



[The Kingdom: A Fargo Adventure](#)

By Clive Cussler with Grant Blackwood

| Adult | Paperback | Michael Joseph | 30 May 2011 | \$32.95 | ISBN: 9780718157937

Prologue

A Land Forgotten

Of the original one hundred forty, could I be the last Sentinel? The grim thought swirled through Dhakal's mind.

The invaders' main force had overrun his country from the east eight weeks earlier with brutal speed and cruelty. Cavalry and foot soldiers poured from the hills and swarmed into the valleys, razed the villages to the ground, and slaughtered all who stood before them.

Along with the armies came elite bands of soldiers tasked with a single mission: locate the sacred Theurang and bring it to their King. Having foreseen this, the Sentinels, whose duty was to protect the holy relic, removed it from its place of reverence and spirited it away.

Dhakal slowed his horse to a trot, slipped off the trail through a break in the trees, and stopped in a small shaded clearing. He climbed from the saddle, allowing his horse to wander to a nearby stream and bend its head to drink. He moved behind the horse to check the series of leather bands that secured the cube-shaped chest to the animal's rump. As always, his cargo was held fast.

The chest was a marvel, so solidly built that it could withstand a high fall onto a rock or repeated bludgeoning without showing the slightest crack. The locks were many, hidden and ingeniously designed to make them all but impossible to open. Of the ten Sentinels in Dhakal's cadre, none had the resources or ability to open this unique chest, nor did any of them know whether its contents were genuine or

a substitute. That honor, or perhaps curse, belonged solely to Dhakal. How he had been chosen was not revealed to him. But he alone knew that this sacred chest carried the revered Theurang. Soon, with luck, he would find a safe place to hide it.

For nearly the past nine weeks he'd been on the run, escaping the capital with his cadre just hours ahead of the invaders. For two days, as the smoke from their burning homes and fields filled the sky behind them, they raced south on horseback. On the third day they split up, each Sentinel heading in his predetermined direction, most heading away from the invaders' line of advance, but some back toward it. These brave men were either already dead or suffering at the hands of their enemy who, having captured each Sentinel's decoy cargo, were demanding to know how to gain access to his chest. As designed, this was an answer none of them could give.

As for Dhakal, his orders had taken him due east, into the rising sun, a direction he'd maintained for the past sixty-one days. The land in which he now found himself was very different from the arid, mountainous terrain in which he was raised. Here there were mountains too, but they were covered in thick forest and separated by lake-pocked valleys. It made staying hidden much easier, but it had also slowed his progress. The terrain was a double-edged sword: skilled ambushers could be upon him before he had a chance to run.

Thus far he'd had many close calls, but his training had seen him through each one. Five times he'd watched, hidden, as his pursuers rode within feet of him, and twice he'd fought a pitched battle with enemy cavalry squads. Though outnumbered and exhausted, he'd left these men dead, their bodies and equipment buried and their horses scattered.

For the past three days he'd not seen or heard any sign of his pursuers. Nor had he come across many local people; those he did encounter paid him little attention. His face and stature was similar to theirs. His instincts told him to ride on, that he hadn't put enough distance between himself and—

From across the stream, perhaps fifty yards away, came the crack of a branch in the trees. Anyone else would have dismissed it, but Dhakal knew the sound of a horse pushing through heavy brush. His own horse had stopped drinking, its head raised and ears twitching.

From the trail, another sound, the scuff of a horse's hoof on the gravel trail. Dhakal pulled the bow from the sheath on his back and an arrow from the quiver, then crouched down in the knee-high water grass. Partially blocked by the horse's legs, Dhakal peeked under the animal's belly, looking for signs of movement. There was nothing. He turned his head right. Through the trees he could just make out the narrow trail. He watched, waited.

Then, another hoof scuff.

Dhakal nocked an arrow and drew the bow slightly, taking up the tension. A few moments later a horse appeared on the trail, cantering slowly. The horse stopped. Dhakal could see only the rider's legs and his black-gloved hands resting on the saddle's pommel, reins gripped loosely in his fingers. The hand moved, jerked the reins slightly. Beneath him, the horse whinnied and stamped its hoof.

An intentional move, Dhakal realized immediately. A distraction.

