

Marco Polo

Search for the Fourth Gift of the Maji

BOOK ONE

Carl Altiero



Messer Niccolo Polo returns to China with his son Marco Polo. Kublai Khan has requested a flask of holy oil from the burning lamp in the sepulcher of the Christian God. With the Polo expedition are the wizard Baron Ch'en-liu, an Absolute Being, and the Hoopala who sees four heartbeats into the future. Secret scrolls in the Vatican cellars tell about the fourth gift. Pope Gregory commissions the Polo expedition to find the Fourth Gift. Baron Ch'en-liu builds an airship and with the help of a flying dragon, and a repentant angel seek the Kingdom of Prester John.

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CHAPTER ONE

In the twelfth century, Venice was Queen of the Adriatic, a city of winding canals and grand palaces and was the unrivaled leader in trade between Europe and the Orient. Venice built its control on trade and in the middle of the 12th century, its domination over the Adriatic was complete. Venetian, Genoa, and Pisa traders reached for the land east of the Mediterranean for the land of the Rising Sun. The Polo brothers, Messer Niccolo Polo, and Messer Maffeo Polo, after five years of travel, were the first Latin traders to reach the Mongolian capital Khanbaliq in the year 1265.

The Great Khubilai Khan was delighted with all the Polo brothers told him about the Latin world. Khubilai Khan commissioned the Polo brothers as his ambassadors and envoys to the then-reigning Pope Clement IV. The Great Khan gave the Polo brothers a letter to the Pope requesting when the Polo brothers return to the land of the Great Khan they bring with them Holy Oil from the burning lamp from the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

To make sure the brothers would be given all assistance necessary in their travels, Khubilai Khan presented them with a golden tablet, a *Gerege*. The *Gerege*, a passport guaranteeing the Great Khan's diplomats would travel without hindrance. The *Gerege*, 1.8 inches by 3.54 inches gold tablet, was inscribed with the words: *By the strength of the eternal Heaven, holy be the Khan's name. Let him that pays him not reverence be killed.*



The Gerege

The Polo brothers had traveled fifteen years before they returned to Venice in April 1269. The Polo brothers had amassed a huge fortune in their stay in the land of the Great Khan; on their return to Venice they built *magazzino* (warehouses) along the Grand Canal to house their fortune.

Doge Tiepolo of Venice rewarded Messer Niccolo Polo and his brother Messer Maffeo Polo with great honor and acclaimed them as 'The greatest merchants of Venice of all-time.' The fame and wealth of the Polo brothers spread through Venice, and they became one of the *cittadino* (rich nobility).

It was midmorning of April 1271, and the boat traffic along the Grand Canal was heavy and calls from the sailors, from boat to boat, echoed along the canal. The barge *La Luce Della Luna* (*Light of the Moon*), captained by Captain Giovanni, commanded the middle of the canal as it made its way along the Grand Canal to the

Polos' main magazzino. At the main magazzino, the *La Luce Della Luna* would load cargo intended for the Polo brother's next expedition to the Far East.

Oarsmen on barges that sailed past *La Luce Della Luna* paused in their labor and waved their hats at the pride of the Venetian waterways, the *La Luce Della Luna*.

The *La Luce Della Luna* was the pride of Admiral DePacheallo's fleet, painted brilliant red and trimmed in gold; the aft cabin decorated with sculptures and carvings. It was a cargo sailing boat, with red and gold-colored lateen sails, and had eight oarsmen, brightly uniformed in orange, yellow and blue sailor dress.

Marco Polo and his friend Dioneo Gaetano were sitting on the top of the *La Luce Della Luna's* cabin, laughing and waving to their friends along the canal.

Marco Polo was five years old when his father and uncle left Venice and traveled overland to the land of the Mongols. Marco had to make his own way in Venice, his mother and he was popolani (commoners).

At an early age, Marco Polo worked along the canals of Venice and became a bargeman. He was twelve years old when Dioneo first met him under the Rialto Bridge where they were both fishing for their morning breakfast. Marco Polo's father was in the Far East and Dioneo, fatherless, lived with his widowed mother. They were both alone, and they became like brothers. Dioneo was three years older than Marco Polo. Dioneo was 'canal smart', and all the gondoliers and bargemen along the canal knew Dioneo Gaetano as the 'number one' bargeman on the canal.

Captain Giovanni and General Admiral DePacheallo seated in the caponera, the open side stern cabin of the boat, enjoying an early afternoon lunch. Sailor Adriano bowed as he entered the open cabin and placed on the small cabin table a bottle of cool straw-colored prosecco summer wine. He made way for the sailor Calvino, who pressed past Adriano, bowed and placed on the table a

silver tray of fried calamari and crabmeat and white linen table napkins.

“Grazie,” said Captain Giovanni to the sailors as he reached over and opened the summer wine, and filled two crystal goblets.

“Yes,” said Admiral DePacheallo as he helped himself to the calamari, “I am commissioned by Messer Nicola Polo to sail his company to the land of Khubilai Khan. You must come, Giovanni, you must come, you will be my second in command, you will return rich and wise in the mystery of the Far East.”

Captain Giovanni placed the linen napkin in his open shirt front and pierced the crabmeat with a silver two-prong tiny fork, tasted the crabmeat, sipped the summer wine, and looked to his admiral, Admiral Galena DePacheallo.

Admiral Guilanno DePacheallo, Admiral of the Royal Venetian Navy, a gallant Venetian hero and held in high esteem among his contemporaries was known as the ‘Lion and the Defender of Venice.’ Admiral Guilanno DePacheallo, decorated by Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo in the Hall of the Great Council of Ten for his accomplished command of the Crusaders in the year of Our Lord 1229.

A painting by Bellini, the famous Venetian painter, of Admiral Guilanno DePacheallo was on prominent display in the palace in the Great Room of Great Council of Ten.

General Admiral DePacheallo’s Crusaders defeated the armies of the Sultan Saladin and regained control of Constantinople. The admiral was rewarded with wealth, honor, and rank.

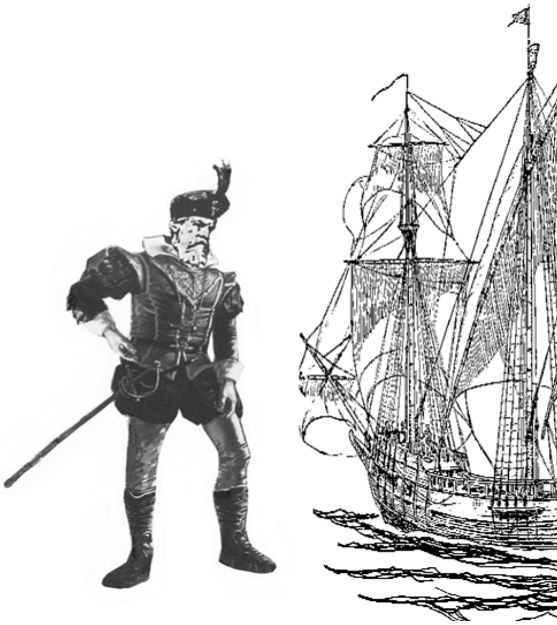
General Admiral DePacheallo was tall and commanding. His stands, his demeanor, his pointed beard, his grand Venetian nose his deep-set eyes marked him as a Venetian aristocrat. A velvet crowned black hat trimmed around with heavy gold chain sat squarely on his head. He always wore a long, black cloak over his white, full-sleeved, ruffle collar shirt, his tight

black pants tucked into high, black leather boots. A silver buckle belt held his long-jeweled sword. Around the admiral's neck, hanging low on his chest was a gold chain with a heavy gold crescent medal stamped with the image of the winged lion of St. Mark. The medal inscribed with the title of his rank: General Ammiraglio della Veneziana Reale (General Admiral of the Royal Venetian Fleet).

Captain Giovanni had sailed under Admiral DePacheallo's flag for many years, and he sat back in his chair and dabbed his lips with a fine linen napkin.

"Admiral DePacheallo," said Captain Giovanni, "you do me great honor. With joy in my heart, I say to you, my Admiral, I am honored to sail with you to the Holy Land."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the pleased Admiral DePacheallo, and he slapped his knee, "Buno, Giovanni, you will sail by my side, we will seek this great adventure together, eh, Giovanni?"



General Admiral DePacheallo



Captain Giovanni

Admiral DePacheallo reached for the summer wine. With a smile, he filled Captain Giovanni's wine goblet and said, "After we dock at the magazzino, we will meet with Messer Niccolo Polo and an emissary from the Royal Court of Khubilai Khan, Ambassador Baron Ch'en-liu.

"Giovanni, this Ambassador, Baron Ch'en-Liu is a most mysterious oriental, yes, yes, most mysterious. Messer Niccolo Polo told me the Great Khan's trusted adviser, Baron Kuo-Shi said; Ambassador Baron Ch'en-liu is an Absolute Being."

"Che cosa è questo, Un Essere Assoluto?" questioned Captain Giovanni.

"A mystic Giovanni, un mago (a wizard).

"Two nights ago Messer Polo called a meeting; we met at Messer Niccolo Polo's place of business. Messer Polo's brother, Messer Maffeo Polo and Messer Polo's financial counselor, Andrea Cappello, were present. The Turk, Colonel Karakochi, was there and Ambassador Baron Ch'en-liu.

"Messer Niccolo Polo introduced a new member of our expedition, Colonel Karakochi. Messer Niccolo Polo said that Doge Tiepolo asked that Colonel Karakochi joins our expedition; Colonel Karakochi is a staff officer of Sultan Baybar's Royal Guard. Messer Niccolo Polo said that it is of Sultan Baybar's interest to assure our flotilla safe passage through Ottoman waters, this Turk, Colonel Karakochi said nothing.

"It is rumored that Colonel Karakochi once sailed on a pirate ship along the Barbary Coast. Messer Niccolo Polo told me he was once a bodyguard to the Sultan Baybars. Giovanni, I tell you this—this Corsair is a strange man, a man of many faces. Giovanni, you will know him when you see him. He wears a long white silk scarf wound around his head, and below his long nose, a mustache, thin lips, and a long pointed beard. This Turk dresses in the style of the Janizary, the elite Imperial Guard of the Sultan Baybars. You will see this

Corsair Giovanni; he wears a red, rust-colored, long, wide-sleeved coat over a scarlet tunic and black pants. And his shoes, Giovanni, are not like Venetian gentlemen—oh no—they are red with long pointed curled toes. This Corsair has two curved daggers in gold-jeweled scabbards tucked into his sash. Yes, Giovanni,” said Admiral DePacheallo nodding his head, “you will take from your command, one you trust, and assign him to watch this—this—corsair.”

