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Map of 1911-13 China and Korea
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CHAPTER ONE

Tientsin, China, 1893 – file Alpha, folder one

Sergeant Go scuttled across the bow of the junk *Jilseong* and found his officer, Korean Army Captain Jung-hee Yi, prone on the fore-deck. He was scanning the waterfront with those ungainly, expensive night field glasses of his.

Yi said nothing and Go knew what that meant. He was searching each lantern-illuminated face on the pier for some hint of special attention.

No suggestions, no indications, no apparent threat.

“Everyone pictures emissaries as clad in silk, wearing ceremonial daggers. If they only knew how much time we expended these days ankle-deep in ox manure,” the heavy-shouldered captain confided.

Sergeant Go squatted next to him, looked thoughtfully at his own mucky feet, and chuckled. Then he stifled a cough. Taking the night glasses, he panned full circle, watching for that single aggressive movement from any unexpected quarter. The advantage to the outsized front lenses of the night glasses was they collected more light facilitating better defined images.

He caught the eye of each of the two courier detail lookouts and waited for them to acknowledge. He studied the junk’s captain who overlooked the helmsman and his five crewmen as they stood ready to handle lines.

“It’s diplomats they associate with manure, not couriers,” Go rasped with a snort of derision. “Not much we can do. Not feeding the oxen for two weeks before a jaunt just won’t work.

Several of Yi's men were rigging the derrick that would lift the oxen out of *Jilseong's* hold in belly slings. The derrick wasn't large enough to swing them over the side safely. The Korean junk's narrow beam required the oxen be first deposited on deck, and only then, moved to the pier. The tribute silver was equally heavy and would follow the same route.

Yi's methodical planning had assured the junk made landfall and passed the Dagu Forts by dusk. He always consulted the *I Ching*, the *Confucian Classic of Changes*, studiously thinking through the six variables to each successive operational challenge. And then addressing the six options each variable generated. It was his duty. His beliefs required he achieve his potential and honor the ancestors always.

They'd doused their sails and then surged up the Hai River to the piston rhythm of the auxiliary steam engine. A series of four pagodas marked a river more sinuous than a dragon's back.

Now, the third pagoda loomed dead ahead marking the terminus of the boat segment of their journey. On either side of the river lay the dimly lit structures known as the "Long Storehouses." It was 100 li from the Forts to the walled inner city of Tientsin. They were at the 85 li mark.

"I miss the old procession deliveries, all the rippling banners, the bells and gongs. They were festive affairs." Sergeant Go mused. "On the other hand, those Porro prism glasses make it so a man can pluck the shadow off a silhouette."

Annually Korea paid China tribute in silver, copper, ginseng, and other goods valued at about 30,000 tael. A *tael* was 1.2 ounces of silver frequently fashioned into boat-shaped ingots, *sycee*, of different denominations. When paid in silver exclusively, the total yearly silver shipment weighed eighteen tons.

Yi was ten years younger than Go. They and their men, were part of the organization that made those payment in several installments. Korea paid tribute and in return, China agreed to safeguard Korea and remain out of its internal affairs.

Yi nodded. He knew Sergeant Go played the simple soldier, but his contemplative sergeant knew there was nothing simple about courier duty — even in the procession days. Go was always analyzing the next step, the step after that, and projecting prioritized options.

Yi could make out the pier now. Behind it was a ramshackle warren of sheds, shacks, and *godowns* that spread left and then up the river. A floating hedge of junks rafted one and two-deep opened to receive *Jilseong* which trebled their size. The junks weren't pickets, rather residential and bumboat squatters at sufferance. They maintained their unofficial night anchorages pointed upriver for a small fee as long as they kept confidences and didn't interfere with important commerce. The junk-curtain flapped to one side, just enough to allow the Korean junk to tie up.

The oak double-timbered junk rode low in the water. He still feared grounding on a river shoal, even pier side.

The weight of *Jilseong's* cargo was significant, when added to the weight of the English-built boiler and triple-expansion engine which were confined in steel-lined compartments. In a couple years, he planned to replace that engine with a British steam-turbine engine. The prime and secondary steering stations were inconspicuously sandbagged in a web of tarred line. The builders had fashioned an armored (and uncomfortably compressing) "crib" below deck to shelter the crew and courier detail. A similar crib craddled the silver.

The junk's speed under steam guaranteed few ships could catch her, but her draft made grounding on a river shoal, an ever-present danger.

This was Tientsin, gateway to Peking, one of several unheralded points of delivery, an upriver port of the Hai River. The city's borders encompassed the three foreign concessions of Britain, France and Japan, and the ancient walled inner city. Other foreigners, Russians, Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Italians, Belgians, Americans, and Koreans, walked its streets without attracting attention.

Within minutes they tied up the ramp, to Sergeant Go's monosyllabic commands. Single syllables did not betray accents.

When *Jilseong's* crew was done, Sergeant Go stomped on the deck three times and the remaining sixteen men of the courier detail filed on deck to offload cargo.

The night was cool, yet every man's tunic was soaked in sweat. Several of the detail – their carbines wrapped in rolls of cloth like bedrolls – took positions behind crates and baskets. None wore uniforms.

"Ready to offload sacks of 'iron ore'?" Yi asked.

