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Muzhuolun, Chen and the others were trapped on the hill. The Manchu troops had attacked twice, but had been beaten back. The hill was surrounded by piles of corpses. Losses on both sides had been heavy.

Sometime after noon, there was a movement in the Manchu lines, and a column of mounted Muslim soldiers charged through towards them. Amidst the flying snow flakes, they spotted Huo Qingtong at its head.

"Charge!" shouted Muzhuolun, and led his men down the hill to meet her. Princess Fragrance galloped over to her sister and embraced her.

Huo Qingtong took her hand and shouted: "Commander of the Black Flag Third Unit: lead your men west until you meet up with the first unit of the White Flag and follow the orders of its commander."

The officer and his troops galloped off, and a column of Manchu cavalry broke from the main force and chased after them.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Huo Qingtong. "Commander of the Black Flag First Unit: retreat with your men towards Yarkand and follow the orders of my brother. Commander of the Second Unit, you retreat towards the Black River." The two units broke out of the encirclement, and disappeared into the distance pursued by two more columns of Manchu cavalry.

"Everyone else head eastwards!" Huo Qingtong ordered, and the remaining Muslim soldiers along with the Red Flower Society fighters galloped through the circle of Manchu troops and away.

The Manchu cavalry, under the command of Zhao Wei closed in on the fleeing Muslims and cut off several hundred of them. All were slaughtered. Zhao Wei was delighted. He pointed to the huge Crescent Moon banner near Huo Qingtong and shouted: "Whoever seizes that banner gets a reward!" The cavalymen surged forward, galloping madly across the desert.

The Muslims were riding good horses and the Manchu cavalry had difficulty keeping up with them. But after ten or fifteen miles, some of the Muslim fighters began to fall behind and were killed by the Manchu troops. Zhao Wei saw they were all either old men or boys, and exclaimed: "Their leader has no crack troops with him. After them!" They galloped on for another two or three miles and saw the Muslim force dispersing, apparently in confusion. Fluttering on the top of a large sand dune ahead was the crescent banner.

Zhao Wei flourished his sword and led the charge towards the dune with his bodyguards behind. But as he reached the top and looked out beyond, he was almost frightened out of his wits. To the north and south, were rank after orderly rank of Muslim warriors, waiting silently. The Manchu force had originally been several times larger than the Muslim force, but so many units had been sent out in pursuit of the breakaway Muslim columns that only ten thousand armoured cavalry now faced the concentrated might of the Muslim army. Two more Muslim columns appeared behind them, and with enemy troops to the north, south and west, Zhao Wei shouted: "Everyone forward! Eastwards!" The Manchu forces surged forward as the Muslim fighters gradually closed in on them.

Suddenly, there was a chorus of cries from the cavalry unit in the lead. A soldier rode up to Zhao Wei and said: "General! We're finished! There's quicksand ahead!" He could see a thousand cavalymen and their horses already flailing about as they sank into the soft mud.

Chen and the others stood on a sand dune and watched as the Manchu troops fell into the quagmire. The soldiers behind tried to escape, but the Muslims pressed relentlessly in, forcing them into the mud. The air was filled with the screams of the hapless Manchu soldiers, but the mud crept up their legs, and when it reached their mouths, the noise ceased. The dwindling numbers of Manchu troops fought desperately, but in less than an hour, the whole army had been forced into the quagmire. Only Zhao Wei and a hundred or so guards managed to escape after carving a path of blood through the Muslim ranks.

"Everyone head westwards and gather on the south bank of the Black River," Huo Qingtong ordered. The entire force of more than ten thousand troops galloped off.

As they rode, Chen and Muzhuolun discussed what had happened since they parted. Muzhuolun's heart was uneasy. He loved his two daughters more than anything in the world, and they had both fallen in love with the same Chinese man. According to Islamic law, a man could marry four wives, but Chen was not a believer, and he had heard that Chinese had only one wife while the second and subsequent women were not considered real wives. He wondered how the matter could be resolved. "Wait until the Manchus have been beaten," he thought. "One daughter is wise and the other kind. A way will be found."

The great Muslim column arrived at the south bank of the Black River towards evening. A soldier galloped up and breathlessly reported: "The Manchus are attacking hard. The commander of the Green Flag Second Unit

is dead, and the commander of the Black Flag Second Unit is badly wounded. Losses are heavy."

"Tell the deputy commander of the Green Flag second unit to take over. He is not to retreat one step," Huo Qingtong ordered. The soldier galloped off again.

"Let's go and reinforce them!" Muzhuolun suggested.