The attackers would be coming from the forest side.

Dhakal drew the bow fully, took aim, and let fly the arrow. The point pierced the man's leg in the crease between his upper thigh and hip. He screamed, clutched his leg, and toppled off his horse. Instinctively, Dhakal knew his aim was true.

The arrow had punctured the leg artery; the man was out of the fight and would be dead within minutes.

Still crouching, Dhakal spun on his back heel while retrieving three more arrows from his quiver; two he planted in the ground before him, the third he nocked.

There, thirty feet away, were three attackers, swords drawn, creeping through the underbrush toward him. Dhakal took aim on the trailing figure and fired. The man went down. In rapid succession he fired twice more, catching one man squarely in the chest, the next in the throat. A fourth warrior let out a war cry and charged from behind a copse of trees. He almost reached the edge of the stream before Dhakal's arrow dropped him.

The forest fell silent.

Four? Dhakal thought. They had never sent fewer than a dozen before.

As if in answer to his puzzlement, the pounding of horses' hooves sounded on the trail behind him. Dhakal spun, saw a line of horses galloping down the trail past their fallen comrade. Three horses . . . four . . . seven . . . Ten horses and still they came. The odds were overwhelming. Dhakal mounted his horse, nocked an arrow, and turned in his saddle in time to see the first horse galloping through the gap between the trees and into the clearing. Dhakal fired. The arrow plunged into the man's right eye. The force drove him backward, over his saddle, where he bumped off the rump of his horse and into the next rider, whose horse reared, backpedaling, creating a choke point. Horses began slamming into one another. The charge stalled.

Dhakal kicked his heels into his horse's flank. The animal leapt off the bank into the water. Dhakal brought its head around, heeled the horse, and charged downriver.

He realized this was no chance ambush. His pursuers had been covertly following him for some time and had managed to surround him.

Over the splashing of his horse's hooves in the shallow water he could hear them now: riders crashing through the forest to his right and hooves on the gravel trail to his left.

Ahead, the stream curved to the right. The trees and undergrowth were thicker here, crowding the bank, all but blotting out the sun and leaving him in twilight. He heard a shout and glanced over his shoulder. Four riders were in pursuit. He looked right, saw dark horse shapes slipping in and out of the trees, paralleling his course. They were flushing him, he realized. But to where?

His answer came seconds later as the trees suddenly parted and he found himself in a meadow. The stream's width quadrupled; the color of the water told him the depth had increased as well. On impulse, he veered his horse left, toward the sandy bank. Directly ahead, a line of five riders burst from the tree line, two of them bent low, pikes held horizontally before them, the other three

riding upright, bows drawn. He laid his body across his horse's neck and jerked the reins to the right, back into the water. On the opposite bank, another line of riders had emerged from the trees, these too armed with pikes and bows. And to complete the ambush, directly behind, galloping down the stream toward him, was yet another line of cavalry.

As if on cue, all three groups slowed to a trot, then stopped. Pikes still at the ready and arrows nocked, they watched him.

Why aren't they following? he wondered.

And then he heard it, the deafening rush of water.

Waterfall.

I am caught. Trapped.

He reined back and let the horse walk until they reached a bend in the river. He stopped. Here the water was deeper and moving fast. Fifty yards ahead Dhakal could see the mist plume billowing over the surface, could see the water boiling over the rocks at the rim of the cataract.

He turned in his saddle.

His pursuers had not moved save a single rider. The man's armor told Dhakal this was the leader of the group. The man stopped twenty feet away and raised his hands to his shoulders, signaling he was unarmed.

He shouted something. Dhakal did not understand the language, but the tone was clear: placation. *It is over*, the man was surely saying. *You have fought well, done your duty. Surrender, and you will be treated fairly.*

It was a lie. He would be tortured and eventually killed. He would die fighting before he would let the Theurang fall into the hands of his accursed enemy.

Dhakal turned his horse until he was facing the pursuers. With exaggerated slowness, he drew the bow from his back and tossed it into the river. He did the same with his quiver, followed by his long sword and short sword. Finally the dagger in his belt.

The enemy leader gave Dhakal a nod of respect, then turned in his saddle and shouted something to his men. Slowly, one by one, the riders raised their pikes and sheathed their bows. The leader turned back to Dhakal and raised his hand, gesturing for him to come forward.

