

118 CONTINUED: 118

We HOLD ON Marco's face --

119 EXT. HANGCHOW - DAY 119

Mei Lin looks troubled as she prepares to be shipped out in wagons with CHINESE CAPTIVES and DEFECTORS, headed to the Court of the most powerful man on earth...

MARCO (V.O.)
You will travel, the Khan says.
You will see it for me with fresh
eyes. Write it down...

120 EXT. HALL OF FRAGRANCE - DAY 120

Kokachin stands on her balcony, gazing out.

MARCO (V.O.)
Write it down and bring it back to
me. Tell me of the rare jewels in
Java...

She looks across the steppe, a young woman with secrets --

121 INT. XIANGYANG - THE WALLED CITY - DAY 121

Chancellor Jia Sidao bets on his praying mantis fights; strategizing. Ready for the war of all wars.

MARCO (V.O.)
Tell me of the vast lands I control...
and those left for me to conquer.

122 EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE - BATTLEFIELD - DAY 122

BACK ON MARCO as he brings Ba-Tu to a stop. We PULL BACK TO REVEAL Marco alone in a vast land of corpses, carrion left to rot on the Mongolian Steppe.

MARCO (V.O.)
Tell me of my empire... as it
grows...

Marco rides alone, Kublai's forces receding behind him. Marco steadies himself in the saddle. A man learning control, command. A man come of age.

(CONTINUED)

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122 CONTINUED:

122

A silent moment. Then Marco turns Ba-Tu, gallops through the
grisly landscape, rides after his Khan, his new horizon, and --

SUDDEN CUT TO
BLACK:

END OF PILOT