Admiral DePacheallo leaned back in his chair, sipped his summer wine, then leaned forward and helped himself to a piece of fried calamari. He leaned back in his chair, waved his silver two-pronged tiny fork and placed the fork back on the table. “Hah,” he said, as he took another sip of the summer wine. “Ambassador, Baron Ch’en-liu, described the royal court for the new members of the expedition. Baron Chen-Liu explained the court protocol and the grandeur of Khubilai Khan’s empire.

“Counselor Andrea Cappello addressed our many needs, supplies, boats, horses, camels, and items of trade in the Far East market. On and on he spoke of the supplies we needed.”

Admiral DePacheallo leaned over and put his hand on Captain Giovanni’s knee and said, “I will tell you about Ambassador Baron Ch’enliu,” He paused, with a finger alongside his nose, a Venetian gesture, what he was about to say was important and confidential.

“Giovanni, never are you to tell any man of what I tell you.” Admiral DePacheallo sat back, paused and sipped on his summer wine. “Like I, Ambassador Baron Ch’enliu had heard the planning stage of this expedition before, and looking at him, I knew his thoughts were elsewhere, and then—I could not believe what I was seeing! Giovanni, I tell you this! I tell you a truth!

“Admiral DePacheallo leaned closer to Captain Giovanni, “Ambassador Baron Ch’en-liu reached for the teapot to pour himself a cup of tea; it was just out of his

reach. He looked at the teapot and with a wave of his hand, motioned the teapot to come to him. Giovanni—the teapot obeyed his command! Hah, yes! The teapot slid ever so silently into his hand. Yes, yes, Giovanni, I tell you a truth! Baron Ch'en-liu poured himself a cup of tea. Baron Ch'en-liu looked up and looked at me looking at him. Baron Ch'en-liu again waved his hand at the teapot, and smiling; he offered me a cup of tea. I accepted. I tell you, Giovanni, I held my cup out to Baron Ch'en-liu, and I say to you, my hand was not as steady then, as it was when I was aboard my galley in the Aegean Sea, with a sword in hand boarding the sultan's war galley. And then, Giovanni, Baron Ch'en-liu smiled, and he slightly bowed his head, toasting me with his cup of tea."

"Strette di mano," muttered Captain Giovanni.

"Sleight of the hand you say," scowled Admiral DePacheallo with a raised eyebrow, "Hah—Giovanni I was there, I saw what I saw!" And with a stab of his fork he impaled a piece of fried calamari, put in his mouth and chewed furiously, and he reached for the summer wine and took a long draft.

Captain Giovanni said nothing, and sat back in his chair and waited for his Admiral to speak.

Admiral DePacheallo's hand quivered a little as he put his hand on the gold handle of his sword and continued, "This Baron Ch'en-liu has powers we know nothing about—praise be to God. I tell you, Giovanni, he is a man to encounter with caution."

"Wow," said Dioneo, as he cupped his hand to his ear trying to hear all that was being said in the cabin below, "Marco, do you know this Baron Ch'en-liu?"

"No," said Marco Polo, "I didn't ever meet Baron Ch'en-liu."

"We finished our dinner meeting," continued Admiral DePacheallo, "and thanking Messer Polo and his brother Maffeo; we went on our way."

Admiral DePacheallo helped himself to more pieces of calamari. With a wave of his hand, as he chewed on the calamari and dabbed his lips with his napkin said, “You know, Giovanni, I tell you a truth, the Baron Ch’en-liu walked in front of me, I tell you, Giovanni, *the curtains in the doorway parted*, and made way for Baron Ch’en-liu, it is true Giovanni, it is true.”

As they made their way along the Grand Canal, the gondoliers who passed the barge knew this splendid vessel, and when they saw Admiral DePacheallo aboard, they waved their hats and shouted:

“Admiral DePacheallo, good morning to you, sir!”

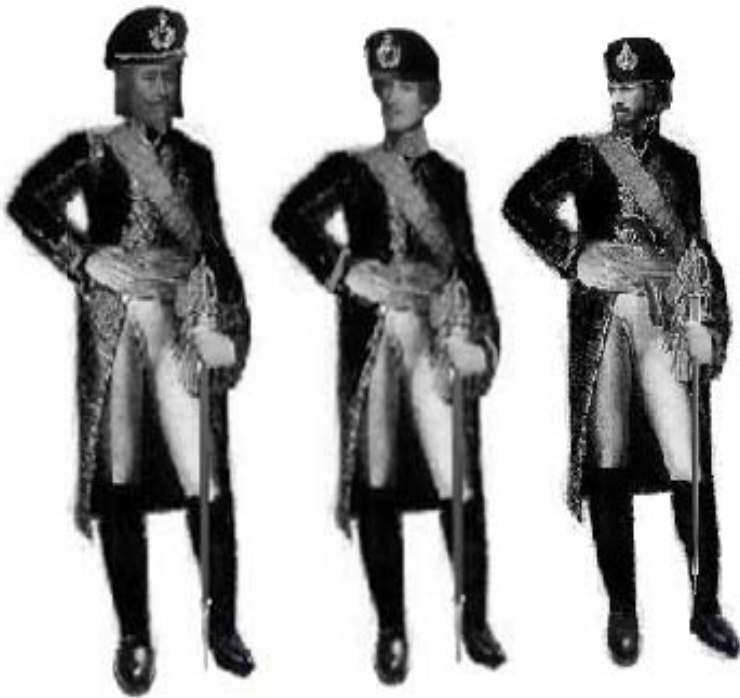
“Admiral DePacheallo, I will sail with you on your new expedition.”

And from an old senior gondolier, “Good morning, General Admiral DePacheallo, my respects to your blessed mother and on you, my General Admiral—may the Lion of St. Mark blesses you.”

Admiral DePacheallo acknowledged all who hailed him, smiled, and with a wave of his hand, saluted them. Of course, the ‘number one’ barge kid, Dioneo Gaetano, and Marco Polo also smiled and waved at all who hailed their admiral.

On the bow of the barge were three of the admiral’s elite officers, all were men of valor who pledged their lives and sacred honor to their General Admiral DePacheallo. These officers commanded the General Admiral’s fleet, and as his personal staff, they were ready to carry out his every command. Now their mission was to ensure the safety of Messer Polo’s valued cargo. Commander Michael Partecipazio was senior in rank, staff officers, Commander Polani, and Commander Cappello all were noble officers of the Venetian Christian Fleet.

The commanders were tall men; they wore the officer’s uniform of the Royal Venetian fleet. They wore fleet officer’s hats, on the rim of their three-corner hats, a gold medallion was fastened, a sign of their rank.



Commander Partecipazio, Commander Polani,
Commander Cappello

Admiral DePacheallo leaned back into his chair and said, "Giovanni, before we meet with Messer Polo and Ambassador Baron Ch'en-liu, there is another mystery you will see. With Baron Ch'en-liu there will be a small, four-leg creature, this four-leg creature is a Hoopala.

"Hoopala?" asked Captain Giovanni.

"Yes, Giovanni, I said Hoopala—the creature is a Hoopala. This Hoopala stands about the height of your boot and has long, white and black hair with streaks of silver fur, and his hair hangs from the top of his head to the ground. And around his neck, there is a gold band, and Giovanni . . ." Admiral DePacheallo bent over and whispered, "Giovanni, this band holds a gem—a red ruby. Messer Niccolo Polo said the gem is priceless. Giovanni, this garnet must be worth a fortune. Yes, this Hoopala is strange. He has a short face and a small black nose, and Giovanni, his eyes are silver . . ."

"*Argento?*" interrupted Captain Giovanni.

"Yes, Giovanni, I said silver with a small black dot in the middle of his eye, and when he looks at you, it seems as though he looks right through you. Messer Niccolo Polo told me this Hoopala is smart; he never barks like a dog, but Messer Niccolo Polo said that if you listen carefully, the Hoopala can speak to you, and he talks in many different languages."

Captain Giovanni looked strangely at Admiral DePacheallo.

"No—no—Giovanni—ha, ha, ha," laughed Admiral DePacheallo, "I tell you a truth, ha, ha, ha—when you meet the Hoopala you will see for yourself."

"This Hoopala looks like a dog?" asked Captain Giovanni.

"No, no, no Giovanni," answered Admiral DePacheallo, "not like a dog, he doesn't even have a tail. Messer Niccolo Polo told me there is, but one Hoopala in the Royal Court of the Great Khubilai Khan and the Hoopala has been a loyal companion to Baron Ch'en-liu for many years."

“Un altro essere assoluto? Another Absolute Being?” asked Captain Giovanni.

“Ha, ha,” laughed Admiral DePacheallo, “Sì, sì, un altro essere assoluto eh, ha, ha, ha.”

“Brunetta!” snapped Commander Partecipazio at the helmsman, who leaned over to hear about the Hoopala. “Watch your ears—hear what your business is—watch the traffic around this bend.”

The oarsmen hearing Commander Partecipazio sharp command leaned further on their oars and stroked, they dared not look about.

The barge approached the bend under the wooden bridge that crossed the Grand Canal, the Rialto Bridge. On either side of the portico were covered ramps with rows of shops, it was here that Venetian merchants brought their cargo of spices, wine, and perfumes and stored in warehouses, their *magazzino*. The Messer Polo brothers had their *magazzino* where they stored their valued cargo, and in their *magazzino*, they were preparing for their next journey to the Far East.

As the barge approached the bridge, Commander Partecipazio was on guard for vicious varlets, thieves, and murderers that worked the *traghetto*, the dark underbelly of the bridge. These villains would swiftly row out from the darkness of the bridge, sweep past a cargo barge, grab what they could and with howls of laughter and a string of curses would row off into one of the many narrow canals off the Grand Canal.

Dioneo Gaetano knew of the dangers beneath the old wooden bridge and the evil Mario Borgia, known as the *consigliere*, the leader of the Black Hand of Venice. Venetian canal hoodlums say that Mario Borgia was not Venetian at all; they say he was born, and he grew up in Sicily. They said he lived with the Black Hand, the Mafia, a notorious satanic cult that kidnapped, stole and murdered the peasants of that southern island. Borgia and his Black Hand Gang members preferred to live by stealing and beating up strangers that ventured into the

dark canals and streets of Venice. The evil hoodlum Mario Borgia was known throughout the damp, slimy, dark, water-filled cellars of Venice. This villain Black Hand Mario Borgia grew a full beard and wore a feathered, velvet, hat, and dressed in the fine livery of the merchants of Venice. He wore thick gold-rimmed glasses, glasses he stole as a prize right out of a cargo barge master's cabin. Around his fat belly, he wore a belt and tucked into his belt; Mario Borgia carried a long, deadly, curved, sharp dagger. The hoodlum limped as he walked; his right back leg had a peculiar twist that always kept moving out from under him as he walked. This twist, it is said, was the result of one of his escapes aboard a cargo barge where he was discovered, and the barge master thumped him with a barge oar and threw him off the barge.