Dhakal gave him a smile and a shake of his head.

He jerked his reins hard to the right, whipping his horse around, then heeled it hard in the flanks. The horse reared, coiled its legs beneath it, and began thrashing toward the spray rising above the deep waterfall.

***Frontier Wastelands
of Xizang Province,
Qing Empire, China, 1677***

Giuseppe saw the dust cloud on the eastern horizon before his brother did. A mile wide and confined by the walls of a narrow valley, the swirling brown wall of dirt and sand was headed directly for them.

Eyes fixed on the spectacle, Giuseppe tapped his older brother on the shoulder. Francesco Lana de Terzi of Brescia, Lombardy, Italy, turned from his kneeling

position where he'd been studying a sheaf of blueprints and looked in the direction Giuseppe was pointing.

The younger Lana de Terzi whispered nervously, "Is it a storm?"

"Of sorts," Francesco replied. "But not the kind you mean." Behind that dust cloud was not another wind-whipped sandstorm, the kind they'd grown so accustomed to over the last six months, but rather hundreds of pounding horses' hooves. And atop the horses, hundreds of elite and deadly soldiers.

Francesco gave Giuseppe a reassuring clap on the shoulder. "Do not worry, brother, I have been expecting them—though, I admit, not this early."

"It is him?" Giuseppe croaked. "He is coming? You did not tell me that."

"I didn't want to frighten you. Worry not. We still have time."

Francesco raised a flattened hand to shield his eyes from the sun and studied the approaching cloud. Distances were deceptive here, he had learned. The vastness of the Qing Empire lay far behind the horizon. In the two years they'd spent in this country, Francesco and his brother had seen a wild variety of terrain—from jungles to forests to deserts—but of all of them, this place, this territory that seemed to have a dozen different pronunciations and spellings, was the most godforsaken.

Comprised mostly of hills, some rolling and some jagged, the land was a vast canvas painted in only two colors: brown and gray. Even the water of rivers that gushed through the valleys was a dull gray. It was as though God had cursed this place with a swipe of his mighty hand. On days when the clouds parted, the startlingly blue sky seemed only to accent the ashen landscape.

And then there was the wind, Francesco thought with a shudder. The seemingly endless wind that whistled through the rocks and drove eddies of dust along the ground that seemed so animated the locals often treated the phenomena like ghosts come to snatch away their souls. Six months ago, Francesco, a scientist by nature and training, had scoffed at such superstitions. Now he wasn't so sure. He had heard too many strange sounds in the night.

Another few days, he consoled himself, and we will have the resources we need. But it wasn't simply a matter of time, was it? He was making a bargain with the devil. The fact that he was doing it for the larger good was something he hoped God would remember when Judgment Day came.

He studied the approaching wall of dust a few seconds more before lowering his hand and turning to Giuseppe. "They are still twenty miles away," he estimated. "We have another hour, at least. Come, let us finish."

Francesco turned back around and shouted to one of the men, a squat, powerful figure in a roughly woven black tunic and trousers. Hao, Francesco's primary liaison and translator, jogged over.

"Yes, sire!" he said in heavily accented but passable Italian.

Francesco sighed. Though he'd long ago given up trying to get Hao to call him by his first name, he had hoped that at least by now the man would have ceased with the formality.

"Tell the men to finish quickly. Our guest will be arriving soon."

Hao cast an eye to the horizon and saw what Giuseppe had pointed out a few minutes earlier. His eyes widened. He nodded curtly, said, "It will be done, sire!"

then turned around and began barking orders to the dozens of local men milling around the hilltop clearing. He scurried off to join in.

The clearing, which measured a hundred paces square, was in fact the roof of a gompa's interior courtyard. On all sides of the clearing, its turreted walls and watchtowers followed the hill's ridges down to the valley floor like spines on a lizard's back.

While Francesco had been told a gompa was primarily a fortified center for education, the residents of this particular stronghold seemed to practice only one profession: soldiering. And for that, he was grateful. As evidenced by the frequent raids and skirmishes that took place on the plains below, it was clear he and his men were living on this realm's frontier. It was no accident that they had been transported here to complete work on the machine—what their benefactor had dubbed the *Great Dragon*.

