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Prologue

LEAVING HOME

GUANGDONG PROVINCE, CHINA. June, 1882.

Mui stood away from the family, chin up, eyes forward. She struggled against the hard knot of tears in her throat. Tears of sorrow at the leaving of her brother, tears of envy that he could go and she must stay. *It's unfair. Yes, I am younger but what does that matter? I am strong. I carry heavy buckets of water to feed the rice plants all day. When the men need to be called for dinner, it is me, not Li who races ahead to tell them. He stops to rest after the first field. Not Mui. I could run forever.*

But the family chose Li. It is his honour to board the big, ugly schooner moored at the dock. And I am left behind, unworthy of the task set for Li. Mui bowed her head and fisted her hands. Crying will do no good. Grandmother will call me a baby. I am not a baby. I am not.

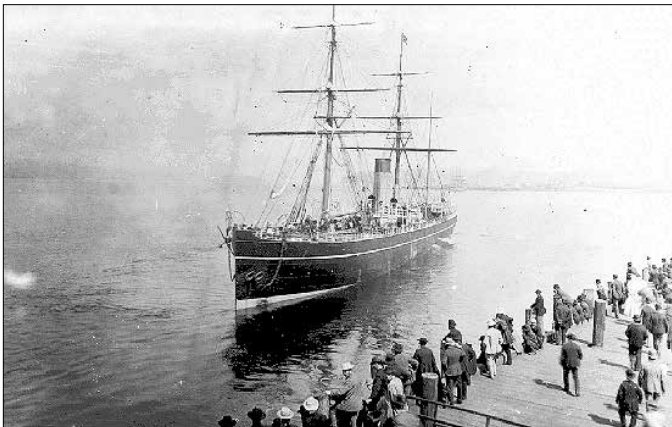
A hesitant hand landed on her stiff shoulder. “Mui, my sister. It is time for me to go. Will you say good-bye and wish me luck?” The soft voice of her brother brought her out of her misery. She blinked back her tears and turned to him. In the last year Li had grown tall so that she looked way up to meet his gaze. In his eyes

Lambs of Hell's Gate

she saw understanding. He knew what she was feeling. "If I could take you with me I would, Mui. But the fare is too much and you are needed here." The mutinous tilt of her head told him what his sister thought of that idea. "Who will help father with the rice if we both go? Who will tease Grandmother and keep her young? They need you, Mui."

After a moment of thought, she nodded. Her posture relaxed and she leaned forward to hug her big brother farewell. "Good luck, brother. Find a good job and make us rich!" With a last squeeze she released him and stepped back, a small teasing smile on her lips.

"Hurry up, Li!" screeched Grandmother. "The others are on the boat! If you are left behind, all of the money for the passage will go to waste!" Frantic at the possibility, she rushed to her grandson, grabbed his coat and began pushing him towards the gang plank. She was tiny and her efforts to steer him broke the tension in the family. Mother and Father smiled sadly at the sight while Mui giggled behind her hand. She didn't let Grandmother see though, for she did not want to



S.S. Abyssinia, carrying immigrants, approaching the dock after crossing the Pacific Ocean, circa 1890.

appear disrespectful. She hid her laughter and watched as the old woman shooed Li up the ramp. Grandmother stood at the bottom waving her hands and screeching directions. Li turned once he was at the top—a slightly built fifteen-year-old boy off on an adventure that would take him to new lands, new people and new ways. He was bound for a land of promise, where he could earn his fortune and save his beloved family from poverty. He bowed to his grandmother and his parents. To Mui he gave a cocky grin and a careless wave before he disappeared among the crowds of passengers leaving for Golden Mountain.

* * * * *

I wish I could be with Li, Mui thought as she trudged along the dusty path behind her father. She was tired and thirsty and the heavy basket she carried on her back weighed her down, sapping her strength. “Father, how much further do we walk today?”

Father glanced anxiously back down the path before he answered her. “Not far, my child. I know you are tired. We will stop soon.”

Mui reached out to touch him. “Do not worry, Father. I am young and strong. I will be fine.” She knew Father was unhappy at having to ask her to accompany him on the trip to the market. He had hoped to spare her the degrading job of pack horse. But as he told her, he had no choice.

“The animals are either dead or too weak to make the trip. Li has been gone for four months now. We have heard little from him and times are difficult. I must carry the grain to the city if we are to have enough money to get through the winter. And I must carry a weapon.” Anger darkened his eyes as he spoke. “The bandits are everywhere now. No one is safe. If they found me alone and unarmed I would surely die.”

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"I understand, Father, and I am honoured to accompany you," Mui replied. She did feel honoured. She was doing the job of an oldest son. This was very important. The thought straightened her back and lightened her step. Together they plodded along into the growing darkness of the evening.

They camped the first night without a fire. Both were tired and a quick supper of cold rice and water was all they had to eat. Lighting a fire would have eased the chill from their bones. It was fear of the outlaws terrorizing the villagers in their quest for food in the drought-ridden countryside that made them hesitate. Instead, they huddled together for warmth and waited for the dark to end, falling in and out of sleep as fatigue and fear pulled at them.

Mui asked questions to take her mind off the night. "Li has been in Gum San for a long time, hasn't he? When will we hear from him? Does he have heavy pockets from all the jingling coins?"

Father replied, "Yes, Mui. Soon, Mui. I am sure you are right, Mui," but said nothing else.

The next day passed as the first. Mui and her father walked for hours; he in the lead, she following. The strap attached to the heavy basket cut into her forehead as she leaned into the path. Sweat ran down her face and her back. The ground they covered now was not so flat. Large stones and rocks blocked their way, making walking harder. She slipped as the trail wound over a hill. Her hands scraped against the sharp stones and she cried out.

"Mui, are you all right? Your hands. Let me see them." Father dropped his pack and hurried back to her. He looked at his daughter's bloody palms. Fatigue etched her face; dirty lines of sweat ran from her forehead to her neck. "Let us go a little farther. It looks like we can find shelter enough to build a fire.