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All eyes turned in the direction from which the horn blast had come. Two Muslim guards rode up and reported to Muzhuolun: "The Manchu General Zhao Wei has sent an envoy who requests an audience."

"All right," replied Muzhuolun. "Bring him here." The two riders galloped off, and returned with five other riders who dismounted about a hundred feet from the crowd.

The Manchu envoy was robust man and walked towards them with powerful strides. But his four attendants made the Muslims jump in surprise. All four were giants, a good two heads higher than ordinary men, and their bodies were broad and thick.

The envoy strode up to Muzhuolun and nodded at him. "Are you the head of the tribe?" he asked arrogantly. The Muslims were outraged, and several of the younger warriors drew their sabres. The envoy ignored him.

"I am under orders from General Zhao Wei to give you an ultimatum," he announced loudly in the Muslim tongue. "If you know what's good for you, you will surrender immediately, in which case your lives will be spared. Otherwise, our two armies will meet at daybreak the day after tomorrow and you will be completely annihilated. It will be too late then for regrets."

The crowd of Muslims sprang to their feet in rage, but Muzhuolun, with a wave of his hand, ordered them to be seated and turned to the envoy. "You come without reason or justification and kill our people, steal our property. The True God on High will punish you for your dishonourable behaviour. If you want to fight, we will fight. Even if our army is reduced to only one man, that man will still never surrender."

The Muslims raised their sabres and repeated his words in unison: "If you want to fight, we shall fight!" they roared. "Even if our army is reduced to only one man, he will never surrender!" The mood was sombre but determined. The Muslims knew the Manchu force was powerful and that in a battle to the finish, the chances were they would lose. But they were loyal believers in Islam, they loved freedom and would be no man's slave.

The envoy looked about him and sneered. "All right," he said. "The day after tomorrow, each and every one of you will die." He spat savagely onto the ground in a calculated insult, and three young Muslims leapt towards him. "Today, you are an envoy, so you will be allowed to leave safely," one

of them shouted. "But when we meet on the battlefield, we will not be so polite."

The envoy's mouth twisted in anger, and his four giant attendants roughly pushed aside the three Muslim boys and took up positions around him.

"Ha!" The envoy cried in contempt. "You useless scum! We'll give you a taste of our Manchu skills!" He clapped his hands and one of the four giants glanced round and strode over to a poplar tree nearby to which several camels were tethered. He grasped its trunk in his arms and after a few rigorous shakes, pulled the tree bodily from the ground. Then he snapped the reins of one of the camels and gave it a kick on its rump, sending it racing away in great pain. When the camel was more than a hundred feet away, another of the giants sprinted after it and in a moment caught up with the animal. He swung the huge camel onto his shoulders, ran back towards the bonfire and set it back on its feet, then stood proudly beside it. "Huh!" exclaimed the third giant in contempt, and drove a fist at the camel's head. The animal swayed unsteadily and crashed to the ground. The fourth giant grabbed hold of its two hind legs and swung it round and round above his head, then with a shout let it go. The camel fell to earth sixty or seventy feet away.

The giants, known as the Four Tigers, were quadruplets, and their mother had died giving birth to them. Their father was a poor hunter in the forests of Manchuria, and with his wife dead, he had no milk to feed the four babies, but soon after, he heard a mournful cry outside in the forest and found a female tiger caught in a trap. He and a companion were tying the animal up when he happened to notice three tiger pups lying close by. In a flash of inspiration, he killed the pups and took the tiger back to his hut where he reared her, feeding her meat every day, and milking her to feed his four sons. From the start, they were uncommonly big and strong, and became more so as they grew. The only problem was that they were a little stupid and impetuous.

The Muslims were startled by this amazing show of strength, but unwilling to appear weak before the enemy, they roared out their defiance.

"What are you doing, killing a good camel? Are you inhuman?" someone shouted. The envoy curled his lips into another sneer. The crowd became even more incensed, and it looked as though he would be mobbed.

"So you're going to bully an envoy, are you?" he shouted.

Muzhuolun restrained the crowd with difficulty. "You are an envoy, but you ordered your men to kill one of our camels, which is a great insult," he

said. "If you were not guests here, I would not let you get away with it. Leave immediately."

"Do you think we Manchus are afraid of you scum?" the envoy shouted. "If you have a reply, give it to me to pass on. I'm sure none of you would dare to go and hand it to General Zhao Wei personally." Another roar went up from the Muslims.