When two or three Venetian merchants got together, they spoke in whispers about the villain Black Hand Mario Borgia, '. . . The Black Hand' they said '. . . is wired to the Genoese '. . . Beware the Black Hand' they said. Black Hand Mario Borgia was not welcome among the company of Venetian merchants. 'Anche nel sonno, mano nera Mario Borgia ruberà il vostro sonno. Even in your sleep Black Hand Mario Borgia will steal your sleep.'



Black Hand Mario Borgia

Marco Polo and Dioneo Gaetano knew of this villainous Mario Borgia, and as they approached the bridge, they were on a sharp lookout. Admiral DePacheallo believed with his four officers on board, and with the Admiral, known to be on board, the evildoers along the canal would have no heart in making mischief to his cargo barge.

Marco Polo and Dioneo Gaetano lived along the canal and had other ideas about the Black Hand and Dioneo whispered to Marco Polo, "Watch out for Mario Borgia and his Black Hand Gang."

"Look—look!" shouted Marco Polo. "That gondola, the black one—I don't know that gondola!"

Dioneo Gaetano knew all the canal gondoliers, and he shouted, "I don't know the gondolier—ho, they're gang members of Mario Borgia! Ho, ho, there, there he is—in that gondola, that's Mario Borgia!"

"Commanders—Commanders!" shouted Marco Polo. "There—there—you see him? In the middle of that gondola, there he is, Commanders, do you see him? There he is, Mario Borgia and his Black Hand Gang!"

Captain Giovanni commanded his helmsman, "Hard port! Ram that gondola—sink it and the slime with it! Oarsmen—pick it up! Pick it up! Faster! Faster! Ram that gondola!"

Before Captain Giovanni's orders could be carried out, Commander Cappello reached for his flintlock pistol tucked in his waist sash, with a swift motion, cocked the pistol, aimed, and with one-shot knocked the ore out of the menacing gondolier's hand and he fell into the canal.

"Good shot, Polani," shouted Commander Cappello.

"Hold water—back water!" Commander Partecipazio shouted to the oarsmen.

Commander Partecipazio and Commander Cappello grabbed the oars from the deck of the boat. With wild swings and howling laughter, made hits on the hoodlums, including one good hit on the backside of Mario Borgia. Mario Borgia was knocked into the canal,

spitting up canal water, his hat was floating away, and his gold-rimmed glasses were more crooked than before. Mario Borgia shook his fist, made the sign of the Black Hand and swore the Black Hand curse on Dioneo Gaetano.

“Give way together,” order Commander Partecipazio to the oarsmen.

Now it was over. The cargo barge was back on course heading for the bridge. General Admiral DePacheallo and Captain Giovanni were laughing and slapping each other on the back and in good cheer commandeered a bottle of Messer Niccolo Polo’s fine wine to toast the morning’s event as they approached the Rialto Bridge.



The Rialto Bridge

“Giovanni, slow down under the bridge,” said Admiral DePacheallo. “Slow around the bend—slow, Giovanni. Tell your oarsmen to back off, there—do you see them?”

Waiting at the dock were Messer Niccolo Polo, Messer Maffeo Polo, Baron Ch’en-liu, the Hoopala, Counselor Andrea Cappello and the Turk, Colonel Karakochi.



Messer Niccolò Polo and Colonel Karakochi.

Baron Ch'en-liu stood next to Messer Niccolo Polo. He had a mustache and a short black beard. His deep, oriental, black, slanted eyes looked at you and knew who you were. He wore a white silk turban headdress weaved with silver trim. Baron Ch'en-liu's full-sleeved robe was bright white silk and bordered with bands of pure gold and silver-threaded cloth; his boots looked as if they were made of solid gold. The morning Venetian sun danced off his robe, making it difficult to see its beautiful gold and silver ornate trim

"Giovanni—look—there's the Hoopala," said Admiral DePacheallo.

"I see him, but do my eyes deceive me? The Baron Ch'en-liu is holding the Hoopala with braided gold and silver leash—look, now you see the leash, and now you don't—strange."

"Not a leash Giovanni, I have seen this before, I believe this to be a symbol—a secret bond between them. Not so strange, Captain Giovanni, another mystery, just another mystery."

Marco and Dioneo stared at the group gather on the pier, whispering and nudging each other, "Wow," whispered Marco, "Admiral DePacheallo was right, Baron Ch'en-liu is *mysterious*—and—and," Marco said pointing, "that's the Hoopala."

"Yeah, the Hoopala is a strange lookin' creature," said Dioneo, "look at the Turk, Colonel Kar ... ah, ochi . . ."

"Colonel Karakochi," prompted Marco, "he's scary."

"Yeah," whispered Dioneo.

Commander Partecipazio looked back at the boys standing behind him, scowled and said, "Silenzioso, avete buone maniere, essere abbastanza. Silent, have you no manners, be quite."

The cargo barge was docking, Captain Giovanni shouted orders to his deckhands, Captain Giovanni was careful not to bruise the General Admiral's boat.

“Ho there, port oarsmen,” Captain Giovanni shouted. “Slack off, slack off—up oars. Steady now—move that bow line forward to the next stanchion. You—on the pier—get that boat hook on the bowline—make fast the bow spring line, get that stern line—make fast!”

Leaving Captain Giovanni to the duty of docking, Admiral DePacheallo went ashore and was now on the pier explaining the confrontation under the bridge.

“No, no,” said Admiral DePacheallo, “it was of little importance. It has been just a little excitement, a passing incident, my commanders enjoyed the moment as an interlude in a dull passage.”

“Come now,” said Messer Niccolo Polo laughing and shaking Admiral DePacheallo’s hand, “come, we will have lunch and make our plans.”

Messer Niccolo Polo called to a gondolier standing by a boat docked at the pier. A Sàndolo da barcariòl, a magnificent large gondola painted black with gold leaf horses painted on its sides, furnished with luxurious thick, red, velvet cushion chairs. Messer Niccolo Polo invited his guest aboard his Sàndolo da barcariòl, and the gondolier and oarsmen guided the boat through the canals to the business house of the Polo brothers.

They were invited to sit at a long, polished, black-lacquered table. Messer Niccolo Polo waved to attendants, and they were served red wine, fresh bread, fruit, black pepper beef and cheeses.

The conversation was heavy during lunch; sometimes it was different points of view, or a low agreement reflecting cautious feelings of the potential danger ahead. Counselor Andrea Cappello spoke of the Polo’s main trading post, Trebizond, on the coast of the Black Sea. “. . . Trebizond has become a great trade route to East Asia.”

“The Mongolians,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “have opened this trade route . . .” Counselor Andrea Cappello interrupting said, “Messer Niccolo Polo it is true Sultan Baybars has opened the trade route to the Middle East,

but the Genoese has built trading posts along the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea, and the Black Sea, their intent is to control the trade route to East Asia. It is important the Polo brothers continue to hold a strong presence in the Black Sea, the flotilla, at the port of Trebizond, we will renew our partnership with the Nicaean leadership.

The Turk, Colonel Karakochi, sat silently at the table, sipping his cup of red wine.

Ambassador Baron Ch'en-liu and the Hoopala stood by the large window overlooking the Grand Canal, silently observing, his hands folded within his full sleeves and the afternoon sun danced off his brilliant white cloak.

Marco Polo and his friend Dioneo stood listening. Dioneo looked at him and this noble company of men. *Some change, he thought,* and he looked at Marco Polo. Marco Polo smiled as he looked at his friend Dioneo, Dioneo Gaetano smiled at his friend and winked.

Marco Polo and Dioneo listened and were awestruck by the talk of sailing the Adriatic Sea and of the red-beard Aruj Barbarossa, the pirate, who sailed the North African coast. *Sabers and dagger Wow! War galleys! Wow!* Thought Marco Polo, all this adventure danced in young Marco Polo's head, and he nudged his friend Dioneo. "Wow," he whispered.

During the meeting, the Polo Company spoke of treasures of jewels, gold, silk and perfume, and of the desert mystery, where by night, men would hear spirit voices calling them by name.

The meeting adjourned; maps, notes, mathematical calculations, and tools for navigation were gathered and carefully packed.

"Dioneo," said Marco Polo, "come with me. My father wants me to go to Count Lorenzo Donato villa; I am to receive documents from Count Donato and deliver them to Admiral DePacheallo."

Marco Polo paused and whispered to Dioneo, “and my father said Baron Ch’en-liu requested that I meet with him tonight, in his apartments, at the ninth hour.”

“What for?” asked Dioneo.

Marco Polo shrugged his shoulder, “I don’t know, he didn’t say.”

“Can I come?” asked Dioneo.

“Guess so, guess it’ll be alright.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Dioneo, “this is really sometin’.”

Together, Marco Polo and Dioneo hurried down the stairs to the canal. “Ho-Ho” called out Marco Polo; coming up the canal was a friend, young gondolier Senso. Marco Polo cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, “Ho, Hey, Senso!” And he waved Senso to the pier. “Do me a favor, my friend, take Dioneo and me to Count Donato’s villa.”

“To Count Lorenzo Donato’s villa—wow!” said gondolier Senso as he propelled the gondola to the pier. “Come—jump in.” Senso rowed the gondola close to the pier. Marco Polo and Dioneo jumped on board, and they were away.



Marco Polo, Dioneo Gaetano and gondolier Senso

Count Lorenzo Donato was a wealthy, powerful Venetian aristocrat, a member of the *Consiglietto*. The *Consiglietto* not only elected the Doge but also formed an inner council of state, *Il Gran Consiglio dei Dieci* (The Great Council of Ten). Count Lorenzo Donato was a warrior of the first crusade and now was an elder statesman. He was a wise, wily, and a high-ranking member of the Council of Ten.

Senso paddled the gondola along the canal. As they approached Count Lorenzo Donato's private slip, hooded, armored guards watched the advancing gondola. The guards grabbed the line tossed by Marco Polo and made it fast to the pier post.

"Many thanks, friend Senso!" shouted Marco as he and Dioneo jumped to the pier.

"With pleasure Marco—Marco, hey, Marco—speak to your father—I would go with you on your father's expedition. I am young, strong, and very bright. I will serve Messer Niccolo Polo honorably."

"Say no more Senso," Marco shouted as he waved to his friend Senso. "I will speak to my father; you will come with me and Dioneo."

The guards opened a large wooden iron-bound gate and escorted them along the stone walkway; torches lined the stone walkway, and in the shadows, armored guards watched as they approached the great doors of the Villa Donato. The guard at the main entrance of the Villa Dioneo opened a double, heavy wooden door and they followed house guards into Count Lorenzo Donato's library.

The stone floor of the library was heavily carpeted with thick Venetian wool rugs. Walls of stone rose high to a timbered roof and on the walls were hanging lighted iron candelabras. Shelves of books lined the walls and on wooden tables, books were piled high, some of the books had spilled onto the floor. Maps, navigation tools, and weapons were scattered about the floor. The library

was a working room, the private room of Count Lorenzo Donato.

