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They travelled on for another six days. On the morning of the seventh day, they spotted dark clouds in the distance.

"Is that a storm brewing?" Chen asked.

The girl studied the horizon. "They're not rain clouds," she said. "It's dust from the ground."

"How could there be so much?"

"I don't know. Let's go and look!" They spurred their horses forward, and as the swirling dust cloud rose before them, they began to hear the sound of metal clashing with metal drifting over towards them. Chen reined in his horse.

"It's an army," he said. "We must get out of the way quickly." They turned and rode off east, but after a while, another dust cloud arose in front of them and a column of mounted troops appeared. Amidst the dust, Chen saw a huge flag inscribed with the name of General Zhao. Having already clashed once with Zhao's armoured troops at the Yellow River crossing, he knew them to be formidable fighters, and he motioned to the girl with his hand and galloped off southwards. Luckily, both their horses were swift, and after a moment's hard riding, the armoured column had dropped far behind.

The girl looked anxious. "I hope our army will be able to hold their own," she said. Chen was just about to say something comforting when horns sounded in front, and rank upon rank of soldiers appeared over a rise. To the left, there was a thundrous ground-shaking roar and a vast carpet of cavalry moved across the hills towards them. With one sweep of his left arm, Chen swung the girl onto his horse and took out his shield to protect her.

"Don't be afraid," he said. The girl, still hugging the little deer, looked round at him and nodded. "If you say there's no need to be afraid, then I won't be," she said. As she spoke, her soft, orchid-like fragrance, enveloped him, and feelings of tenderness rose within him despite the danger of their situation.

With enemy troops advancing from the east, north and south, Chen urged the white horse westwards as her chestnut horse followed along behind. After a while, they spotted Manchu troops ahead of them once more. Very worried, Chen spurred the horse up onto high ground to get a better idea of the Manchu positions and to look for a gap through which they could escape. But he could see at a glance that they were completely surrounded

by the Manchu army. To the west, beyond the thousands of Manchu foot soldiers in close ranks protected on both flanks by cavalry, was the Muslim army, also an imposing force with a forest of spears and scimitars rising above the striped gowns of the warriors. The two sides had halted, obviously in preparation for battle, and Manchu officers rode back and forth making final preparations. The huge army gradually became deathly quiet. Chen and the girl had by this time been noticed, and several soldiers approached to question them.

"The gods have conspired to deliver us into the hands of the Manchus," Chen thought. But the idea of dying with the girl beside him gave him a strange pleasure. He grasped the Pearl Strings in his right hand, the reins in his left, and shouted: "Let's go!"

The horse galloped off towards the end of the Manchu lines, and in the blink of an eye, had passed three companies of troops. Rank upon rank of armoured soldiers, bows at the ready, passed before them, and Chen knew that with one word from the Manchu commanders, he and the girl in his arms would immediately become the repositories of a thousand spears and ten thousand arrows. He pulled the reins in tightly and slowly cantered along, not even glancing at the soldiers.

The morning sun had just risen, and as they rode towards it, the troops stared in shock at the girl's glorious beauty, her hair, face, arms and gown splashed with pale sunlight, and each one, whether general or trooper, found his heart thumping furiously. They watched as the two gradually rode off into the distance.

Even General Zhao, who was in personal command, was overcome by a feeling of calm and peace, and he knew he was in no mood for killing. Looking round, he found all his officers and underlings likewise had expressions of serenity on their faces. They had already replaced their swords in their scabbards, and were obviously awaiting the general's order to retire.

"Return to camp," Zhao said in a far-away voice. The order was relayed back, and the tens of thousands of soldiers turned and went back to their camp site more than ten miles away beside the Black Water River.

Chen was covered in a cold sweat and his hands shook with fear, but the girl looked un-worried, apparently unaware of the great danger they had passed through. She smiled at him and leapt over onto the back of the chestnut horse.

"That is our army in front," she said. Chen put away his shield and galloped towards the Muslim lines. A small detail of cavalymen rode out to

meet them, shouting and cheering as they came, then jumped off their horses and bowed before the girl. The officer in charge walked over to Chen and bowed before him too.

"Brother, you have endured great hardship. May Allah the true God protect you," he said.

Chen bowed in return and thanked him. The girl rode straight into the Muslim ranks without waiting for Chen. She obviously commanded a degree of respect, for wherever the chestnut horse went, the soldiers made way for it with cheers.

A brigade commander invited Chen to the barracks to eat and rest, and Chen told him he wanted to see the tribe's leader, Master Muzhuolun.

"The Master has gone to observe the enemy's strength," the commander replied. "When he returns, I will immediately inform him." Following the long journey and the tense encounter with the Manchu army, Chen felt worn out, and after he had been shown to a small tent, he immediately slept.

Some time after noon, the commander returned to say that Muzhuolun was now not expected to return until evening. Chen asked him who the white-gowned girl was.

The commander smiled. "How could anyone be more beautiful than she?" he said. "We are having a love-match meeting tonight. Why don't you come along, brother? You will be able to meet our leader there."