The clearing now echoed with the overlapping pounding of mallets on wood as Hao's workers hurried to drive the final stakes into the rocky soil. All across the clearing, plumes of brown dust rose into the air, only to be caught by the wind and whipped into nothingness. After another ten minutes the mallets fell silent. Hao scrambled back to where Francesco and Giuseppe stood.

"We are done, sire."

Francesco backed up a few steps and admired the structure. He was pleased. Designing it on paper was one thing; to see it come to life was something else altogether.

Standing forty feet tall, occupying three-quarters of the clearing, and constructed of snow-white silk, with curved exterior bamboo braces painted blood red, the tent seemed like a castle built of clouds.

"Well done," Francesco told Hao. "Giuseppe?"

"Magnificent," the younger Lana de Terzi murmured.

Francesco nodded, and said softly, "Now, let us hope what is inside is even more impressive."

Though the gompa's hawk-eyed lookouts had certainly spotted the visitors approaching even before Giuseppe had, the alert horns did not sound until the retinue was but minutes away. This, as well as the riders' direction of approach and early arrival, was a tactical decision, Francesco guessed. Most of the enemy's outposts lay to the west. By coming in from the east, the party's dust cloud would be obscured by the hill on which the gompa sat. This way, roving ambush parties would have no time to intercept the new arrivals. Knowing their benefactor as he did, Francesco suspected they had been covertly watching the gompa from a distance, waiting for the wind direction to change and enemy patrols to move on.

A cunning man, their patron, Francesco reminded himself. Cunning and dangerous.

Less than ten minutes later Francesco heard the crunching of leather and armored boots on the spiral gravel path below the clearing. Swirling dust rose above the rock-lined border of the clearing. Then, suddenly, silence. Though Francesco was expecting it, what came next startled him all the same.

With a single barked command from an unseen mouth, a cadre of two dozen Home Guard soldiers double-timed into the clearing, each syncopated footstep punctuated by a rhythmic grunt. Grim-faced, eyes fixed on the horizon, their pikes held horizontally before them, the guards spread out through the clearing and began herding the awestruck workers to its far side and out of sight behind the tent. Once done, they took up stations along the clearing's perimeter, spaced at regular intervals, facing outward, pikes held diagonally across their bodies. Again from the path below, another guttural command, followed by armored sandals crunching on gravel. A diamond-shaped formation of royal bodyguards in red-and-black bamboo armor marched into the clearing and headed directly toward where Francesco and Giuseppe stood. The phalanx stopped suddenly, and the soldiers foreside stepped to the left and right, opening a human gate, through which a single man strode.

Standing three hand widths taller than his tallest soldiers, the Kangxi Emperor, the Ruler of the Qing Dynasty, the Regent of the Mandate of Heaven, wore an expression that made the grimness of his soldiers' faces seem positively exuberant.

The Kangxi Emperor took three long strides toward Francesco and came to a stop. Through squinted eyes, he studied the Italian's face for several seconds before speaking. Francesco was about to call for Hao to translate, but the man was already there, standing at his elbow and whispering in his ear: "The Emperor says, 'Are you surprised to see me?'"

"Surprised, yes, but pleased nonetheless, Your Majesty."

The question was not a casual inquiry, Francesco knew. The Kangxi Emperor was paranoid in the extreme; had Francesco not seemed sufficiently surprised at the Emperor's early arrival he would have fallen under immediate suspicion of being a spy.

"What is this structure I see before me?" the Kangxi Emperor asked.

"It is a tent, Your Majesty, of my own design. It serves not only to protect the *Great Dragon* but also to shield it from prying eyes."

The Kangxi Emperor nodded curtly. "You will provide the plans to my personal secretary." With a raised fingertip, he commanded the secretary to step forward.

Francesco said, "Of course, Your Majesty."

"The slaves I provided you have performed adequately?"

Francesco winced inwardly at the Emperor's question but said nothing. Over the past six months he and Giuseppe had worked and lived with these men under hardship conditions. They were friends now. He did not confess this aloud, however. Such an emotional attachment would be a lever the Emperor would not hesitate to use.