The open-hearth fireplace behind Count Lorenzo Donato burned high. Count Lorenzo Donato was seated at a long, heavy, dark mahogany desk. Count Lorenzo Donato looked up as Marco Polo, and Dioneo were escorted into the room; he stood up; his full white beard flowed over his dark, green tunic. Against the chill of the night, he wore a full-length, yellow and gold, velvet outer dress and he wore dark, green velvet slippers. He wore a flat-topped dark, brown velvet hat, trimmed in gold. Around his neck hung a heavy gold chain with a medallion cast in gold with the image of the winged lion of St. Mark.



Count Lorenzo Donato

“Sit, sit,” said Count Lorenzo Donato, he waved to wooden high chairs alongside his desk, “the night is cold, perhaps some hot tea? Good, we will have tea, Fabio will see if there are any stuffed zucchini flowers

leftover from tonight's dinner; young men are always hungry, are they not, eh? Good, good, tell me, Master Marco, Doge Tiepold has informed me of your father and his brother Maffeo Polo's expedition, and there is this Baron Ch'en-liu, have you meet Baron Ch'en-liu?"

"I have, Count Donato, I've seen him—ah, we've seen him," said Marco Polo, and Marco told Count Lorenzo Donato about the Hoopala and that the Hoopala and Baron Ch'en-liu are Absolute Being, and he told Count Lorenzo Donato of the Turk corsair Colonel Karakochi, and Donato told Count Lorenzo about the encounter under the Rialto Bridge .

"Hmm," said Count Lorenzo Donato as he looked at the two excited young men. "Interesting gentlemen, you are to be commended for your sharp observations. This Absolute Being, Baron Ch'en-liu . . ." And Count Lorenzo Donato wrapped the robe he wore tighter about him, he returned to his desk and sat down. It seemed as if a cold draft flowed over him, and he sunk his face deeper into the robe he wore and said, "It was during the last crusade, it was a terrible undertaking, too much savagery, too much looting, too much blood spilled. I remember hearing about an Absolute Being. He was said to be Oriental, a mystic, a wizard with supernatural power; I believed this to be foolish talk gentlemen.

"This Absolute Being was said to be not of this world, foolish talk, gentlemen, and yet—your description . . ." The Count Lorenzo Donato's voice trailed off almost to a whisper as he remembered times long past.

"I knew a Count Andrea Michie," said Count Lorenzo Donato, "a noble knight. We were on the last crusade to the Holy Land when he told me about an Absolute Being he had encountered. Gentlemen, I was too busy keeping alive to have an interest in an Absolute Being. You know, Count Michie was not the same man after that encounter. A mystery, gentlemen, a mystery—truly this Absolute Being is a mystery."

Count Lorenzo Donato's thoughts of long ago were interrupted as Fabio entered the library, and he placed steaming hot, stuffed zucchini flowers and hot tea on a sturdy, wooden table.

"Ah, good," said Count Lorenzo Donato, and he thanked Fabio.

"Tell me, Dioneo Gaetano," said Count Donato as he motioned them to sit at the table; Fabio poured the tea and served the stuffed zucchini flowers, "what of your plans? What do you, a young boy, hope to gain joining this long and dangerous expedition?"

Dioneo stood tall, and he shuffled from one foot to the other, held his breath a bit, and said, "Sir—Count Donato, my friend Marco Polo will one day be known among Venetians as a famous merchant and traveler. As for me, I am only known as the number one barge kid of the Venetian canals. But—sir—Count Donato, I am still a low-class citizen of Venice, I am a *popolani*." And Dioneo Gaetano pointed to his clothes. "Sir Count Donato, I am seventeen years of age, and because of the generosity of my friend Marco's father Messer Niccolo Polo, these are the first new clothes I have ever had, but sir—Count Donato, I am a *popolani*. I would be better, I wish to care for my mother, I plan to make my fortune with the Messer Polo's expedition, I would return to Venice as a man of renown."

Count Lorenzo Donato smiled and nodded his head. Yes, he knew about ambition, all one had to do is look about the Villa Donato to see the result of Count Lorenzo Donato's fiery ambition. "So—Dioneo," asked Count Donato, "your proposal? What say you, Dioneo Gaetano—eh?"

"Sir—Count Lorenzo Donato," said Dioneo, quickly looking at Marco, and then he said to Count Donato, "this is what I propose." Dioneo Gaetano took another deep breath and said, "My friend Luigi Vanvitelli of Rome, and me, on arrival at the royal court, we will seek an audience with the Great Khubilai Khan's ministers.

And we will negotiate with the ministers a franchise to open Italian restaurants across China.”

“What! What?” cried Marco Polo, “You never told me about that—a franchise for Italian restaurants? Dioneo—what are you saying?”

“Calm, be calm, Master Polo,” said Count Lorenzo Donato. “Let us hear more—Italian restaurants you say, eh? And who is this Luigi Vanvitelli from Rome?”

“Marco,” said Dioneo, “you remember him, don’t you? Two summers ago, he was here for the Festival of St. Mark, remember Marco? Luigi Vanvitelli said he is from a long line of chefs of the papal kitchens, and he told me about his famous relative, Buonarroti de Simony, who was the Chief Chef of the papal kitchen of Pope Clement. Luigi Vanvitelli told me that Chef Buonarroti de Simony’s *fegatgo alla Veneziana* became the delight of the papal dining rooms. He said that Pope Clement commissioned Buonarroti de Simony Master of the Papal Kitchen and said that one day the name Buonarroti Simony name would be known throughout Italy and . . .”

“So,” interrupted Marco Polo, keeping his eyes away from Count Lorenzo Donato and asking in a pleading voice said to Dioneo, “you say that this chef Buonarroti di Simony is related to that long line of papal chefs?”

“I asked this question of Luigi Vanvitelli,” said Dioneo, “and when I asked this question.” Dioneo shrugged his shoulders, and with stretched-out arms and open palms, and with a painful look on his face, said, “Luigi Vanvitelli answered me . . .” And Dioneo took a deep breath. “. . . And he told me that Buonarroti di Simony is a twenty-third cousin, removed, on his mother’s side.”

Marco Polo expected Count Lorenzo Donato at any moment to call his guards and have them both thrown out into the canal. *Curious*, thought Marco Polo, *nothing happened.*

Count Lorenzo Donato looked at Dioneo Gaetano with raised eyebrows and with a hint of a smile, a gesture of his hands, and a nod of his head showed his acceptance of this Dioneo Gaetano.

“This is a found good fortune of events,” said Count Lorenzo Donato. “It will be to our advantage. Gaetano, I find some merit in your proposal, after all, we Venetians are the master merchants of the Eastern trade, ha, ha, ha, and you have a chef, eh, a chef no less from the papal kitchens, ha, ha, ha.”

Marco Polo looked at Count Lorenzo Donato, and looked at Dioneo and shrugged his shoulders and sat back in his chair.

“Sit, Gaetano,” said Count Lorenzo Donato. “The zucchini grows cold,” and he pushed the plate of stuffed zucchini before Dioneo.

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed Count Lorenzo Donato. He sat back, sipped at his tea, and said, “I will, of course with your acceptance, join you in this Italian restaurant venture. When you reach the court of Khubilai Khan, and when you speak to his ministers, find me a Baron of the Imperial Court, and I will enter a joint venture with that Baron. We will build a string of Italian restaurants in China, ha, ha, ha, *Belissimo ristorante*—eh Gaetano?”

Count Lorenzo Donato, still smiling, sat back in his great wooden chair and looked at the two boys seated with him, and then his smile disappeared and with a serious face, with folded hands on his desk, leaned forward and said, “Now, my friends, listen carefully, I have a sealed message for your General Admiral DePacheallo. You will take this message to him. My personal *cental dabarcariòl* is waiting for you at the pier. You will be taken out to the *Maria de Venice*, and you will deliver this secret message to the admiral.”

Marco Polo stood and bowed, and with a little hesitation, and stepping from one foot to the other bowed and shyly said, “I am honored to serve you, Count Lorenzo Donato.”

Count Lorenzo Donato smiled, wished them well and walked with them to the pier, to his private slip, and he watched as they boarded his magnificent gondola.

The *Sàndolo da barcariòl*, built for Count Donato, was a narrow, long, black-lacquered gondola with red-lacquered floorboards and a velvet-cushioned *parécio* (a central divan). On the black-lacquered sides of the gondola, was gold-gilded carved horses and the image of the Winged Lion of St. Mark. In front of the cushioned divan were three black-lacquered chairs for Count Lorenzo Donato's personal bodyguards. The *Sàndolo da barcariòl* was built for speed and luxury.

"Wow," said Marco Polo, "nothing like Senso's gondola."

Marco Polo and Dioneo sat on the red velvet-cushioned *parécio*; three guards boarded the gondola and shoved off away from the pier. The gondolier stroked his long oar, and they swiftly traversed the canals to the harbor and the anchored *Maria de Venice*.

They delivered Count Lorenzo Donato's secret message to Commander Michael Partecipazio, Admiral Captain DePacheallo's Chief of Staff. Quickly begging their leave, Marco Polo and Dioneo hurried down the rope ladder to the waiting gondola and hurried to their next meeting.

Commander Partecipazio turned to Lieutenant Torchia. "You have the watch," he said. "I will deliver this message to Admiral DePacheallo."

Commander Partecipazio nodded to the sentry at the cabin door of Admiral DePacheallo; the guard knocked on the cabin door and announced Commander Partecipazio.

"Come in Commander," cried out Admiral DePacheallo.

Commander Partecipazio handed Admiral DePacheallo the sealed message. "Admiral DePacheallo," Commander Partecipazio said, "Marco Polo and his friend Dioneo have just delivered this message for you

from Count Lorenzo Donato; Marco said it was most urgent that you receive this message.”

“Hmm,” said Admiral DePacheallo looking at the message. “Sit, Commander—sit.” He took a lighted candle from his desk and opened the wax seal of Count Lorenzo Donato’s message and read aloud, “My dear and trusted friend Admiral DePacheallo,” and Admiral DePacheallo began reading the secret message. “This message is about the Turk, Colonel Karakochi,” said Admiral DePacheallo and he read on. “Hah,” he would say as he read on “. . . ah hah.” He would mutter aloud and sometimes, with emphasis on what he read, thump the desk with his ringed finger.

“Commander Partecipazio,” said Admiral DePacheallo as he finished reading the message. “Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo is worried about the growing strength of the Ottoman Empire.” He thumped the message with his jeweled finger. “Two nights ago, in secret, in the dead of the night, Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo received emissaries from the Ottoman Empire. These emissaries, hah—the Sultan’s spies,” he remarked. “They knew of Messer Polo’s planned trip to the Empire of the Great Khubilai Khan. They knew the Polo brothers were ambassadors of the Great Khubilai Khan and carried letters to the Pope of Rome. They knew in these letters the Great Khubilai Khan requested of the Pope that when the Polo brothers return to the Empire of the Great Khan, they will bring with them, from Jerusalem, Holy Oil from the lamp that is kept burning in the Holy Sepulcher. Hah—see here,” and Admiral DePacheallo pointed to the message. “Count Lorenzo Donato said that Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo and Great Council of Ten know the still burning embers of the Crusade and the Ottoman Empire could again restrict our great Venetian commercial trade along the eastern Mediterranean Sea.



Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo
A message for Admiral DePacheallo

“Yes, I agree with Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo, the embers still burn. Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo, hah—this one is a wise, cunning politician. Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo agreed to the request of the Ottoman Emissaries. Doge Lorenzo requested Messer Niccolo Polo to accept and have the Turk Colonel Karakochi join their expedition. Doge Tiepolo, in his request, described the Turk Colonel Karakochi as a friend of the Doge’s court, and so you see, Commander Partecipazio, the Polo brothers, not knowing all the reason of Doge Tiepolo’s interest in the expedition, accepted the Turk Colonel Karakochi as a member of their expedition. Messer Niccolo Polo believes Colonel Karakochi was once a bodyguard to the Sultan Baybars, that this Colonel Karakochi is a staff officer in

the Sultan's Royal Guard, but no . . .” Admiral DePacheallo picked up the message from his desk and waved it, and said, “Count Lorenzo Donato tells me this Colonel Karakochi is a staff officer of the sultan's secret service.” Admiral DePacheallo sat back in his chair and nodded his head. “Commander Partecipazio, this Colonel Karakochi is a ruthless man, a political assassin. Count Lorenzo Donato's message said this Colonel Karakochi had amassed a large fortune while in the service of the sultan, and he is a loyal officer in the service of Sultan Baybars. Count Lorenzo Donato believes his assignment is to evaluate the wealth of the Cravens going to the Far East and Cravens returning to Venice. You know, the Doge signed a treaty with the Turks, and we pay a high tribute to the Turks so Venetian trade with the Far East would go unmolested. Yes, I agree with Count Lorenzo Donato . . . I fear the sultan has other plans for the Silk Road as we know it, and I believe the Sultan could close the passageway as he wills.”

“Admiral—this Colonel Karakochi is a threat?” asked Commander Partecipazio.

“We will see—yes, I believe so,” answered Admiral DePacheallo.

Marco Polo and Dioneo hurried to the apartment of Baron Ch'en-liu. They scurried in and out of and around cables, mooring lines, and timber piles sunk in the Venice lagoon. They hurried as they moved in and out of shadows as they approached the great, wooden Rialto Bridge.

Marco Polo and Dioneo were too excited and did not heed the Count Lorenzo Donato's warning, they were not careful, they were not alert, following them was one of Mario Borgia's Black Hand soldiers.

“Follow them,” said Mario Borgia. “I want to know who they meet, where they go, report to me in the

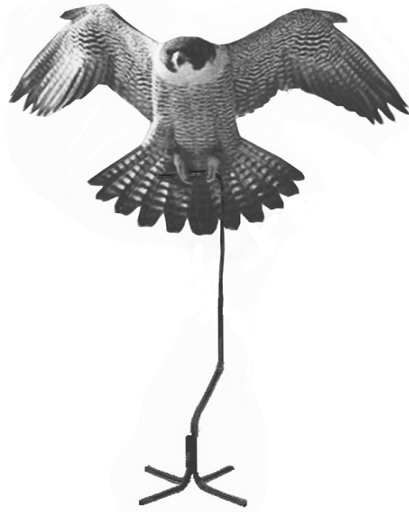
morning,” and Black Hand Borgia angrily adjusted his bent, crooked, gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

Marco Polo and Dioneo arrived at the entrance of Baron Ch'en-liu's apartment and the clock in St. Mark's Basilica began ringing the ninth hour. At the last toll, the heavy wooden door opened. They saw in the dim light of a torch a tall oriental man who bowed and waved them to enter, they followed him and climbed the three flights of steps to Ambassador Baron Ch'en-liu's apartment.

Baron Ch'en-liu's apartment, which occupied the top floor of the Polos' palazzo, was layered with exquisite Chinese rugs of thick woven silk, woven with dragons, flowers and Chinese lettering and symbols, rugs that covered the entire floor. On the wall was a painting of twenty cranes flying in a dark blue sky. Silk curtains covered the windows and walls. By the window, overlooking the Grand Canal, on a stand, perched a large bird.

Baron Ch'en-liu welcomed them and smiled as he saw Marco Polo and Dioneo looking at the bird and wondering in puzzlement, they never saw such a large bird. The bird was twenty-five inches long, all white with black plumage along his wings and his dark eyes watched as they entered the room and he slowly spread his wings a full fifty-two inches. The bird closed his wings, and bobbed and stared at them.

“Zhu San finds you interesting,” said Baron Ch'en-liu. “He is a gyrfalcon.”



Zhu San the Gyrfalcon

Baron Ch'en-liu invited Marco and Dioneo to sit at an elaborate carved, rosewood table.

"We have prepared a small repast of Chinese delicacies," said Baron Ch'en-liu. "Zhu San will join us; he has developed a taste for little moon cakes." The falcon hearing moon cakes bobbed in agreement. The tall oriental walked over to the falcon and the falcon flew and perched on his shoulder. "Lord Su Che," said Baron Ch'en-liu, "and the Zhu San are good friends."

Lord Su Che . . . thought Marco Polo . . . this lord is no servant.

Lord Su Che wore a plain brown gown wrapped around him, a common military dress, except that around the wide bottom of his sleeve and down the front of his gown was weaved a wide gold braided trim. On the front of his gown was embroidered an emblem of the Great Khan's Royal Dragon Guard, a badge of his rank, *Shangkio* Colonel of Royal Dragon Guard.

Baron Ch'en-liu introduced Lord Su Che. "Lord Su Che is an officer in the Royal Guard of the Great

Khubilai Khan. The Great Khubilai Khan personally assigned Lord Su Che to me as my royal escort.”

Baron Ch'en-liu was interrupted as a large carved, arched wooden door to the outer room opened. Baron Ch'en-liu and Lord Su Che turned and bowed to a young girl who entered.

“Gentlemen,” said Baron Ch'en-liu, may I present my royal charge, the Princess Taia Anshi.”

In the manner of the Orient, with her head lowered, hands together, the Princess bowed greetings. She was a standard of beauty from the royal court, slender figured, pale skin, and with only little cosmetics. Her face matched the beauty of the pale pink rose pinned to her black hair, shaped into a bun atop her head. Her eyes dominated her face, they were large and slanted and of a golden-brown, greenish tint. Her lips were soft, small and smiling. The Princess Taia Anshi wore a gown of red and gold silk, with flowers and birds embroidered in colors of silver, green, purple, yellow and blue. On her feet, she wore gold curled-toe slippers. The princess wore no jewelry, except for the diamond-studded silver pin through her hair bun. Lord Su Che smiled as he could see this beauty from the Imperial Court of the Great Khubilai Khan had overcome Dioneo and Marco Polo, both of whom stood up and awkwardly bowed to the Princess Taia Anshi.



Lord Su Che and Princess Taia Anshi

“Master Marco,” said Baron Ch’en-liu “I have asked you to meet with me for an important reason. But first, you should know that you almost risked your mission and the trust of Count Lorenzo Donato.”

Marco Polo and Senso were on their feet, white-faced and stuttering.

“Never! Never!” cried Marco Polo.

“No! Never!” said Dioneo.

With the wave of his hand, Baron Ch’en-liu silenced the boys.

“You were followed by one of Mario Borgia’s hoodlums. That evil hoodlum who followed you is no longer a menace; he will be found in the morning floating under the Rialto Bridge.”

Baron Ch’en-liu motioned the troubled boys to sit.

“This is our inner circle of companions,” said Baron Ch’en-liu. “We met here so you may understand my wishes and the wishes of the Great Khubilai Khan. Princess Taia Anshi travels with me by the command of the Great Khubilai Khan. The princess is commanded to learn about the outside world, to know the friends and enemies of the Great Khan. Baroness Chew Huaizhi and Baroness Shen Yitang, from the court of Khubilai Khan, are her companions; Lord Su Che is her protector. The Hoopala, at my request, travels with me. The Hoopala and I have much in common; the Hoopala is special to me.

“You, Dioneo Gaetano, will be my liegeman, you will owe your allegiance to me, and you will sail with Captain Giovanni. Master Marco, you will stay close to General Admiral Captain DePacheallo, he will know my wishes; he will think of them as his own. The Hoopala, who is my closest friend, will assist you in this duty.”

“As always,” said the Hoopala, speaking for the first time, “Baron Ch’en-liu honors me and pays me a great compliment.”

Marco Polo and Dioneo Gaetano looked at each other; it was the first time they heard the mysterious Hoopala speak.

Baron Ch’en-liu nodded his head and smiled at the Hoopala.

“Marco Polo,” said Baron Ch’en-liu, “you will be my chronologist.” Lord Su Che handed Marco Polo a leather pouch with a leather shoulder strap. “In this pouch is a documentary book, paper and pen, and sticks of wax and my *yinzhang* seal. After you have completed a page of a document you will stamp the bottom of the document with this seal. The sticks of wax have a special property; there will be no need to melt the wax with a burning candle, on your command, ‘melt’ the stick will melt, and you can then use this signet ring and make your mark, here is the signet ring for you to

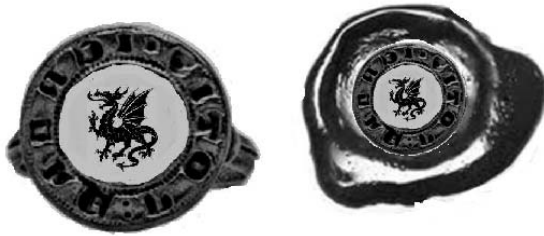
wear. Lord Su Che will show you the proper method of putting a seal mark on the document.”

Lord Su Che took a page of out of the document book and a stick of wax.

“The signet ring Marco,” said Lord Su Che. Marco handed the signet ring to Lord Su Che, Lord Su Che took a stick of wax and pressed it on the document page said “melt,” the wax melted and Lord Su Che took the signet ring and pressed it on the melted wax.

“You see and understand Marco?” asked Lord Su Che.

“I understand Lord Su Che,” said Marco.



The signet ring and the melted mark

It will be your duty to record this journey, write what you see and what you hear, for there is more to this expedition than the outside world knows. At the completion of this journey, your written chronology of this mission will be secreted in the Royal Library of the Great Khubilai Khan.”

Baron Ch'en-liu paused for a moment, folded his arms in his full, flowing sleeves and said, “Perhaps one day the world will know the importance of this mission.