Go bristled, though not because he was the elder. Yi realized he'd unconsciously struck a nerve. Officers attended to grand concepts, noncommissioned officers like Go, made things happen. They were *always* ready to address the practical.

Oxen, unlike horses, grew restive if they had to stand in one place for long. They needed to be loaded with the silver in the staging area ashore quickly and moved quickly. Loading the oxen's massive arching packframes on a swaying deck risked capsizing the junk.

"Does the sun go down at sunset? Does snow ever blanket Mount Baektu's peak?" Sergeant Go answered, raising one eyebrow. "You have a gift for these new ways, and more tricks than a shaman, still there are things you have to learn, and I, cousin, am here to suggest them. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're both plowing new furrows in uneasy times."

"I wouldn't doubt there was a shaman somewhere in your bloodline," Go added almost resentfully.

Yi knew the readiness question was wrong the moment he'd asked it, though he was anxious to move the evolution along. Who in his position wouldn't be?

Sergeant Go, a distant relation, gave his stocky captain hints how to be a good officer when no one was looking. Sergeant Go was steady, reliable, and circumspect. Yi was *mugwa*, the military officer caste of Korean of the yangban aristocracy. He had passed the exams required to take his commission.

Go's family had once been yangban, too, but three successive generations of his family had failed to pass the civil or military examinations. This failure relegated his family by law to the next lower class, the *jungin*. He had served with great merit to achieve his present position. He galled at the slightest suggestion of incompetency in his current role. Whatever Go's issue, Yi knew it wasn't with him personally.

Then too, Yi had overheard a discussion between Go and one of the men. Evidently Go was not happy with shamans, healers, or fortune-tellers this week.

Go was as lean and tough as whipcord, nevertheless Yi wondered if his health, or the health of some other member of his fami-

ly, was failing. Yi was struck by the thought Go had seen a shaman recently.

Yi wanted to ask, to assure him that he was an excellent soldier.

He wanted to tell Go that three generations of scholarly failure meant nothing in the real world. Yet, Yi couldn't cross the line, it would only make things worse. "Always the ancestors," Yi sighed feeling obliged to reveal his personal demons and trying to end the exchange. "Oh, a mythical bear who became a woman and mother of the Korean nation is in the Yi bloodline surely. But no shamans we admit to. Can't a man ever be alone and free of the ancestors? "

Go having made his point, smiled avuncularly, and returned to the oxen.

Points of transition were particularly vulnerable to ambush, he knew, and needed to be addressed smartly. The time constraints on unloading added to the general tension.

After a rough crossing, Go imagined the oxen would be relieved to place their hooves on a stable surface. Below, they had been chained and bolted into position. Oxen were inclined to bunch up, and stampede, even in a confined space. Their combined weight, if they were allowed unrestrained movement, was capable of capsizing the junk. That was a risk, even tied to the pier.

Right away he saw a problem. The lead ox balked at descending the ramp.

Sergeant Go strode quickly to the first ox and adjusted its blindfold downward. Oxen could only be led across a ramp like this one blindfolded.

The mess created by the bowel-vacating oxen below had coated feet and hooves with ordure. The first drover, a new man, had concentrated on his beast's footing, not the position of its blindfold.

Yi caught Go's attention and made a hand gesture signaling "well-done." Let all our problems be so easily resolved, thought Yi, skimming his drover's switch along the junk's rail.

Moments later, his men were leading the remaining seven oxen from the heavy-timbered junk to a small staging area.

As the last blindfolded ox was led down the ramp, Yi was reminded that male oxen were invariably castrated. It made them

steady and reliable. All their oxen were, in fact, males; male oxen were larger and could carry larger loads.

Debarkation had required concentration on the ramp. Now in the gloom, Yi could dog-trot to the eight oxen and pack-frames ashore and focus his efforts there.

"Strong and docile," one of his men observed reading Yi's mind. "Thankfully, we've been allowed to remain strong and decidedly un-docile."

The lead drover, Corporal Mun, was organizing the staging area and gave Yi a crisp, almost imperceptible, nod of the head.

"Oxen at the back, ox packframes, left; ordnance sacks center; the two 'ceramics' *jiges*, right. Don't even think of dropping those 'ceramics,' brothers. Keep them well clear of those heavy-hooved beasts back there" the corporal susurrated as each detail member deposited a portion of the cargo.

He looked directly at Yi, accompanying that last caution with a brief flare of his eyes.

Each ox packframe resembled the picturesque Camel Back Bridge in Peking. The pack-frames were designed to straddle an ox at its midsection. Beside the frames, sacks of iron ore tailings stacked in groups of five concealed the silver tael. Yi's men, experienced drovers, quickly cinched on the arched pack-frames and loaded the sacks.

Ordnance included extra carbines and ammo, and curved, single-bladed swords, in straw-stuffed sacks.

These *jiges* were A-frame man-packs designed to carry an innovative item Yi had recently introduced to the detail's organizational gear.

The ox-train floated soundlessly through the alleys and along the footpaths, hastening down a series of narrow alleys and footpaths that would have proved impassable by ox cart. The ox-train moved along the bank gradually angling northward. These oxen didn't respond to voice commands. Instead they responded to a code of whacks on their haunches by way of a switch. The occasional lowing attracted no attention.