"They have performed admirably, Your Majesty. Sadly, though, four of them died last week when—"

"That is the way of the world, death. If they died in service to their King, their ancestors will greet them with pride."

"My foreman and translator, Hao, has been especially invaluable."

The Kangxi Emperor flicked his eyes at Hao, then back to Francesco. "The man's family will be released from prison." The Emperor raised his finger above his

shoulder; the personal secretary made a notation on the parchment he cradled in his arms.

Francesco took a deep, calming breath and smiled. "Thank you, Your Majesty, for your kindness."

"Tell me: When will the *Great Dragon* be ready?"

"Another two days will—"

"You have until dawn tomorrow."

With that, the Kangxi Emperor turned on his heel and strode back into the phalanx, which closed in behind him, did a synchronized about-face, and marched from the clearing, followed moments later by the Home Guard soldiers from around the perimeter. Once the clomp of footsteps and the rhythmic grunting faded away, Giuseppe said, "Is he crazy? Tomorrow at dawn. How can we—"

"We will make it," Francesco replied. "With time to spare."

"How?"

"We have only a few more hours of work left. I told the Emperor two days, knowing he would demand the seemingly impossible.

This way, we can give it to him."

Giuseppe smiled. "You are a crafty one, brother. Well done."

"Come, let us put the finishing touches on this *Great Dragon*."

Under the glow of pole-mounted torches and the watchful gaze of the Emperor's personal secretary, who stood just inside the tent's entrance, arms folded inside his tunic, they worked through the night with Hao, their ever-reliable foreman, playing his part perfectly, haranguing the men to hurry, hurry, hurry. Francesco and Giuseppe did their part as well, walking through the tent, asking questions, bending down here and there to inspect this or that . . .

Ox-sinew guylines were unlashd, reknotted, then checked for tension; bamboo stays and cross braces were sounded with mallets to search for cracks; silk was closely examined for the slightest imperfections; the rattan-woven undercarriage underwent a mock attack with sharpened sticks to gauge its battle-readiness (finding it lacking, Francesco ordered another coat of black lacquer be applied to the walls and bulwarks); and finally the artist Giuseppe had hired finished the bow mural: a dragon's snout, complete with beaded eyes, bared fangs, and a protruding forked tongue.

As the sun's upper rim rose above the hills to the east, Francesco ordered that all work be quickly finished. Once this was done, he slowly circled the machine from bow to stern. Hands on his hips, head tilting this way and that, Francesco studied the ship's every surface, its every feature, looking for the slightest flaw. He found none. He returned to the bow and gave the Emperor's personal secretary a firm nod.

The man ducked under the tent flap and disappeared.

An hour later came the now familiar clomping and grunting of the Emperor's retinue. The sound seemed to fill the clearing before suddenly falling silent. Now dressed in a simple gray silk tunic, the Kangxi Emperor stepped though the tent's entrance, followed by his personal secretary and his chief bodyguard.

The Emperor stopped in his tracks, eyes wide.

In the two years he had known the Emperor, this was the first time Francesco had seen the potentate taken aback.

With the sun's pinkish orange light streaming through the tent's white silken walls and roof, the interior was bathed in an otherworldly glow. The normally earthen floor had been covered in jet-black rugs that left the attendees feeling as though they were standing at the edge of an abyss.

Scientist though he was, Francesco Lana de Terzi had a bit of showman in him.

The Kangxi Emperor stepped forward—unconsciously hesitating as his foot touched the edge of the black rug—then strode to the bow, where he gazed at the dragon's face. Now he smiled.

This was another first for Francesco. He'd never seen the Emperor without his characteristic dour expression.

The Emperor spun to face Francesco. "It is magnificent!" came Hao's translation. "Unleash her!"

"At your command, Majesty."

Once outside, Francesco's men took their stations around the tent. At his command, the tent's guylines were cut. Weighted along their upper hems, as Francesco had designed them, the silken walls collapsed straight down. Simultaneously, on the rear side of the tent, a dozen men heaved the tent's roof backward, which rose up and billowed open like a great sail before being hauled down and out of sight.

All was silent save the wind whipping through the gompa's turreted walls and windows.