“Companions, tomorrow afternoon, we meet with Messer Niccolo Polo, Messer Maffeo Polo, General Admiral Captain DePacheallo, and counselor Andre Cappello. The Turk, Colonel Karakochi will not be privileged to this meeting. General Admiral DePacheallo and Captain Giovanni will set our course through the Mediterranean Sea to the port of Acre, Arabia. We will

renew our supplies at Acre and then will take a company of our expedition and go overland to Jerusalem, to the Holy Land. We will seek the oil from the lamp of the Holy Sepulcher from the empty tomb of the Christian God. The passage through the Mediterranean will be dangerous; Ottoman pirates sail these waters. These pirates and their ruthless crew with sabers and daggers rule the African coast. However, Lord Su Che will deliver to Mr. Contarini, Master of the *Maria de Venice*, the writings of the great Kuo Shou-ching, master of astronomical observation, and with the aid of this compass Admiral DePacheallo will sail the Mediterranean out of sight of the African coast.”

“A compass?” asked Marco Polo. “Baron Ch’en-liu, I am not familiar with the term.”

Baron Ch’en-liu pointed at a small brass bowl sitting on top of a pedestal, and said, “Come, Master Marco, and look. Chen Yuanliang, a Chinese Geomancy master of the Southern Song Dynasty, discovered this instrument. You see this wooden bowl is filled with water and floating on top of the water a fish, on a stem, carved out of a magnetized piece of the mineral magnetite, this fish is magnetized, and its head will always point to the magnetic south. Look at the rim of the bowl Master Marco, and see what our Chinese sages call a compass; the letters impressed on the bowl rim N-E-S-W with this compass General Admiral Captain DePacheallo will sail the seas without having to keep in sight of land.

“I will also deliver to Master Contarini this mechanical astrolabe, invented by Abi Bakr of Isfahan, an instrument that measures the altitude of stars and planets above the horizon, an important instrument enabling the ship’s master in navigation.”

Marco Polo thought as the General Admiral Captain DePacheallo would say, *just another mystery.*”



Chinese geomancy master Chen Yuanliang of the Southern Song Dynasty



Compass



Mechanical astrolabe

“General Admiral DePacheallo,” said Baron Ch’en-liu, “has enlisted his friend Captain Giovanni to join our expedition and he will serve as his second in command. Tomorrow they will start outfitting the two cargo vessels. The Hoopala tells me that these cargo vessels are armed with sixteen-pounder cannon amidships, six on each side and swivel guns on the stern and bow. This is excellent planning of Admiral DePacheallo—don’t you think so, Hoopala?”

“An excellent inspiration, Baron Ch’en-liu,” agreed the Hoopala.

“It is getting late,” said Baron Ch’en-liu. “Tonight, Master Polo, you and your friend Dioneo Gaetano are to board the *Hellaon de Venice*. Captain Giovanni has been notified, and the officer of the watch is expecting you, *the Hellaon de Venice* will be a haven for you this night. Lord Su Che will see to your safe arrival.

“Gentlemen, we sail in four days, make your preparations.”

Baron Ch’en-liu bid the boys good night; the Princess Taia waved goodnight. The Hoopala said, “Be alert—keep your eyes open.”

The *Venice Morning Inquirer* newspaper, on its second page, had a brief account of a member of the Black Hand found under the Rialto Bridge, floating in the canal holding onto a log,

The *Venice Morning Inquirer* reported, ‘. . . The Black Hand member said he does not recall how he got the bump on his head or who threw him into the canal.’

The *Venice Morning Inquirer* quoted an anonymous source that said, ‘. . . A certain member of the Black Hand swore revenge for the member’s mistreatment.’

CHAPTER THREE

That night before they were set to sail, General Admiral DePacheallo and Baron Ch'en-liu received by special courier a message to meet with Messer Niccolo Polo at the Polos' palazzo within the hour. "Urgent" stressed the message.

Admiral DePacheallo's gig was made ready, and Admiral DePacheallo accompanied by Commander Partecipazio arrived at the private rear landing of the spacious Polo palazzo. Attendants on the landing grabbed the lines tossed to them by the gig's oarsmen and made fast the admiral's gig. At a half-opened door stood, two of Messer Niccolo Polo's private guards, and Admiral DePacheallo and Commander Partecipazio were escorted to Messer Niccolo Polo's studio.

Admiral DePacheallo bowed to Baron Ch'en-liu and the Hoopala, who were already present, and shook hands with Messer Niccolo Polo and Messer Maffeo Polo and smiled and nodded to Marco Polo.

Messer Niccolo Polo asked them to be seated.

"Baron Ch'en-liu, Admiral DePacheallo," said Messer Niccolo Polo, "I thank you for your prompt response to my most urgent request. Tonight, I received emissaries from the papal diplomatic staff, Dominican friars, Brother Niccolo de Vicenza, and Brother Guielmo. The friars were commanded by Pope Gregory to give his pontifical blessing to our expedition with full diplomatic credentials. I also received, from Brother Vicenza a personal message from Pope Gregory."

Messer Niccolo Polo walked to his desk and picked up an open dispatch case, looked at its contents and set it down on his desk. "Ahem," he said and after a moment said, "This, gentlemen," and he pointed to the

dispatch case, “is the urgency of it all. In the Pope’s message is a copy of a letter, written in the year 1219 from a Priest, Juan of Constantinople, the letter tells that in a remote land, there is a great king called Prester John, not only is this Prester John a great king, but he is also a Christian priest. The letter reads that this king rules over a Christian kingdom, and he is a descendant from one of the three Magi.”

Messer Niccolo Polo pointed to the dispatch case on his desk. “Hmm,” he said, “imagine that, a descendant of one of the three Magi. It is said that this Prester John rules over seventy-two countries, and his land is rich in silver and gold. Pope Gregory’s personal letter to me tells of letters from Prester John found recently in the papal archives addressed to the Pope’s of Rome. The letters from King Prester John to anyone’s knowledge were never answered.

“These letters written by Prester John describe all kinds of man and beasts in his kingdom. They tell of men with horns on their heads, men with three eyes, of men who live to be two hundred years old. Hah, but these letters gentleman are not the urgency of it all. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said there is another matter of great importance. He dismissed Brother Guielmo, and we talked in secret, he said he had a special message for me from Pope Gregory.”

Messer Niccolo Polo folded his arms behind his back and walked to the window of his studio, paused, deep in thought, looked at the dark flowing waters of the canal beneath his window, turned and walked slowly back to his desk.

“Gentlemen,” he said as he sat down at his large, ornate Venetian desk, “I will tell you about this Brother Niccolo de Vicenza. When I returned from my expedition to China, Pope Clement the Fourth was the reigning Pope. Pope Clement requested my presence. Pope Clement asked about the Silk Road, the Mamelukes of Egypt, of the Mameluke General Baybars. I answered his

many questions, and then Pope Clement waved his hand and dismissed his attendants.

“He asked me to please sit for a moment. I realized we were not alone. A friar had placed a chair for me facing Pope Clement.

“Pope Clement waved to the friar who placed the chair for me and dismissed him. Pope Clement said he wanted me to meet Brother Niccolo de Vicenza. The Pope told me Brother Niccolo de Vicenza was his private secretary and his friend. Pope Clement said to me, ‘We live a lonely life here; we are surrounded by intrigue, power struggles, and the mystery we try to understand day by day.’ The Pope told me Brother Niccolo de Vicenza serves him as he has served the Popes before him; he said Brother Niccolo de Vicenza would surely serve the Pope after him. Pope Clement said he told me all of this because he would ask me on my next expedition to accept a mission. Pope Clement said, ‘If it's His will, then I will send for you.’

“I never heard from Pope Clement after that meeting, so you see I know about Brother Niccolo de Vicenza. He is now the private secretary to Pope Gregory. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said to me the message he was instructed to deliver to me could not be delivered by normal Vatican couriers. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said that a letter from Prester John to Pope Innocent the Third, in the year 1199, was found in the Vatican archives. This letter mentions a mysterious stone, the *Chintamani Stone*.”

“Chintamani Stone?” asked Admiral DePacheallo.

“Yes, Admiral DePacheallo, the Chintamani Stone. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza told me about a legend mentioned in one of Prester John's letters, a legend about the Chintamani Stone. The legend tells of the Magi Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, who followed a miraculous guiding star to Jerusalem to pay homage to the infant Jesus. We know about this; it is well known that these three wise men brought gifts to the Christ

Child, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is said there were three gifts—but gentlemen—*there was a fourth gift!*”



Magi Balthasar with the Fourth Gift

Messer Niccolo Polo paused and pointed at the open dispatch case on his desk.

“And here, gentlemen,” and Messer Niccolo Polo closed the dispatch case and held up a wax-coated letter. “is a letter, a copy Brother Niccolo de Vicenza, with the help of a Vatican scribe, copied. A letter from Prester John, here in this letter is written the mystery of it all—*there was another gift*. Prester John said it was Balthasar who gave to the Christ Child the *fourth gift*, in a small leather pouch, the mystery gentlemen is *what was in the leather pouch?*”

Wise men, three wise men, a gift . . . Bah thought Admiral DePacheallo. Admiral DePacheallo sat back in his chair and adjusted his sword at his side.

They were silent as they watched Messer Polo pace the room. Messer Polo put the letter back in the dispatch case and closed the case. Messer Polo turned to them and said, "Gentlemen, Prester John's letter said the small leather pouch contained a small stone, a small green stone. Yes, gentlemen—Prester John said the stone, the gift, *was a small fragment of the Chintamani Stone.*"

"Messer Polo," asked Admiral DePacheallo, "this stone—the stone, ah, the Chintamani Stone—did Brother Niccolo de Vicenza say if Prester John's letters tell the whereabouts of this, ah, mysterious stone?"

"Admiral DePacheallo," said Messer Niccolo Polo, "Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said Prester John's letters said no more about the Chintamani Stone, he believes Prester John is of the lineage of the Magi Balthasar, he believes Prester John may have knowledge of where the stone that Paul received from John is secreted. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said he spent many years searching the cellars of the Vatican and found remnants of very old scrolls which tell about the gift of the Magi to the infant Jesus."

Messer Niccolo Polo returned to his desk and sat down.

"When I questioned the truth of these old scrolls," said Messer Polo, "Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said to me, there is evidence that Paul did have in his possession a fragment of the Chintamani Stone. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza told me he found very old scripts that say John told Paul about the Chintamani Stone, and that John gave Paul the leather pouch containing the Chintamani Stone. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said that John told Paul the Chintamani Stone would one day change the hearts of men. Paul told John that he had a mission; he would turn to the east and evangelize the known world. Paul said he would secret the Chintamani Stone fragment, and it will remain in secret until that

day when men will open their hearts to the mystery he knows.

“Brother Niccolo de Vicenza told me the scrolls he found in the cellars of the Vatican were never revealed to anyone in the Vatican. He said the scrolls and the letters of Prester John are kept in the private vault of the Popes.”