Chen did not press him further. Towards evening, he saw the young warriors donning their finery, each face alive with excitement. The desert evening sky slowly deepened in colour and a thin crescent moon rose above the horizon. Chen heard the sound of music strike up and soon afterwards, the commander came into the tent.

"The new moon has risen," he said, taking Chen's hand. "Let us go, brother!" The two walked towards a huge bonfire where the young Muslim warriors were gathering. All around, people were roasting beef and mutton, and preparing various delicacies while others played musical instruments. A horn blew, and a group of people emerged from a large tent near the bonfire, among whom Chen recognised Muzhuolun and his son, Huo Ayi. Chen decided he would wait until the official ceremony was over before revealing himself, and turned up the collar of his gown to hide his face.

Muzhuolun motioned to the crowd, and they all knelt down and prayed to Allah. When the prayer was ended, he spoke.

"Those brothers who have already taken legal wives, I am afraid I must ask you to go and stand guard," he said. "Let your younger brothers have a pleasant evening."

Three columns of warriors formed up. Huo Ayi, flourishing his sabre, led them off into the darkness.

Having lived many years in the Muslim regions, Chen knew that although marriages were arranged by parents according to various considerations of wealth and property, the procedure was still much more liberal than that of the Chinese. The love-match party was a tradition among the Muslims that had been passed down for many generations at which young, unmarried boys and girls could seal their romances and become engaged. The initiative was taken by the girl, who would place a belt round the neck of her chosen boy and lead him to dance.

After a while, the music became softer in tone. The tent door flaps parted and out came a large group of young Muslim girls who sang and danced their way towards the bonfire. They all wore colourful clothes and small caps laced with gold and silver threads which sparkled brightly in the firelight. Chen noticed two beautiful girls walking over to Muzhuolun, one in yellow, the other in white, and with a start, he recognised them as Huo Qingtong and the girl who had brought him to the Muslim camp. Under the moonlight, they both looked extremely graceful and attractive. The two girls sat down, one on either side of Muzhuolun.

A thought suddenly struck Chen. "The girl in white must be Huo Qingtong's younger sister. No wonder I kept thinking her face was familiar: it's the same face as that on the jade vases, although the drawing does not even come close to reproducing her real beauty."

His heart began to thump wildly. From the day he had first met Huo Qingtong, his love for her had begun to grow, but the familiar closeness between her and Lu Feiqing's pupil had convinced him that she already had a suitor. Also, having spent the past few days with such a matchless beauty, his romantic thoughts had turned completely towards the white-gowned girl.

The music stopped, and Muzhuolun's voice rang out clearly: "The prophet Mohammed teaches us in the Koran in the 190th verse of the second chapter: 'Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you', and in the 39th verse of the 22nd chapter: 'To those against whom war is made, permission is given to fight because they are wronged, and verily, Allah is most powerful for their aid.' We are being oppressed and Allah will certainly assist and protect us." A thunderous cheer went up from the crowd. "Brothers and sisters!" he shouted. "Enjoy yourselves fully!"

Singing and laughter rose all about, accompanied by the music of Horse Head fiddles. Cooks distributed roast meat, honeymelons, dried grapes and horse milk wine among the throng. Everyone held in their hands a small bowl made out of salt rock in which they rubbed the roast meat. After a while, the new moon rose up into the sky and the merry-making became even more intense. Some of the young girls jumped up and danced over to the boy of their choice, took the embroidered belt from their waists and placed it round the boy's neck, then led him off to dance near the bonfire.

Chen had grown up in a world of strict conventions and had never before seen an occasion of such open-minded and unrestrained merriment. With the singing ringing in his ears and emotions swirling through his heart, he found his face beginning to flush after only a few cups of horse's milk wine.

The music stopped momentarily, then started again, even faster than before. Everyone looked curiously towards Muzhuolun, and following the direction of their gaze, Chen saw the white-robed girl had stood up and was floating gracefully towards them. The crowd was greatly excited and a hubbub of discussion arose. Chen heard the cavalry commander beside him say: "The Fragrant Princess has chosen a lover. But who could possibly be worthy of her?"

That his beloved younger daughter had found a boy she loved was a great surprise and a great joy to Muzhuolun. He watched her intently with tears glistening in his eyes.

Princess Fragrance glided round and round, passing along the edge of the circle that had formed. In her hands, she held a brilliantly-embroidered belt and she softly sang:

"Please come out,
You who picked the snow lily for me.
I am searching for you,
You who saved my little deer."

The words hit Chen's ears like a clap of thunder. A white hand touched his shoulder and the embroidered belt fell around his neck. The Princess tugged gently and Chen, scared out of his wits, followed her. The crowd cheered, and all around him people started singing.

In the hazy moonlight, Muzhuolun and Huo Qingtong failed to recognise Chen, and walked forward to congratulate him along with the others thinking he was an ordinary Muslim. Suddenly, they heard three blasts from a distant horn, the signal for danger, and the crowd immediately dispersed.

Muzhuolun and Huo Qingtong returned to their seats. The Princess took Chen's hand and led him off to sit at the back of the crowd. Chen felt her soft body leaning towards him, and a light fragrance entered his nostrils, intoxicating his senses. He truly could not tell if he was in a dream or in heaven.