Standing alone in the center of the clearing was the Kangxi Emperor's flying machine, the *Great Dragon*. Francesco cared nothing for this moniker; while he of course humored his benefactor, to Francesco the scientist the machine was merely a prototype for his dream: a true lighter-than-air Vacuum Ship.

Measuring fifty feet long, twelve feet wide, and thirty feet tall, the ship's upper structure was comprised of four spheres of thick silk contained inside cages of finger-thin bamboo braces and animal sinew. Running from bow to stern, each sphere measured twelve feet in diameter and was equipped with a valve port in its belly; each of these ports was connected to a vertical copper stovepipe engirdled in its own lattice of bamboo and sinew. From the valve port, the stovepipe descended four feet to a thin bamboo plank to whose bottom was affixed a wind-shielded charcoal brazier. And finally, affixed by sinew to the spheres above, was the black-lacquered rattan gondola, long enough to accommodate ten soldiers in a line, along with supplies, equipment, and weapons, as well as a pilot and navigator.

The Kangxi Emperor strode forward alone until he was standing beneath the fore sphere, facing the dragon's mouth. He raised his hands above his head as though he were beholding, Francesco thought, his own creation.

It was at this moment that the gravity of what he'd done hit him. A wave of sadness and shame washed over him. Truly, he had made a pact with the devil.

This man, this cruel monarch, was going to use his *Great Dragon* to murder other human beings, soldiers and civilians alike.

Armed with *huǒ yào*, or gunpowder, a substance that Europe was only now using with moderate success and which China had long ago mastered, the Kangxi Emperor would be able to rain fire down upon his enemies using matchlock muskets, bombs, and fire-spitting devices. He could do all of this while out of reach in the sky and moving faster than the swiftest horse.

The truth had come too late, Francesco realized. The death machine was in the Kangxi Emperor's hands now. There was no changing that. Perhaps if he were able to make a success of his true Vacuum Ship, Francesco could balance out the evil to come. Of course, he would know that only on Judgment Day.

Francesco was shaken from his reverie as he realized the Kangxi Emperor was standing before him. "I am pleased," the Emperor informed him. "Once you have shown my generals how to build more of these, you will have all you require to pursue your own venture."

"Majesty."

"Is it ready to fly?"

"Give the command and it will be done."

"It is given. But first, a change. As planned, Master Lana de Terzi, you will pilot the *Great Dragon* on her test flight. Your brother will remain here with us."

"Pardon me, Majesty. Why?"

"Why, to ensure you return, of course. And to save you when you are tempted to hand over the *Great Dragon* to my enemies."

"Majesty, I would not—"

"And now we will be certain you will not."

"Majesty, Giuseppe is my copilot and navigator. I need him—"

"I have eyes and ears everywhere, Master Lana de Terzi. Your vaunted foreman, Hao, is as well trained as your brother. Hao will accompany you—along with six of my Home Guard, should you need . . . assistance."

"I must protest, Majesty—"

"You must not, Master Lana de Terzi," the Kangxi Emperor replied coldly. The warning was clear.

Francesco took a calming breath. "Where will you have me go on this test flight?"

"Do you see the mountains to the south, the great ones touching the heavens?"

"I do."

"You will travel there."

"Your Majesty, that is enemy territory!"

"What better test for a weapon of war?" Francesco opened his mouth to protest, but the Kangxi Emperor continued. "In the foothills, along the streams, you will find a golden flower—Hao knows the one I mean. Bring that flower back to me before it wilts and you will be rewarded."

"Your Majesty, those mountains are"—Forty miles away, Francesco thought.

Perhaps fifty—"too far for a maiden voyage. Perhaps—"

"You will bring the flower back to me before it wilts or I will mount your brother's head on a spike. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

Francesco turned to his younger brother. Having heard the entire exchange, Giuseppe's face had gone ashen. His chin trembled. "Brother, I . . . I'm scared."
"No need. I'll be back before you know it."

Giuseppe took a breath, set his jaw, and squared his shoulders.

"Yes. I know you are right. The craft is a wonder, and there is no one better at piloting it. With luck, we'll be sharing dinner together tonight."

"Good spirit," Francesco said.

They embraced for several seconds before Francesco pulled away. He turned to face Hao, and said, "Order the braziers stoked. We lift off in ten minutes!"