Messer Niccolo Polo stood up from his desk turned to Baron Ch'en-liu, and bowed.

“Baron Ch'en-liu will tell you what he has told me about the Chintamani Stone,” said Messer Niccolo Polo.

Baron Ch'en-liu came forward and bowed to the Messer Niccolo Polo and Admiral DePacheallo and said, “The star the Magi followed was the star Sirius. Thousands of years ago, emissaries from the planet orbiting the star Sirius brought to Earth a stone, a heavenly stone, an extraterrestrial stone, the Al-Ka'ba, the Chintamani Stone.

“The Al-Ka'ba,” interrupted Messer Niccolo Polo, and he waved his hand excusing his interruption.

“Yes, Messer Niccolo Polo, the Al-Ka'ba, a meteorite that the angel Gabriel gave to the emissaries. When the meteorite descended to earth it was whiter than milk, but the sins of the children of Adam turned it black and after centuries of prayer, it has turned into a radiant, illumines green . . .”

“Stone—emissaries,” loudly interrupted Admiral DePacheallo shaking his head, “from a planet—I don't . . .”

“Admiral DePacheallo,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, quieting the ‘fighting Admiral’ of the Royal Venetian Fleet. “patience Admiral let us hear more.”

“It is said,” continued Baron Ch'en-liu, “this ‘Stone of Heaven was a gift to humanity to prepare for a one-world civilization of love and equality. It is said that fragments of the stone were given to Abraham, forefather of the Jewish people, and to the empire builder King Solomon.”

“Ah, these emissaries,” quietly and respectfully asked Admiral DePacheallo, “they are still, ahem—here on Earth?”

“Emissaries, missionaries, angels . . .” answered Baron Ch’en-liu, “. . . call them what you will—no Admiral DePacheallo, these messengers are no longer here.”

Messer Niccolo Polo pointed to the dispatch case and said, “Pope Gregory stressed the importance of this information. Pope Gregory said the outside world knew nothing about the Chintamani Stone and asked that I share the legend of the Chintamani Stone with only my immediate officers. I looked at Brother Niccolo de Vicenza and the open dispatch case on my desk and realized the seriousness and the responsibility this message placed on me.

“Brother Niccolo de Vicenza bowed his head and in silence held his hands in prayer. And after a while, we hugged each other in friendship, and he bid me Goodnight.”

“Here, gentleman is the dispatch case from Pope Gregory, in the dispatch case, there is a letter addressed to me written by the Pope.



Pope Gregory writes his secret letter to Messer Niccolo Polo.

“Pope Gregory writes that Brother Niccolo de Vicenza’s personal message to me be held in secret, but the dispatch papers bearing the Vatican seal can be made known to all. Pope Gregory asked me to destroy his letter, gentlemen, the letter written to me by Pope Gregory is a secret that is to remain known only to this immediate circle. We are asked by the Pope to find the stone Paul carried, find the fragment of the Chintamani Stone—this is our mission gentleman. The outside world will only know of the Vatican’s official commission of our expedition as emissaries of Pope Gregory. Pope Gregory’s message requests that, in our expedition to the empire of the Great Khubilai Khan, we seek and find this great King Prester John. We are asked to deliver the Pope’s special epistle, his blessing, and salutation.

“Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said there is only a vague location of Prester John’s kingdom. Some say in India, some say Ethiopia, others say the kingdom is located in the steppes of Central Asia, the land of the Mongolians. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza said the letters he found say that Prester John sits on a throne of rubies, pearls, and emeralds and he lives in an enchanted palace in the mountains. The letters say Prester John has a magic mirror in his fortress where Prester John can look at the magic mirror and see his vast dominions. Brother Niccolo de Vicenza believes his kingdom lies on the far-off Mongolian steppes of China.”

Messer Niccolo Polo closed the dispatch case and turned to Baron Ch’en-liu.

“Ambassador Baron Ch’en-liu,” he said, “do you have knowledge of this King Prester John?”

“I know legendary tales of Prester John,” answered Baron Ch’en-liu.

“Baron Ch’en-liu,” asked Messer Niccolo, “but have you, yourself have personal knowledge of this King Prester John?”

“I hesitate to tell you, Messer Niccolo Polo,” answered Baron Ch’en-liu. “It was many years ago, in my travels

through the Holy Land . . .” Baron Ch’en-liu hesitated; silence prevailed in the Polo studio as everyone waited for Baron Ch’en-liu to continue. “. . . I met one who knew of Prester John; I met him at the Holy Sepulcher, where they say is the tomb of Jesus. He wore the clothes of a Tibetan nomad, and he was wrapped in a brown hooded cloak. He was beardless, and his face was like the color of gray clay. It was his eyes—his eyes—that was when I knew, his eyes were like a fire, like red-hot burning embers. What are you called, I asked him, he said, I am called La-tu. La-tu, I said, this staff you carry is most unusual. The staff was long and half covered with leather. La-tu told me the staff is a lance, a spear. I asked no more questions about the spear because I then knew. For a moment, it was quiet between us, then La-tu said, I know of you. And I know you, La-tu, I answered.

“La-tu told me about Prester John and of his kingdom. He said that Prester John lives, and during the battle with Chinghis Khan on the plains of Tenduc, he was severely wounded. La-tu told me Prester John fled with his armies to the Tien Shan Mountains of Mongolia, and there Prester John built a mighty fortress on Mount Tengri Tag. La-Tu told me that Prester John’s fortress is surrounded by evil and cannot be penetrated by mortal man. La-Tu said the evil that encircles the castle of Prester John are a lower caste of angels, demon angels call Ekons.”

“Ekons?” asked Messer Niccolo Polo.

“Yes, Messer Niccolo Polo,” said Baron Ch’en-liu. “The Ekons once served the bidding of the Heavenly Host and were apparitions with no substance, just a wisp of vapor. The Ekons were not eternal and existed for only one hundred-hundred-hundred thousand years. The Ekons joined the Evil One in rebellion and demanded that they too should be eternal and be as beautiful as the angels. They were cast to the Earth with the Evil One and given substance and in punishment

they now roam the Earth as humpbacked creatures, with horns and three eyes, with feet of three toes, arms that have no palms just four long fingers protrude from their wrists. The Ekons learned of Prester John's magical stone that gives eternal life and wish to seize Prester John's castle. They are held back from seizing the castle by a moat which circles the castle in which Prester John has poured Holy Water."

"Hmm, this La-tu," asked Messer Niccolo Polo, "you say he knew you and you of him—how is that so, Baron Ch'en-liu?"

"Messer Niccolo Polo," answered Baron Ch'en-liu, "it is because La-tu is an angel."

The Polo studio broke out in pandemonium.

"An angel!" exclaimed Messer Niccolo Polo.

"An angel!" exclaimed Messer Maffeo Polo.

"An angel!" exclaimed General Admiral Captain DePacheallo.

"An angel!" exclaimed Commander Partecipazio.

Marco Polo held his hand over his mouth and with bulging eyes said nothing.

The Hoopala knew.



La-Tu the repentant Angel

“Yes, gentlemen,” said Baron Ch’en-liu, “La-tu is an angel, a fallen angel—a demon—a devil. La-tu told me he was a repentant angel and for millenniums sought repentance and his eyes—his terrible eyes, as he said this, blazed even more.”

“The lance you speak of, Baron Ch’en-liu,” asked Messer Niccolo, “what of this lance?”

“Yes, the lance,” said Baron Ch’en-liu. “The Holy lance—a spear Messer Polo, a Roman spear that pierced His side as he hung on the tree.”

Quiet prevailed in the room, as the words of Baron Ch’en-liu hung in the air and chilled the room. Messer Niccolo stood, the years of all he had seen, the torment and misery, the punishing years of travel, hung around him like a loose cloak; he adjusted his cloak about him and nodded his head. “Baron Ch’en-liu,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “the Chintamani Stone—what knowledge do you have of the Chintamani Stone?”

“The Hoopala,” said Baron Ch’en-liu, “has knowledge of the Chintamani Stone.”

“Hoopala,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “the Chintamani Stone?”

“Gentleman,” said the Hoopala, “it was during the Han dynasties, during the Christian year forty-five AD, the Emperor Mou-yin requested of me . . .”

Admiral DePacheallo knew of the mystery of the Hoopala, but he never before had a first encounter, and he interrupted.

“Hoopala,” said Admiral DePacheallo, “forty-five AD—that was . . .”

Baron Ch’en-liu raised his hand. “Please, Admiral DePacheallo—let the Hoopala continue.”

“Yes, yes,” said Admiral DePacheallo, “please continue, Hoopala.”

“The Emperor Mou-yin request I, with General An Lushan, would go on a mission to Tibet. With a thousand armed soldiers, General An Lushan was commanded to find the Great Holy Je-tsun of the Great Mountains. Emperor Mou-yin asked me to bring him knowledge of this holy man.”

“Interesting,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “forgive me, Hoopala, please continue.”

“We traveled many li,” said the Hoopala, “over six months before our caravan reached the Himalayas. At the base of Mount Sumeru, we came on an encampment of monks who said they were disciples of the holy man Je-tsun. They said they knew we were coming and greeted us with the beat of drums and the crash of cymbals. General An Lushan ordered his captains to make camp at the base of the mountain. The monk Han-yun said he was the first disciple of the holy man Je-tsun and that he would escort our delegation to their monastery, General An Lushan accepted the monk Han-yun’s invitation.

“General An Lushan, with his first captain and his elite officers, mounted the donkeys at the monk’s encampment, we followed Han-yun up a narrow trail where only one donkey at a time could travel. I knew General An Lushan was thinking of the impossibility of assaulting this monastery that hung off the edge of a mountain cliff where the base of the clouds touched its tiled roof.

“We dismounted at the entrance to the monastery and the monk Han-yun asked us to remove our boots. Young monk apprentices washed our feet and gave us saddles to wear. We were escorted along a long hall and entered a great a chamber held up by columns of stone. At the end of the great hall, on a stone bench, sat the holy man Je-tsun, on each end of the stone bench were golden incense burners. The holy man Je-tsun stood up as we entered the hall he bowed and beckoned us to come forward.

“Holy Je-tsun said to General An Lushan, ‘General An Lushan, you do us honor, welcome to the center of the universe, welcome to the monastery Samye.’

“General An Lushan said, ‘Great Holy Je-tsun, my master and Emperor Mou-yin sends his greetings.’

“Holy Je-tsun asked General An Lushan, ‘Why is this you honor us?’

And General An Lushan told Holy Je-tsun of his mission, he said his Emperor Mou-yin had commanded him to travel all his empire and report to Emperor Mou-yin the nature of his land and his subjects.