Huo Qingtong jumped to her feet. "You say none of us would dare to go to see General Zhao Wei. Huh! Every single person here would dare, men and girls alike." The envoy looked stunned for a second, then threw back his head and roared with laughter. "If any of these girls didn't die of fright on seeing General Zhao Wei, I would be amazed."

"Don't underestimate us," replied Huo Qingtong angrily. "We will send someone back with you immediately. Pick someone yourself. Whoever you choose will go. You will see what spirit we followers of Mohammed have," The Muslims roared their approval and everyone began shouting "Choose me! Choose me!"

"All right," said the envoy coldly. He wanted to find the weakest, most useless girl who would immediately burst into tears so that the Muslims would lose face completely. His eyes roved over the crowd, searching back and forth, and suddenly lit up. He walked over to Princess Fragrance and pointed at her. "Let her go!" he said.

The Princess glanced at him and slowly stood up. "For my tribe, for my brothers and sisters, I would go anywhere without fear. Allah the true God will surely protect me," she said.

Her apparent weakness had given way to calm dignity. Faced with her stunning beauty, the envoy involuntarily lowered his eyes, and he felt a tinge of regret at his choice. Muzhuolun, Huo Qingtong and the other Muslims, although proud that she had not displayed weakness, were nonetheless anxious. Huo Qingtong was particularly worried. Her sister knew no kung fu, and could not be allowed to enter the Tiger's Lair unprotected. "She is my sister," she said. "I will go in her place."

The envoy laughed. "I always knew the word of a girl could not be relied upon. If you don't have the nerve, why bother sending anyone? War or surrender, I can take the message for you."

"If we meet on the battlefield and if you don't run away, I'll let you see whether us girls are useless or not," said Huo Qingtong, livid with anger.

"I would naturally be merciful with a beauty such as you," he replied, smiling. The Muslims gnashed their teeth at his insolence.

"Sister, I will go," the Princess said to Huo Qingtong. "Don't be afraid." She pulled Chen up by the hand. "He will go with me."

In the light of the flames from the bonfire, Huo Qingtong suddenly recognised Chen and stared at him in shock. Chen surreptitiously motioned with his hand indicating that she should not reveal his identity yet, then turned to the envoy.

"We mean what we say," he said. "I will go alone with her to see General Zhao Wei. Unlike you, we do not require four giants to protect us. What use are these giants anyway?"

"A camel can carry a load of thousand catties, but a man can only carry one tenth as much," added the Princess. "Should the man ride the camel or the camel the man?" A great laugh went up from the crowd at this taunt.

"What are they laughing at?" one of the four giants asked the envoy.

"They say that you are useless even though you are large and strong."

Incensed, the giant beat his chest with his hands. "Who dares to match himself against me?" he roared.

"What use are you?" the envoy said to Chen. "You've just a little stripling. Even if you were ten times stouter, you would still not be as strong as he."

Chen decided this envoy needed to be cut down to size to save the face of the Muslims. He took three steps forward.

"I may be the most useless member of our tribe but I am still better than you Manchus," he said. "Tell those four hulks to come over here."

By this time, Muzhuolun had also recognized Chen. "Daughter, look who it is!" he cried to Huo Qingtong in surprise and joy. The girl did not answer. Muzhuolun looked over and saw her eyes brimming with tears, and realised both his daughters were in love with the same man. He wondered how Chen had met his younger daughter.

Next to the giants, Chen looked like a small child. He had come forward, the Muslims decided, for the honour of the Princess and the tribe, but was obviously no match for the giants. Chen raised his hands to the crowd.

"Brothers," he said. "These Manchurians are useless. Let me deal with them by myself."

The envoy translated his words to the four giants, who angrily sprang forward to grab Chen. Chen stood solid, smiling faintly, and the envoy hurriedly restrained the four.

"Since this gentleman wants a contest, there will be no blame if anyone gets hurt," the envoy said to Muzhuolun. "It must be one against one, no-one else is allowed to interfere."

Muzhuolun grunted once.

"What fun is there in one to one?" said Chen. "Tell the four of them to come at once."

"How many will there be on your side?" the envoy asked.

"How many? Why, just myself of course." A murmur ran through the crowd: he had gone too far this time.