Oxen transport was a mode that traced both sides of the Yellow Sea with ubiquity. The courier detail set course to a prearranged

livestock pen with sheds and a walled paddock on the outskirts of Tientsin.

They arrived at the paddock a few hours later. The stonewalled enclosure looked tired and its mortar had degenerated to light grit. Its first course had been built finger-tip-to-shoulder high using mortar and stone. Later, another course, the same height, had fortified the paddock with the same materials, plus timber posts and shoring.

Once there, the men bivouacked behind the shed, upwind of the aromatic manure and human night soil pile that was the pen's owner's greatest source of revenue. The pen didn't attract casual onlookers. Its value lay in its seclusion and its stench.

Yi always watched the oxen consume the waiting feed and water with care. A portion of the water went to his men and allowed Yi to clean up and assumed a courtlier appearance, the appearance of a man of resource and experience.

As dawn broke, Yi set off to meet the representative of the Chinese empress by crossing a bridge, and taking a ferry, into the walled inner city to announce the time and place of delivery. A heavily-laden ox-train could never have negotiated the walled city's narrow streets, and it would be ripe for ambush.

His orders were to exchange bona fides, to provide the intricate points of turnover, and to supply the rendezvous point. Then he was to keep away from the silver until well after dark, then slip back unseen to the livestock pen. The next day – if all went well – he'd lead the Chinese counterparts to the tribute.

The tael, all washed free of iron ore tailings and manure splatter, would be primly stacked in a nearby godown, ready for counting and acceptance at noon the next day.

The meeting went well. His counterparts appeared forthright.

His hours of coordination with the Chinese finished, Yi considered the next eight hours his own.

At twilight, he sauntered into a *changsán* house, a gaming establishment, he knew well.

The emissaries of the Qing dowager empress had in the preceding year agreed to take possession of the tael tribute in Tientsin and a few other places on the Empire's eastern border. Tientsin was Yi's favorite.

This particular changsan house, just outside the walls of the inner city, presented an explosion of color and gilded mythological depictions. Many of the images replicated figures in Korean myth, with only minor differences. The building was also peppered with lanterns of all sizes, dimensions, and design. The owner promised to introduce gaslight soon.

He recognized some faces — more of the women than the men — and not others.

Most of the establishment's women were well-known entertainers and courtesans.

There was a smattering of Europeans faces. He'd never formally met a European, and wouldn't have been able to understand their languages at any event. Travel outside of Korea was rigidly regulated. The primary threats to tribute delivery, he'd learned from his superiors, were rogue Chinese and Korea elements. Then came European filibusterers. Finally, there was the distant threat of unsanctioned political elements from Russia or Japan.

Korea's national security had been spun for ages like a child's pinwheel by incursions from China, Russia, and Japan.

China had attempted several times to conquer Korea, but found those adventures too costly. Korea, like China, was fashioned from several kingdoms. From the outset, Korea was protected by the natural fortifications of an extremely mountainous peninsula. The empire and the feisty kingdom came to a mutually beneficial agreement; Korea could remain independent for a price.

For some time now, China had held Russia and Japan at bay, in return for tribute payments.

He searched the well-appointed gaming room with about twenty chattering Chinese men and women. Two thirds of the crowd were very loud. One third were raving with success, a third were muttering with loss. The final third was whispering and holding very, very still, lest they draw the attention of the warring gods of fortune.

On the periphery a few well-dressed, polite men with broken noses and facial scars provided drinks and maintained decorum.

Yi at once searched for Liqin, a comely Chinese-Korean half-caste woman who lived in the Korean quarter. She spoke Korean, though felt no obligation to observe the customary and cumber-

some Korean proprieties between single men and single women involving introductions, station, and chaperones.

"Yi-nim..." she started with a Korean honorific that no one there understood. She had burst out of nowhere.

He laughed at her formality.

She fluttered her eyes dramatically and continued, "...you grace us once again with your eminence.

"So, my gallant friend from across the Yellow Sea has not forgotten, this poor little girl so all alone in this strange land after all?"

He stammered, not able to generate an appropriate retort. She was rarely alone, she wasn't poor, and she was hardly a forlorn "little" girl, but a grown, worldly woman.

Liqin's skin was smooth and white as alabaster. She could trifle with words, kittenish looks, and the bric-a-brac of gambling, for hours. Changsan, or "long three," was a term for a good cast in a game using dominoes. She was a "Changsan courtesan," an entertainer schooled in music, literature, poetry, and games of skill or chance. She hosted gambling parties.

She led a glamorous night life, yet found Yi's life exciting and hers wearisome in comparison. If he was that interesting, Yi thought, why was it she could reduce him to a tongue-tied dolt in public and a single-minded lover in private?

Liqin maintained lodgings in Tientsin's Korean colony, close to the changsan house, but not in a room over it.

He touched her silk-covered side briefly and let his hand trace her outline downward. She was svelte, even so flaunted the curves of a full-figured dancer. Tonight, the establishment was filling up fast.

She excited him the way gambling did. He felt uneasy about the future and the risk, and the reaffirmation of luck at gambling was a comfort. Luck was an avowal that the gods favored him, and her attention also seemed verification. A man favored with dice and women could fare no differently in battle, and his luck as a gambler with her by his side was uncanny.