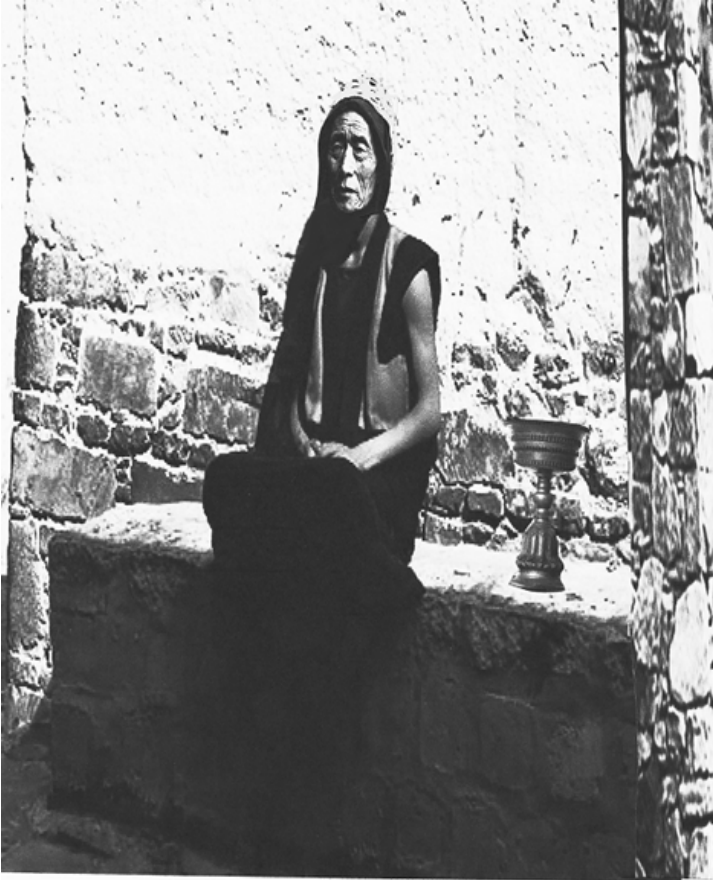
“Great Holy Je-tsun looked at General An Lushan standing arrogantly before him and said, ‘His subjects—his land, we are but humble monks General An Lushan, we hold allegiance to no earthly king.’

“General An Lushan puffed up his chest and put his hand on his sword. Great Holy Je-tsun smiled and sat down on the stone bench and waved his hand as if to dismiss General An Lushan’s arrogance and he said to him, ‘It is of no matter General An Lushan, tonight we will dine together. Rest this night under our humble roof and tomorrow you may continue with your commission.’

“During the middle of the night, I was awakened by the monk Han-Yu. ‘Come, Hoopala,’ he said, ‘our Great Holy One wishes to speak with you.’ I was escorted to his private chamber. Great Holy One Je-tsun waved to me to come forward.

‘Hoopala,’ said the Great Holy One Je-tsun to me, ‘we know of you and what I have to tell you are for your ears only.’

“The Great and Holy Je-tsun told me he called on me, that night, for another reason and he said, ‘As you know, Hoopala, we live an isolated life, we have no contact with the outside world. Your General An Lushan is a soldier, his eyes and ears belong to his Emperor Mou-yin, he would not understand what I am about to tell you—this person is what I wish to tell you about.’



Holy Man Je-tsun

“Holy Man Je-tsun told me this strange story, ‘We found him at the base of the mountain. He was ill and barely held on to the donkey he was riding. We brought him into our monastery and nurtured him; he was a very sick man. His face was hollow from lack of food and drink. His hair and his beard were long and disheveled, his clothes were worn and in tatters, only his eyes seemed alive, his eyes were wild, the eyes of a zealot.’

“Holy Man Je-tsun told me as the monks tenderly removed his torn and worn garments he held onto an

embodied shawl that he wore beneath his coat, a prayer shawl. Paul said it was his Tallit. The shawl was woven with silver and gold thread and had strange writing woven into the shawl, and on this shawl was fastened a leather purse.

“Holy Man Je-tsun told me it was weeks before they were able to talk to him. Paul told him about the shawl. Paul said it was a religious shawl, a symbol of his faith; he said he was a Jew.

“Holy Man Je-tsun said when Paul was well enough he received him in his chambers. ‘He was a strange man,’ said Holy Man Je-tsun.

“Paul told Holy Man Je-tsun a strange story. He told him his name was Saul, but now he said his name was Paul. Paul told him he was a disciple and that his Master was crucified, but now he lives. His mission was to spread the good news. Paul told Holy Man Je-tsun about the Evil One. He called him Satan, a fallen angel.

‘Ah, Hoopala,’ said Holy Man Je-tsun to me, ‘you Chinese have Yan Luo, King of Hell, the Dragon Demon of the Eastern Sea.’ I did not reply.

‘Hoopala,’ said the Great Holy Je-tsun, ‘this Paul was a strange man.’

“And then Paul told Holy Man Je-tsun, ‘in the end times my Master will return like a blazing wheel of fire.’

“The Holy Man Je-tsun was silent for a time, and as I gazed up into the night, it seemed the stars streaked across the night skies as if fleeing from the story being told to me.

“And then the Great and Holy Je-tsun seemed to awake and said to me, ‘I am an old man, Hoopala, and I have witnessed many strange things—but this—I did not understand him.’

“The Holy Man Je-tsun said he knew Paul was a good man, a holy man. Holy Man Je-tsun said Paul unfastened a leather purse from his religious shawl, and Paul opened the leather purse, inside the purse was a stone, a small green stone.

'I took the stone from the leather purse,' said the Holy Man Je-tsun, 'and held it in my cupped hands.'. The Holy Man Je-tsun looked at me as if he hesitated to tell me more. He nodded his head as if he was convinced to tell me more, and he said, 'The green mist about the stone in my cupped hands grew in my hands to overflowing, and I saw in the green mist, my life in the past and hundreds of years into the future. I quickly placed the stone back into the leather purse.'

"The Holy Man Je-tsun said he knew then the stone was a fragment of the stone, the Chintamani Stone.

"The Holy Man Je-tsun asked Paul about the stone, and Paul told him about the Magi and John, who gave him the stone.

"And then the Great Holy Je-tsun said, 'Paul gave me the leather purse to keep, he said he had a mission, I was to keep the Stone until he returns, he never said when.'

"The Great Holy Je-tsun said it was his desire to fulfill Paul's request. He told me, he sent for Han-Yu and directed him to take two monks and find an urn of purity, an urn of pure white jade, 'let not the hands of the unholy touch this urn.' The Great Holy Je-tsun said to Han-Yu to go now, find and bring the urn to him.

"The Great Holy Je-tsun told me Han-Yu found the urn outside the gated walls of the monastery. They found the widow Sauma, who makes a meager living fashioning jade. Han-Yu told her of his mission; Han-Yu said the widow Sauma went to a high shelf in her hut, and reached up and took down an old wooden box. The widow Sauma took from the box a small, pure white jade urn. The widow Sauma told Han-Yu it was her finest work. She said she labored over the pure white jade urn for many years. She told Han-Yu her hands were only hands that have ever touched this urn.

"The Great Holy Je-tsun said he received the exquisite urn of pure white jade and was very pleased.

“The holy man placed the Stone into the urn of pure white jade and sealed it with pure virgin gold.



The urn of pure white jade

“And then the Great Holy Je-tsun told me that it was six years later when he had another visitor who said his name was Ananias. He said the visitor was a member of a small group of disciples in Jerusalem. Ananias said he was with Saul on the way to Damascus when Saul’s sight was restored. He said he was a follower of Saul, who now was called Paul. He told the Great Holy Je-tsun that Paul was in Rome, under house arrest.

“The Great Holy Je-tsun told me Ananias humbled himself before his council and appealed to them with a prayer that he would have the Stone so that he may take the Stone to Paul.

“Ananias told the Great Holy Je-tsun that Paul was under a sentence of death. Ananias said it was his prayer that Paul would have the Stone as he faces the end of his earthly life.

“Holy Je-tsun told me he labored in prayer for many days and made the judgment to give Ananias the Stone.”

“There is no evidence of Ananias ever reaching Rome,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “perhaps Ananias

never left the snow and icy mountains of the Hindukush.”

“A strange story,” said Admiral DePacheallo, “Yes, a strange story.”

After a pause, the Hoopala continued his story.

“I asked no more about the Stone. I was given the Great Holy Je-tsun’s blessing, and the private audience ended.”

“Hoopala,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “the Chintamani Stone, did the Holy Man Je-tsun tell you of the location of the Chintamani Stone?”

“The Great Holy Je-tsun told me the Chintamani Stone is secreted deep in the tunnels of Shambhala.”

Wow! Thought Marco Polo . . . maybe.”

“Hoopala, this holy man,” asked Messer Niccolo Polo, “what more do you know about him?”

“Messer Niccolo Polo,” answered the Hoopala, “he is the Holy Lama of the monastery Samye and one hundred and twenty years from now he will be the Tal le, the Ocean of Wisdom, he will be known as Gedun Drub, the Dalai Lama of Tibet.”

“Gentlemen . . .” said Messer Niccolo, gathering his thoughts, “Baron Ch’en-liu and the Hoopala have told us a remarkable story, a revelation. We must keep in mind our main mission, the Stone, and our search for King Prester John. Ambassador Baron Ch’en-liu, you know of my great respect for you, of the comradeship I feel for you.”

Baron Ch’en-liu, standing with his hands tucked into his full sleeves, bowed deeply to Messer Niccolo Polo.

“Baron Ch’en-liu, after we fulfill the Great Khubilai Khan’s request for the Holy Oil burning in the lamp at the sepulcher of the Christ, I ask that you accept this commission to seek and find the Apostle Paul’s fragment of the Chintamani Stone.

“We will travel to the Holy Sepulcher and request the Holy Oil the Great Khubilai Khan has requested. We

will then seek the holy men at the center of the Earth in the mountain Sumeru.”

“The Hoopala,” said the Baron Ch’en-liu, “and I would be honored to join this holy search to seek the Stone.”

Messer Niccolo Polo, with his right hand over his heart, bowed to Baron Ch’en-liu.

“Gentlemen,” said Messer Niccolo Polo, “it is late, and General Admiral DePacheallo wishes to set sail on the morning tide. My brother and I bid you good night and tomorrow, may we have a blessed and safe voyage.”

The Hoopala didn’t think so.



Messer Niccolo Polo returns to China with his son Marco Polo. Kublai Khan has requested a flask of holy oil from the burning lamp in the sepulcher of the Christian God. With the Polo expedition are the wizard Baron Ch'en-liu, an Absolute Being, and the Hoopala who sees four heartbeats into the future. Secret scrolls in the Vatican cellars tell about the fourth gift. Pope Gregory commissions the Polo expedition to find the Fourth Gift. Baron Ch'en-liu builds an airship and with the help of a flying dragon, and a repentant angel seek the Kingdom of Prester John.

Marco Polo Search for the Fourth Gift of the Maji

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