The envoy laughed coldly. "Are you Muslims really so formidable? First Tiger," he said to the largest of the four giants. "You first." First Tiger strode forward. "You will take it in turns to punch each other. Neither is allowed to block or retreat. The first one to fall loses."

"One is not enough," Chen said. "If we are going to fight, let them all fight together."

The envoy began to suspect Chen had some plan worked out. "Don't worry," he said. "If you beat this one, the others will come after you of their own accord."

Chen smiled. "All right. It's all the same to me." The giant ripped off his upper clothing, exposing ranks of huge, rippling muscles. Huo Qingtong glanced furtively at her sister and saw her gazing intently at Chen, her eyes full of adoration and love. Huo Qingtong sighed and looked over at Chen, and as their eyes met, he smiled warmly. She blushed and looked away.

"We will draw lots to decide who strikes first," said the envoy.

"You are the guests. You may go first," replied Chen. He took two steps towards the giant and thrust out his chest, "Hit me!" he said.

"Please come over here," the envoy said to Huo Qingtong. "We two will act as judges. Whoever moves his feet, uses his arms to deflect a blow, bends or dodges away will be considered the loser."

Huo Qingtong walked over and stood with the envoy as Chen and the giant faced each other, less than an arm's length apart. The huge crowd stood silently about them, watching intently.

"The Manchurian gentleman strikes the first blow," the envoy called out. "The Muslim gentleman will strike the second blow. If both are still all right, then the Manchurian gentleman will strike again followed by the Muslim gentleman. Right! The Manchurian shall strike!"

The silence was broken by the sound of First Tiger breathing deeply. Joints all over his body cracked loudly as he concentrated his strength. Suddenly, the right side of his chest bulged outwards and his right arm swelled to almost twice its normal size. Chen leaned slightly forward. "Punch me," he said.

Several Muslim men moved behind Chen to catch him. Muzhuolun and Huo Qingtong silently prayed to Allah, but Princess Fragrance was unworried. If Chen said he was unafraid, there was certainly nothing to be afraid of.

The giant crouched slightly, then with a mighty roar slammed his right fist at Chen's chest. But at its maximum extension, the fist only lightly grazed the lapel of Chen's gown. Dumbfounded, the giant stared at Chen, neglecting even to withdraw his fist.

"Is that it?" Chen asked. The giant blushed deep red and hastily retracted his arm.

To the crowd, it looked as if the blow had struck home, and they were puzzled that Chen seemed unaffected. Muzhuolun and Huo Qingtong, however, knew that he had made use of Inner Strength Kung Fu to draw in his chest. Huo Qingtong smiled brilliantly and breathed a sigh of relief. The envoy, also a kung fu expert, scowled in annoyance.

Chen smiled. "Now it's my turn," he said.

"Go ahead!" First Tiger roared. He thrust out his hairy chest and Chen's fist shot out and punched it lightly. The giant felt no pain, but was aware of a great force pushing him backwards and put all his weight into countering it by leaning forward. Suddenly, Chen withdrew his fist, and with no time to stabilise himself, the giant toppled forward and crashed to the ground in a cloud of dust. All this took place in the blink of an eye. There was a stunned silence for a second, then the crowd erupted in applause and laughter. The envoy rushed over to help First Tiger who was wailing as blood poured from his mouth: two of his front teeth had snapped off.

Seeing their brother injured, the other three giants charged at Chen with a single howl of rage. Chen skipped around behind Third Tiger and shoved him at Second Tiger. Fourth Tiger lunged at Chen with his arms outstretched, but Chen ducked down and ticked his armpit as he passed. Fourth Tiger was very ticklish, and he immediately rolled into a ball, laughing hysterically.

Chen danced amongst the four, making them look foolish without even hitting them. The envoy could see that Chen was a martial arts master and

tried vainly to stop the fight. But once roused, the four Tigers were impossible to stop. They closed in on Chen again, First Tiger from in front while the other three closed off his line of retreat behind. Chen waited until First Tiger was within arm's length then toppled him over backwards with a push, grabbed his leg and hurled him away so that he landed head-first in the hole where the tree he had up-rooted had stood.

Fourth Tiger roared and kicked out with his right leg, but Chen grabbed his trousers and shirt, lifted him up and with a solid kick sent him flying through the air. The giant landed with a thump on the corpse of the camel he had himself killed.