Yi wasn't as happy with his soldierly status as she was. Yet she never let it slip with others that he was a Korean military officer.

He chafed at the courier service's mechanical nature. Everything must go according to form. He wasn't satisfied; despite Ser-

geant Ko's compliments, he believed he owed his position more to his education and potential, than his competency.

In Confucian society, tradition and knowing one's role was central. One's personal preferences meant nothing at all, yet what *was* his role?

A beefy drunk confronted him in one of the many Chinese dialects Yi didn't understand, but he did catch the word "foreigner." Yi carried a knife, but he waited patiently for one of the men on the periphery to escort the drunk away.

"I'm glad you don't have bound feet," Yi whispered to her and flicked his chin briefly toward a bejeweled matriarch across from them.

"I am changsan. I sing, I play the lyre, and best of all, I dance..." She swiveled her hips slowly against him. Her professional name, "Liqin," he knew, meant "beautiful, stringed instrument,

"...though I'm told my talented feet are not my best feature," She added with a downcast look of false humility.

Korea's power was also declining. He could see that both countries were locked in a mutual Confucian stranglehold that kept their cultures in suspended animation while the outside world was changing rapidly. Did duty to the ancestors mean valuing form over substance?

He cast the dominoes and scored a "long three." The growing crowd cheered. Liqin cheered the loudest.

He was winning, yet it was as if he were vaulting from stepping stone to stepping stone across a familiar stream and realized midstream the stones had been replaced. The new ones were unstable and misshapen.

For the moment, he felt strong, lucky, and favored by the gods.

The lights seemed brighter, the noise greater, and the smoke thicker.

Next to them, a wealthy crone with a hairdo with intertwined ivory carvings smoked a pipe. Yi recognized the sickly-sweet smell of opium. Liqin followed his glance. She turned and said something into his ear. He shook his head, indicating he couldn't hear her. She repeated, "decadence," and that surprised him.

Yi assumed her hostility was to the Chinese class structure. Korea's hierarchy was disturbingly similar, yet opium had made few inroads there. As a military officer he automatically held a high position in that hierarchy, he too was an aristocrat.

In China and in Korea, those who found their way to positions of power were placed there by cultural habit only, or academic merit. The ability to take exams on the classics lacked appropriate merit when foreigners, in China at least, could wrest cities out from under rulers. Korea feared the same predatory practices by China, Russia, and Japan.

Liqin rested her palms in the center of his chest as if to push him away, then pulled him toward her. "You have won yourself a night of pleasure."

The role of Korean warriors now was almost ornamental. He felt that every time he returned to Korea, the country seemed more tired and listless.

In China, he observed Westerners with firearms of increasing complexity. Why weren't Korean soldiers universally armed and trained to match the Westerners, or even the Japanese? Yi had made that effort within the limits of his authority.

The Japanese appeared to absorb the Western ways of making war without difficulty. What could the Japanese do that Koreans couldn't as well?

He had introduced new ways, still he knew they weren't enough.

Yi's night wore on and his luck held. In celebration, they moved on to her lodgings.

There they often talked of his travels elsewhere. He seemed to have a hypnotizing effect over her and as long as he kept talking, she kept stroking and undulating. He found this to be an exciting advantage and played it for all it was worth.

It was no secret that she was the favorite of a doddering Japanese embassy official who paid for her lodgings, yet she was entranced by a Korean junior officer no one knew.

She posed questions in their pillow talk: "You carry gifts to our empress. I don't believe you. How can one man handle bandits? Do you carry these gifts in your sedan chair? Are they objects of great beauty, great antiquity or great value?"

"They are small things, woman's things, tweezers, a thimble, a ladle. Things I could wrap in a sow's ear."

Liqin made a *moue*.

"As for bandits, I cut them into little bits and then eat the pieces

marinated in vinegary red pepper sauce over barley” he’d growl archly.

The last question, too, after lovemaking was always the same: “When will I see you again?” That was a question he never once answered.

They made love until an hour beyond midnight, and he timed these visits to have him back to his men several hours before dawn.

He returned to their camp in the stonewalled paddock five hours before dawn, checked the three sentries, and lay down on his thin quilt.

Sergeant Go, next to him, awoke, but said nothing.

Three shots, almost simultaneous, awakened Yi. His men – in little more than undergarments – were grabbing their carbines and foot-gear and scrambling to their stations on the stonewall perimeter.

Someone was picking off their three sentries, Yi concluded and bellowed. “Get those ceramics flying!”

Using an ember from the firepit, Corporal Mun lit the slow-match pigtail on several Byzantine grenades and lofted them at, and beyond, the closing raiders. Slow match did not leave a trail of sparks back to its point of origin.

The grenades were fist-sized, stoppered jugs of naphtha. Koreans were the best ceramicists in Asia. They could fashion the best ceramics, and in this instance the most frangible incendiary grenades. These projectiles with their sticky liquid contents had doomed several attackers, now easily identifiable as Japanese naval infantrymen, to a fiery death. Yi recognized the distinctive flat hats and leggings.

