

Excerpt from **A JOURNEY WRITTEN IN BLOOD** by Theresa M. Moore ©2018, all rights reserved.

From the 3rd chapter:

Alexander was barely noticed when he stepped off the gangplank onto the dock at Pusan, as it was dark when the ship arrived. He kept to the shadows as he walked along the wharf and the road running through the center of town, aimlessly wandering until he found an inn catering to European travelers tucked among the ramshackle buildings. He entered the double doors and a tavern tucked to one side off the lobby. He took a table in a dark corner and ordered ale, and for the next hour learned the situation in the country by listening to the Spanish and Dutch traders as they conversed over their dinners and tankards of beer.

The news was not good. Manchuria was embroiled in a civil war, its progress and its eventual outcome shaped by the latest Chinese emperor, named Dorghun, who had the same mind as the Shogun Tokugawa when it came to foreigners. He valued their coin and their goods but not their religion or their cultural arrogance, and he was about putting down any resistance to his rule by the natives, who had their own distinct cultural values and customs. His arrogance extended to making imperial edicts about abandoning Manchurian culture and adopting Mandarin as the official language, which the Manchurians resolutely ignored. As a result, Dorghun marched a battalion of Chin soldiers into the country to enforce them.

The Dutch East Asia Company was shipping out, and so were all the rest of the Europeans except for the English, who thought that they could maintain the upper hand. There appeared to be no profit in trying to conduct trade under such risky conditions, but the English were known for their bulldog determination to exploit whatever opportunity came to them wherever they found it. Their optimism was backed by several regiments of disposable troops and a good sized navy, as well as generous bribes to make the local officials look the other way.

Then Alexander's attention riveted on a group of gentlemen taking seats at the table nearby, and their manner was both hushed and furtive. Their speech was difficult to follow for any ordinary man, but he could hear them clearly as if they were right in front of him. They appeared to be either merchants or soldiers of fortune; he could not readily distinguish which. They were planning to leave the country as quickly as possible. Their goal was to reach the lands to the west, and they spoke of Mongolia and Russia but argued briefly about the risks involved with traveling through lands where raiders were known to beset travelers for their goods and possessions. There was also concern shared among them about the presence of soldiers everywhere they went.

Their leader, who was a gentleman clad in dark leathers and a deep blue cape, said that there was little choice to be had, as shipping in the Indian Ocean was dangerous due to the presence of pirates patrolling its waters. He stressed that no matter what they did the way was dangerous and bore great personal risk. Then he took a poll, and in the end the group voted quietly to go by land.

Alexander decided to introduce himself and try to join their group. But before he could move to approach them they got up from the table en masse and left the tavern. He abandoned the drink quickly, tossed a silver coin onto his table and went after them, hoping that he would not lose them among the milling crowd outside; but by the time he stepped out onto the busy street they had already parted and gone their separate ways. He marveled at their stealth and speed, and told himself to gain more practice at tracking prey.

He looked around, then sniffed the air and found the blood scent of their leader mingled with the pungent scent of his pipe smoke drifting on the cold air. He turned his head and spotted the dark hat sporting a pheasant feather and the blue cape moving down the road through the crowd. He adjusted his own cape and began to follow him, hoping to catch up with the man before he disappeared completely.

Alexander was able to keep up easily and caught up in a few minutes, then waited until the stranger turned right at the corner and went down a narrow course between buildings before he decided to close the gap.

Something in his blood told him it was a trap just before the stranger turned abruptly and drew his sword halfway out of its scabbard. "You. You will stop where you are and tell me why you were following me," the man growled, with anger in his voice.

"I mean no harm to you, good sir," Alexander replied as he moved his gloved hands slowly away from his body and sword. "Grant me but a brief moment to speak with you."

The stranger looked him up and down, and his face blanched with both fear and surprise as he edged away slowly. "What are you? Are you a demon? Your skin is paler than any I have ever seen. And your eyes!"

Alexander could have easily taken over the man's mind, but it would be difficult to rekindle any trust later. He raised a hand in supplication and pleaded, "I am no demon, I assure you. Would a demon ask of you a conference from which you would emerge unharmed?"

The man hesitated, considering, then resheathed his sword but kept his gloved hand on the hilt. "What would you say to me?"

"I overheard you and the other men talking in the tavern. You are organizing a caravan to go into the west," Alexander replied. "I am but a humble traveler seeking the very same company, as I am bound for Tibet. I can pay my way, and have such coin as would cover any expense." He stretched his gloved hand forward and showed a small group of gold coins laid out on his open palm.

The stranger stared at the gold, then slowly relaxed a little more. "May I ask why you are going into Tibet?"

My father is a guest of the lamasery at Shangkri-la. Perhaps you may have heard of it," Alexander said. "I have had an urgent letter from him, and I would perforce visit him there and give him comfort."

"That area is sought after by the emperor, and there are raiders and many obstacles we must avoid. The mountains are high and the passes treacherous. But we may pass through it on our way." "That is why I sought to approach you," Alexander said.

"Can you handle an arquebus as well as you handle a sword?" the stranger asked, pointing toward the cutlass Alexander wore.

"Aye. I have many skills which you may find of use," he replied. "I can bind wounds and prepare poultices and medicaments against infections and disease. I can handle a bow and crossbow beside, and I can track any animal easily to obtain meat for the cooking fire."

"Useful skills indeed," the stranger mused, his hand stroking at his short goatee. "But, you may frighten my companions. What gives your skin such a ghostly appearance? Were you imprisoned?"

Alexander improvised quickly. "Nay. I was ill, and have had to amend my life to suit the effects. My skin is sensitive to the light of the sun. Worry not. My condition is not one that would afflict another man."

"Aye, I know well the way of such things," the stranger agreed readily. "Very well. I know not your history, but you comport yourself like a gentleman. Might I know your name, so that when we meet the others I can introduce you properly?"

He stripped off his right glove and stretched a long fingered hand forward. "Alexander Corvina, at your service, sir."

The stranger stared down at the strange sheen on the fingernails, which were tapered slightly, then moved closer and took it gingerly. "Sir John Henry Duggens, trading representative for his majesty King Charles."

"You are a long way from England, sir. I have not been there since..." he cut himself off, unwilling to reveal his true age. His eagerness at meeting an upper class Englishman so long after the death of Queen Elizabeth would have given away his longevity, and he could not afford that. "Well, as the days go, a long time indeed. Not since I was a boy."

But you are not English, as your foreign manner of speech does attest," Duggens said.

"Aye. My family is from Transylvania. I had the privilege to know a man of your country who taught me your language and customs, and tutored me in letters and sums. Later I studied in Oxford."

"An educated man. Even better," the man in blue said. "I feel now that we would profit a great deal from your participation. I will vouch for you to the others and prepare them. But, for a time, will you adopt some disguise that does not reveal your ghostly appearance?"

Inwardly Alexander rolled his eyes, but replied, "I will dress like a Berber, if you will allow me."

"Good. Meet me at dawn at the inn of the Golden Dragon, and we will depart from there. Are we agreed?"

"The inn of the Golden Dragon," Alexander echoed him, nodding.

"Then I give you a good night, sir," Duggens said.

As the Englishman strode away into the darkness, Alexander caught the faint scent of urine on the cold air, the scent of fear. Many men he had encountered before reacted that way, but it was familiar enough by now that he dismissed it with a small shrug and walked back to the inn.