While Fourth Tiger was still in the air, Second and Third Tiger charged at Chen from opposite directions. Chen waited until they were almost upon him before leaping out of the way, and the two giants smashed into each other and toppled like a great pagoda to the ground. Before they could clamber to their feet, Chen tied their two queues together, then with a laugh, he walked back to Princess Fragrance's side. The Princess clapped her hands in delight as the other Muslims cheered and shouted.

The Four Tigers picked themselves up and the envoy rushed over and struggled to undo the knot in Second and Third Tigers' hair. The four giants looked across at Chen, not in hate but in respect. First Tiger raised a thumb in Chen's direction.

"You're good," he said. "I concede defeat." He bowed, and the other three giants followed suit. Chen hurriedly returned the compliment. Seeing their simple nature, he began to rather regret the way he had played with them.

Fourth Tiger suddenly ran over and brought back the camel's corpse while Third Tiger led their horses over to Muzhuolun.

"It was wrong of us to kill your camel," he said. "We give these four horses to you in compensation." Muzhuolun declined the offer with thanks.

The envoy was extremely embarrassed by this turn of events. "Let's go!" he shouted to the Four Tigers and leapt onto his horse. He turned to Princess Fragrance.

"Do you really dare to go?" he asked.

"What is there to be scared of?" she replied. She walked over to Muzhuolun. "Father, write out a reply and I will deliver it for you." Muzhuolun hesitated. If she didn't go, the whole tribe would lose face, but if he let her go, he would worry endlessly. He motioned Chen over, and led him by the hand into the tent with Huo Qingtong and her sister following behind. Once inside, Muzhuolun immediately hugged him.

"Great Helmsman," he said. "What fortuitous wind is it that has blown you here?"

"I was on my way to the Tianshan Mountains on personal business and heard some important news which I wanted to pass on to you. By coincidence, I met your daughter, who brought me here." Princess Fragrance was dumb-struck at hearing her father call Chen 'Great Helmsman', and seeing the shocked expression on her face, Chen said: "There is something I must apologise for. I did not tell you that I am Chinese."

"Great Helmsman Chen is a good friend of our tribe," Muzhuolun added. "He recovered our sacred Koran for us. He has saved your sister's life and recently intercepted the Manchu army's rations which slowed their advance and gave us time to collect our forces. The favours he has rendered us are truly uncountable." Chen modestly declined the compliments.

"I don't blame you at all," the Princess said with a smile. "I'm sure you didn't tell me who you were because you did not want to bring up all the things you have done for us."

"That Manchu envoy was unforgivably arrogant," said Muzhuolun. "It was fortunate that you intervened, Great Helmsman. You certainly deflated his pride. He chose my daughter to be our envoy. What do you think we should do?"

Chen was reluctant to meddle in the affairs of the tribe. "I come from the interior of China and know nothing of the situation here, sir," he said. "If you decide that she should go, then I will do my utmost to protect her. If you feel it would be better for her not to go, then we will think of some other way to deal with him."

"Father, you and my sister worry everyday about the affairs of the tribe," Princess Fragrance interrupted. "Making one trip as an envoy is no big affair. And if I don't go, the Manchus will laugh at us."

"I am just afraid that they will want to harm you, sister," said Huo Qingtong.

"Every time you go out on the battle field you risk your life, so it is only right that I should risk my life this once," the Princess replied. She looked at Chen. "He is so capable, if he goes with me I won't be the slightest bit afraid, not at all."

Huo Qingtong could see how deep her sister's feelings were for Chen, and an inexpressible emotion swept through her heart.

"Father," she said. "Let her go."

"All right then, Master Chen, I entrust my young daughter to you." Chen blushed and Princess Fragrance's eyes, as bright as autumn rain, gazed up at him. Huo Qingtong looked away.

Muzhuolun wrote out a reply which said simply: "We will fight. Allah will protect us." Chen nodded his head in approval. Muzhuolun handed the note to Princess Fragrance, then kissed her cheeks.

"Allah will protect you, sister," said Huo Qingtong. "I hope you come back soon." The Princess hugged and thanked her. A feast was organised to entertain the Manchu envoy, after which there was music and dancing to see off the guests, then the envoy raised his hand and galloped off with Princess Fragrance and the others following behind. Huo Qingtong watched the seven figures disappear into the darkness and felt a great emptiness in her chest as if her heart had disappeared with them into the infinite desert.

"Your sister is very brave," Muzhuolun said. She nodded, then suddenly covered her face and ran inside the tent.