The naval infantrymen’s screams and the sound of gunfire had driven several oxen to rip free their hobbles, smash their stocks, and charge through the paddock.

His men were reluctantly shooting the remaining oxen to fill the holes in their stonewalled perimeter. His men rushed to their positions on the wall, defending themselves with devastating accuracy using Gewehr 88 carbines, a weapon he had also introduced to the courier service. They donned their clothes and equipment. They didn’t wait for orders.

His men took up their positions matter-of-factly. Yi wondered if they had more faith in their leadership than warranted.

The incendiary grenades had not only driven off the initial threat, they now back-lit what would be the next wave

"That first attack was a probe, they're preparing. Expect this next wave will be serious."

He composed himself. "If you haven't noticed we're outnumbered, but we can see them and they can't see us."

Corporal Mun scurried back to Yi and Go with what was left of the night field glasses and placed them carefully at Yi's feet. The left front lens been destroyed by a bullet and now two Porro prisms tumbled into the dirt. Yi concluded his senior sentry had detected movement outside the wall with them, too late to raise the alarm.

Go snatched the damaged glasses and peered through the remaining lens tube.

"Imperial Japanese naval infantry battalion."

"How many?" Yi asked.

"I figure they're sixty-men if they hold to the British model.

They're carrying Murata bolt-action single-shot rifles. Expect two machine-guns and two mountain guns, if they're holding to the British model. The usual practice is one battalion, drawn from the crew of one cruiser. I figure there's a Japanese cruiser somewhere in sight of the Dagu Forts."

During the procession years, Go had studied the military and naval forces who visited China's treaty ports to perfect Korean courier tactics, though no one anticipated tribute-thieving attacks by a formal, foreign military force.

As if on cue a machinegun began to chatter.

Outside their perimeter, Yi saw several running silhouettes rushing forward with a crew-served weapon. No random banditry here. This was a set-piece battle between a covert tribute detail and an intruding military force, no locals involved. No one had anticipated a pitched battle with a trained, disciplined, well-armed adversary. This was a precursor to war, an effort to drive a wedge between Korea and China. He hoped this was a very small military operation, yet it was too brazen, too loud. Were their attackers confident no one would come to aid the tribute detail? Why?

Everyone hugged the walls as the gun dappled the south wall. The paddock's walls were only as tall as the shoulders of his tall-

est man. Yi wished the walls were two-thirds taller and crenelated. Fortunately, Sergeant Go had had them break away stones for firing-steps and to provide firing loops.

The machinegun stuttered and stopped.

"I think it's a Hotchkiss gun and not feeding correctly. They're positioned far too close." Go laughed and tossed a Byzantine grenade to mark it. "

"South wall, aim at the crew of that gun. We can do something with that error."

Go seemed to take forever with the execution follow-up to that command, "Fire!"

The machinegun went silent.

There was a spontaneous cheer.

"Quiet," Sergeant Go ordered.

Later, in the time it took a man to walk a casual li, a momentous boom and shower of broken rock shattered the stillness.

"It took them a while to figure what to do next," Sergeant Go contributed.

Five more thumps punched a "V" out of the west wall. One of his Koreans was clearly dead, the other, hit by flying rock, was crawling with a smashed leg toward the east wall. Their single mountain gun had been sited beyond carbine range and Byzantine grenade illumination.

Yi waited and stared into the dark until his eyes hurt. The damaged, now one-lensed night glasses had their limits.

The Japanese battalion was positioning just out of range in a double line abreast.

About four-to-one odds, he calculated putting his faith in the broken night glasses. *This isn't over yet.* He knew his Koreans held a slight advantage as defenders, especially firing more modern weapons with five-round clips. Then too, they had a wall, albeit a deteriorating wall, protecting them.

Their Gewehr carbines did not have range of the Japanese Murata, but this was low-light fighting and the Japanese had decided to move too quickly. A Gewehr could create terrible carnage. It was capable of firing a bullet through two or three men at a time. That was why concentration of men was rare on modern battlefields.

The Japanese error was they had breached the wall at one point only. *He would exploit that error.*

"Sergeant, have a few men from the east and the north walls form a line about ten paces behind the breach in the wall. The men on the south wall keep up a steady fire. Only have two or three men on the west wall fire, and less frequently. Once the Japanese are a calabash toss from the west wall, then the west wall defenders can open up. We want the breached west wall to be extremely appealing."

Go gave Yi a perfunctory smile.

"Hear that?" Sergeant Go yelled affirming his captain's order to the Korean survivors.

The two double-sections comprising the Japanese battalion began to move toward the west wall and two against the south wall. Each double-section began a "leapfrogging" approach to its assigned wall.

This maneuver was executed in turns; one section of each double-section would make a short rush forward and fall prone protected by cover fire from the other section. Then, in reciprocation, the covering section would then rush forward and drop, covered by the prior rushing section. This rush-and-drop maneuver was repeated a half-dozen times. The Japanese were covering open ground, yet Yi's men had only brief moments to pick out silhouettes and shoot.

Yi looked at the north wall. The ground sloped away from that wall and the sheds were at the base of that wall. It would be the hardest to attack.

"Hold fire," Go ordered. "Swords placed where you can reach them."

He paused, "Breach line, hold, hold your fire, hold. Try to cut down two with one shot if you can when they plunge through."