"No!" she replied and turned to her personal guards. "The whole army will rest here. No one is allowed to light a fire or make a sound. Everyone will eat dry rations." The order was transmitted, and the soldiers settled down silently in the darkness. Far off, they could hear the waters of the Black River and the cries and shouts of Manchu and Muslim fighters.

Another soldier galloped frantically up. "The Green Flag Second Unit's deputy commander has also been killed," he reported. "We can't hold them back much longer!"

Huo Qingtong turned to the commander of the Green Flag Third Unit. "Go and reinforce them," she said. "You will be in command." He raised his sabre in salute and led his unit away. Soon after, the sound of battle rose to a roar.

"The Green Flag units will lie in ambush behind the sand dunes to the east. The White Flag and Mongol units will lie in ambush to the west," Huo Qingtong ordered. "The rest, come with me."

She rode off towards the Black River, and as they approached it, the metallic ring of weapons clashing became deafening. In the torchlight, they saw the Muslim fighters bravely defending the wooden bridge across the river in the face of ferocious assaults by the best Manchu cavalry.

"Give way!" Huo Qingtong shouted, and the fighters on the bridge retreated, leaving a gap through which several thousand Manchu mounted troops swarmed like bees. When about half of the Manchu troops had crossed, she shouted: "Pull away the bridge!"

The Muslims had earlier loosened the beams of the bridge and used long ropes to tie them to horses on the river bank below. The horses strained forward, a series of loud cracks rent the air, and the bridge collapsed, throwing hundreds of Manchu soldiers into the river. The Manchu army was thus cut in two by the river, with neither side able to assist the other.

At the order from Huo Qingtong, the mass of the Muslim army, hiding behind the sand dunes, emerged and overwhelmed the Manchu troops on the near bank. In a short time, they were all dead, and the Manchu force on the

other side of the river were so frightened by the sight of the slaughter that they turned and fled towards Yarkand city.

"Across the river and after them!" shouted Huo Qingtong. A make-shift bridge was swiftly constructed with the remains of the former structure and the Muslim army charged off towards Yarkand.

The citizens of Yarkand had long since evacuated their city. Huo Qingtong's brother, on her instructions, had resisted perfunctorily when the Manchus attacked, then led his troops in retreat from the city. Soon after, the Manchu forces fleeing from the banks of the Black River arrived along with General Zhao Wei and his hundred-odd battered bodyguards. The walled city was now full of Manchu soldiers.

Just as Zhao Wei was about to go to bed, he received a report that several hundred troops who had drunk water from wells in the city had died of poisoning. He sent a unit to collect some uncontaminated water from outside. Then the sky turned red. All over the city, fires were lit by a small number of Muslim soldiers left behind, and the city turned into a huge oven.

Under the protection of his bodyguard, Zhao Wei fought his way through the flames and smoke towards the west gate as the rest of the Manchu soldiers trampled each other in their haste to escape. The bodyguards slashed at them with their swords, forcing them to make way for their general. But when they got to the west gate, they found it had been blocked by the Muslims. The fires were burning even more ferociously, and the streets were filled with frenzied mobs of soldiers and horses. Through the confusion, a small group of riders appeared shouting: "Where is the General?"

"Here!" Zhao Wei's bodyguards shouted back.

"There are fewer enemy troops at the east gate," replied one of the riders. "We can force our way out there."

Even in such danger, Zhao Wei remained calm and led his troops in the attack on the east gate. The Muslims fired wave after wave of arrows at them, and several attempts to break out failed with heavy losses. But at the critical moment, Zhang Zhaozhong led a troop of Manchu soldiers in an attack from outside the city and managed to snatch Zhao Wei away to safety.

Many thousands of Manchu soldiers had already been burned to death, and the stench was sickening. The whole city was filled with cries and screams. Huo Qingtong and the others watched from a piece of high ground.

"It's terrible! Terrible!" cried Muzhuolun. Huo Qingtong sent more troops down to help blockade the east gate of the city. With Zhao Wei gone, the Manchu soldiers left inside were leaderless. They raced frantically about, but with the four gates blocked by the Muslims, they all died in the monster furnace.

"Light the signal fires!" Huo Qingtong ordered, and piles of wolf droppings that had been prepared were put to the torch, sending a huge column of black smoke up to the heavens. (The smoke from burning wolf's dropping is the thickest and blackest of all.) A short while later, a similar column of smoke arose five or so miles to the west.

The Muslims had won three victories and wiped out more than thirty thousand of the best Manchu troops. The warriors embraced each other and sang and danced around the Yarkand city wall.

Huo Qingtong called her officers together. "We will camp out here tonight," she said. "Each man must start ten fires and must spread them out as much as possible."