The leapfrogging had stopped, this time at a kneeling, not prone, position, as the Japanese lines were brought up even.

The kneeling Japanese weren't firing at all, just gasping for breath and anticipating what would come next.

His men on the walls were going through five-round clips with a slow, grim precision. He could see Japanese naval infantrymen falling.

Shortly, they'd released a volley that marked a new phase in their attack.

"Back-light them, now," Go yelled. Mun and another Korean lobbed eight naphtha grenades behind the approaching Japanese battalion."

Avoiding the embers of two firepits in the stock pen, and the grenade stations, Yi moved to the south wall, the unbreached wall.

The Japanese fired a volley to put his men's heads down. Yi heard the word "*yosh*" roared in unison from the Japanese line and guessed it meant a belated "let it begin."

Yi experienced a *frisson*. What right had they to make this show of elan? It was his Koreans who were outnumbered. It was they who held their positions unflinchingly.

Suddenly, the remnants of the two sections flung themselves forward in a bayonet charge.

The two-sections attacking the south wall wavered. They had advanced the longer distance and realized they stood little chance of any of them making it to that wall. Once at the wall they could sling arms or go over with only one hand free. Either way, they were highly exposed. Yi heard a Japanese command, and the south wall Japanese sections swerved to the west wall.

"We're going to let a few through the breach," Go yelled to the six-man line.

"South wall defenders take care of any stragglers from that first bunch with cold steel as they come over your wall. Keep your eyes on the other walls. Only the breach line can shoot targets within the paddock walls. We don't want to shoot each other.

"The rest of you on the perimeter, aim and fire as fast as you can. You can fire at any of them outside the wall or on it."

Go, running down his mental list, came to the key tactical considerations. "*Breach firing line, don't fire into the breach in the wall as fast as you can.*"

He could hear the rattle of the charging Japanese force.

The Japanese would be through the breach any moment. Already it was difficult for them to hear Go's commands.

Go gave one last instruction, "Volley fire on your own, not on my command. Just count to 'three' between volleys. Keep your shots headed down your personal alley. No use wasting bullets on already dead Japanese having a hard time falling down. They can't

shoot through their front line, however we can. Count your shots. After five shots *you must slip in another clip, smooth and steady.*"

The first image through the breach was a lethal reach of bayonets that looked like the spread claws of a tiger.

All four Japanese naval infantry sections hit the breach in the wall at once and jammed. They chanted, "banzai!" with a cadence reminiscent of men hauling on a rope line.

The breach line issued its welcome. Yi was surprised to hear them counting aloud between volleys. They were smacking the breach as coolly as a clerk stamping papers.

The carnage began. Some Japanese had been let through, enough to let the others jam. The dead in the jammed breach did not fall immediately, but were held in place by those in front and behind them. Their non-commissioned officers, oblivious to the trap, were pushing from behind.

The breach line kept firing volley after volley. The shredded bodies offered no protection to the men back twos and threes behind them. That was the terrible lethality of the Gewehr, and the Murata in return, but the Koreans were spread out and the Japanese had impulsively allowed themselves to be channeled. The bodies eventually formed a slope and Yi saw a few Japanese infantrymen bounding up the slope and landing at the feet of the Korean breach line only to be shot when they landed.

The Japanese began boosting themselves up beyond the edges of the breach, though shallow side shots from Yi's perimeter marksmen were dropping multiple targets, too.

Other Japanese attempted to scale the walls of the paddock only to be cut down as they straddled the wall crests or tumbled over.

Yi found himself engaged by two shrieking Japanese and discarded the night glasses. They felt compelled to seek mutual protection and Yi continuously weaving right and left, found it easy to lead each into the other's way. Their long Murata rifles augmented by equally cumbersome bayonets were not match for his close-quarters sword work honed by generations of tradition.

He found the working half of the night glasses, undented and undaunted, crushed beneath the feet of one of his assailants. The Byzantine grenades had stopped burning, even so Yi counted only five Japanese men staggering back to the origin of the second assault.

Sergeant Go's left arm had been pierced by a bayonet, however he'd checked the bleeding. Yi, Go, and eight other Koreans had survived.

Clandestine missions were a form of gambling. Participants either won in a big way or he lost in a big way. Yi believed they had won, yet wasn't sure. Time would tell.

"Well, done, sir. You coaxed the Sons of Nippon through their own private entrance." Go's commands had been crisp and perfectly executed, still he looked thoroughly drained.

"Thank you, Sergeant Go. Kindly have the men even out their ammunition and have their wounds attended to. How's our situation on water?" "Compliment the men on their cool heads and deadly skills," he said over-loudly, hoping the words wouldn't come out with a breathless quality.

Go waved his hand from his mouth toward their men and mimicked an orator delivering a great address. Go was signally the praise must come directly from Yi, for maximum effect.

In the darkness, Yi smiled his pride in his troops and wondered if he looked as worn and shaken as Go and they did. He realized they couldn't see his face. He must say something more. *Smiling in the dark was useless.*

He picked up the badly battered night glasses and waved them high.

"You have fought a battle that will remembered for ten thousand years. A few against the many. You were as strong as the rocks on our coast that withstand crashing waves and typhoons. You were like the Cheju's Dragon Head Rock off Cheju Island, defiant and unbowed. You were not just like a massive stone, you were living breathing dragons. By the gods, you spit five-round clip fire," Yi pronounced with finality and pride.

"*Mansei!*" his men chorused. Ten thousand years.

The paddock was quiet for an hour, though it was still several hours until dawn.

Together Go and he inspected the perimeter and had a scout search the sheds to the north.

Go paced back and forth along the east wall until, Yi thought, he'd worn a groove at its base.

CHAPTER TWO

Tientsin, China, 1893

"Captain, they're back," Corporal Mun whispered.

"How can they be back?" We killed almost all of them.

Yi shook his head. He must have fallen asleep.

He could hear voices in the distance, then the roar of mountain guns and the detonation of their 42mm shells. He looked over the wall and could see the silhouettes of what had to be either the other half of the first battalion, or a whole new battalion of Imperial naval infantrymen.

Could the first battalion had traveled light leaving behind two of their crew served weapons and attacked with reckless overconfidence?

This new group or new battalion – which meant a second cruiser off-shore or that the first cruiser had carried more naval infantrymen than routine — had the benefit of the first's experience.

Yi's men had plugged the original breach with stacked Japanese bodies.

Mun was depressingly buoyant as he passed out the remaining ammunition.

"Any possibility we're the kind of dragons who can sprout wings?"

Seizing this tribute shipment had been the object of significant planning.

He studied a new breach in the south wall.

Sergeant Go yelling new orders to the men, turned to Yi and hissed more than whispered, "You over-clever young fool, you had to have led them here."

Three thumps in succession and another three thumps left a third breach in the south wall.

"No, I couldn't have..." he said turning to Go.

Had he?

He had been trained how to shake off surveillance – double-backs, clothing changes, in one door out another, reading reflections, the whole list. He observed the protocols. To find them, an aggressor would have had to put a regiment ashore to sweep this coast on such short notice. He suspected he may have triggered the timing of a trap laid with the cooperation of corrupt Chinese. Well, Japan had been threatening war with China with greater belligerent moves every day. It had a continuing presence in the treaty ports including Tientsin and could spring a trap quickly.

Duty-bound to protect or deliver the silver, his courier detail would die in place.

He had failed. Only minutes remained before they were overrun.

All the members of the courier detail knew a sufficiently large, determined organization could steal the silver, if that organization were determined to pay the price. Well, today's price in men would be dear for Imperial Japan, but likely worth the cost of driving a wedge between Korea and China.

A final six thumps and a fourth breach ventilated the paddock's walls. The walls looked like an oval of decayed teeth.

Mun looked north. "Those sheds are afire. Now, we're the ones who are back-lit!"

Yi looked at Go. "I didn't lead them here. They must have had an informant, a Chinese official or Japanese spy or both. They could guess the how, but not the when! With sufficient manpower they determined the where."

Grabbing his sword and reloading his carbine breathlessly, he added. "The Japanese simply saturated this section of coast with naval infantry once they had the when."

The meeting with his Chinese counterpart might have set things in motion.

Ko then flicked the butt of his carbine faster than lizard's tongue, across the back of Yi's head.

Yi's last conscious thought that morning was *the world has changed* forever.

Four men in Japanese uniforms stood around him. One held a Nambu pistol to his head.

"Captain Yi, your service to the Kingdom of Korea, if you will, is hereby terminated," one said in Mandarin and laughed. One of the other officers laughed as well. "You've left your post for an assignment with a woman. That woman was the agent of a not unfriendly nation, Imperial Japan, soon to be your country's big brother. You were in a position of responsibility and trust. You failed your country."

The speaker chuckled over the solemnity of his own words. Why did he have to convince Yi of anything? They had him.

Yi agreed. He felt the air leaving his chest and a choking sensation in his throat. They were correct. Perhaps he had betrayed his country, carelessly and unknowingly. Sergeant Go had saved his life and he hated him for it.

He guessed he was in the back room of a shop in commercial building somewhere on the west bank of the Hai.

Japan and China were going to war, now or shortly. Korea's status would change forever. These men must have set the trap.

He had been neither steady, nor reliable. He had diverted his attention for the company of a beautiful woman. *No wonder they castrated male oxen.*

He hadn't been followed; he was certain. His visit to her had triggered a major sweep of Tientsin's wayfaring sites by Japanese intelligence, the *Kempeitai*.

"All, but two, of your courier detail are dead." The second Japanese officer continued, again in Mandarin.

Me and who else? Did it matter?

"I'll bet each of my men cost you four to one, or better." Yi interrupted. All four men shifted postures.

The second officer walloped Yi, tipping him over tied to his chair.

He had squandered the lives of eighteen men and a fortune in silver. All dead and he'd only suffered a bump on the head. No one would believe he'd survived by luck, but rather by betrayal. Sergeant Ko's act was a gift, a curse, and a debt invoice.

His ancestors must be wringing their hands over his disgrace and already turned their backs upon him.

Unless he could erase this catastrophic dishonor, Yi Jung-hee was destined to become a disinherited ghost and walking cenotaph to eighteen righteous ghosts.

"We will circulate the tale of your disgraceful conduct. We'll let it be known that a Korean meeting your description was spreading silver around Tientsin at gambling parties and spending on courtesans. It won't be you, simply someone who looks like you.

"You cannot return to Korea. I hereby sentence you to exile forever, or until you can find friends like us to smuggle you back into Korea." The second Japanese officer seemed to enjoy his part.

Yi strained to control his breathing, and his body's other reactions to fear and disgrace. He must listen more carefully than he'd ever listened to any conversation — in what might be a foreshortened life.

Yi knew he was blinking too fast. He willed himself not to blink at all, and his eyes came up with a compromise.

The second Japanese officer stopped to let the import of his words sink in.

The third Japanese officer spoke in Korean. "Seven times down, get up eight. We always have hope. You just need new friends."

The Korean proverb, repeated in different forms throughout Asia, could mean many things. Normally, it served as a reminder of the Korean virtue of persistence. Yi realized this whole conversation was scripted, a prepared presentation. They had his consignment of silver taels, and they had his reputation, still they wanted something more than their own amusement.

"Seven times down, up eight. In a way, you can still recover from all this. We are offering you a job in the Japanese intelligence service. We suggest, as a gambling man, that you bet on Japan. Time has passed by Korea and China. Their days as independent countries will soon be over. It won't be long before they cease to exist at all," the Korean-speaking officer counseled.

A chance to start over meant starting over under their control. Yi was surprised at how quickly everything became clear to him.

He was of no use to anyone he cared about. He had been knocked down. Whether he had been knocked down "seven times" or just this once didn't matter. Anything to buy time, or in a few minutes his throat would be cut. *Nunji*. His salvation lay in *nunji*, eye measure.

To them this was just a drill in anticipation of turning future Korean officers, a no-cost trial conversion of little consequence.

"No." They'd expect him to refuse initially. Nunji was the art of making high-stakes decisions on intuition. Korea survived among its aggressive neighbors of China, Russia, and Japan on little more. Who better to sway Koreans than one of their kind?

The unspeaking fourth Japanese officer drew and cocked his pistol.

"One more time — you have nowhere to go. You can die now or work for the Japanese intelligence service."

Trussed up, but physically more powerful than any one of them, Yi raged inwardly.

"No."

The Korean-speaking officer nodded to the one with the pistol.

"On what terms?" Yi reversed abruptly in faltering Korean.

Seven times down, up eight.

"Our terms are what we choose them to be, and you'll be grateful if we say you're grateful. No more Korean royal livery for you, no more officer status, no more respected family privileges, of that, we can assure you."

Liqin gave him seaman's papers and a letter of recommendation to a Japanese ship in the harbor. She touched his upper arm wordlessly. This was a contrived affront to break his spirit further, another insult, he realized.

The Japanese officers had dismissed him so quickly, he realized, because they didn't really care what he decided. This was still another insult. He would be hunted by agents of the Chinese empress and his countrymen for the lost tribute. Women like Liqin were all they needed to keep men like him in line wherever he was sent.

That night as he stood on a pier holding his papers and looking at the *Nagasaki Maru*, a passing sailor gave him a studied look.

They intend to destroy my country, my heritage, and want me to help them.

Yi's head was swimming. His brain was generating and rejecting frantic ideas steeped in retribution and redemption. It was as if he were trying to ignite sand with a cascade of sparks scraped from flint on steel.

"I will find a way exact a revenge beyond what has been visited upon my country, and me." He realized.

Bold words, whispered cravenly.

"Brother, you're not considering a Japanese ship?" a sailor said in Korean. "They'll treat a Korean like pig dung. My ship makes the run to the Land of the Golden Mountain. The captain has the face of a pale monkey, even so he's fair and pays regularly. Another Korean is on the ship, too, which will make three of us. The Western barbarians can't tell us from the Chinese. To them, we're all the same."

Yi had failed his country, and now he would fail Japan's docility test. He was not going turn the key on his own cell. Koreans were not tractable.

He looked at Yi closely. "What were you whispering just now? There was something in your face. If you sign on the American ship don't show that face ever. It will scare them."

"Just muttering." Yi said staring at the placid harbor.

He hadn't met the half-caste courtesan by accident. Coming together with her wasn't a matter of *umyong*, "luck," "fortune," or "fate."

Yi had been looking at the world through a gambler's eyes. All luck, good or bad, was simply the roll of the dice. For now, he must treat it all as gambler's bad luck.

He had believed *umyong* was smiling on him at the time. Wasn't that what gambling was? A way of testing the favor of the gods?

Yi laughed at himself, he'd been too wrapped up in cleverness. He'd studied everything through the cold lenses of his night glasses, except himself. He had been used and betrayed despite his training and lineage. His fondness for women and gambling had made it easy for them.

He knew precious metals. Knowledge of their properties and security had been his family's profession. Now they had become his failing and disgrace. Those skills could still be his deliverance. He'd learned one profession. He'd have to learn one, maybe many others. He'd need to learn many new things to achieve retribution of the kind he contemplated.

That disgrace was a debt to Korea that he must satisfy.

The Korean sailor's reaction made Yi realize he was a dangerous man.

He was a dangerous man and he would make himself a patient man.

Yi joined his new friend in climbing aboard the American ship.