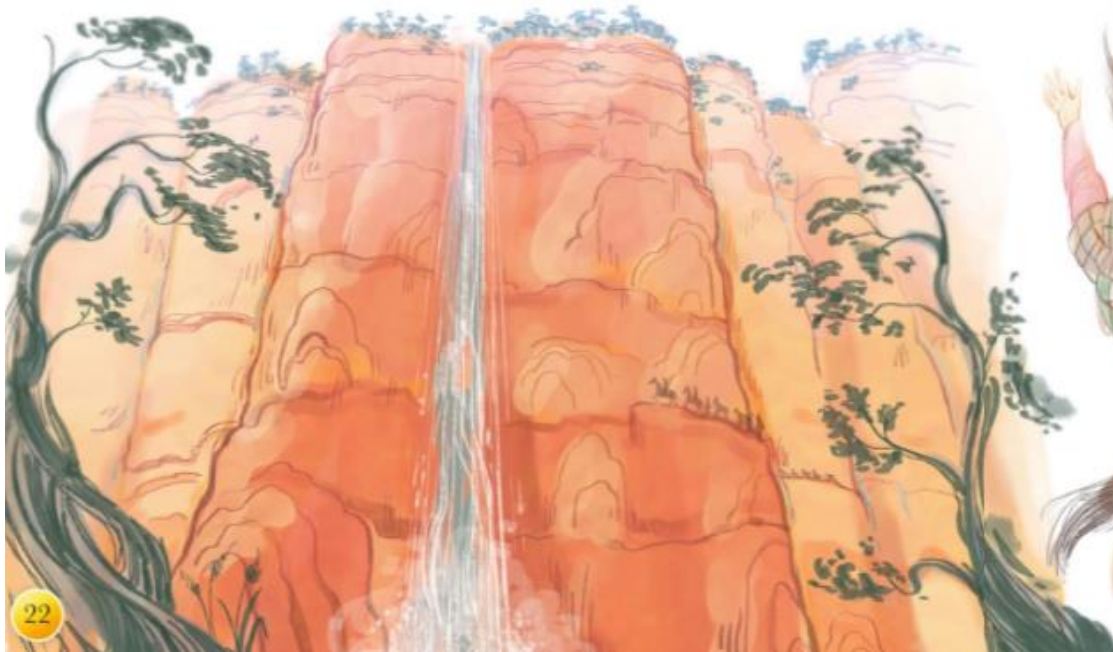


PART 2

The Red Mountains of Taihang were a breathtaking sight. They reared up from the plain like the frame of a colossal loom, vast and craggy, with waterfalls like bundles of tumbling silk.

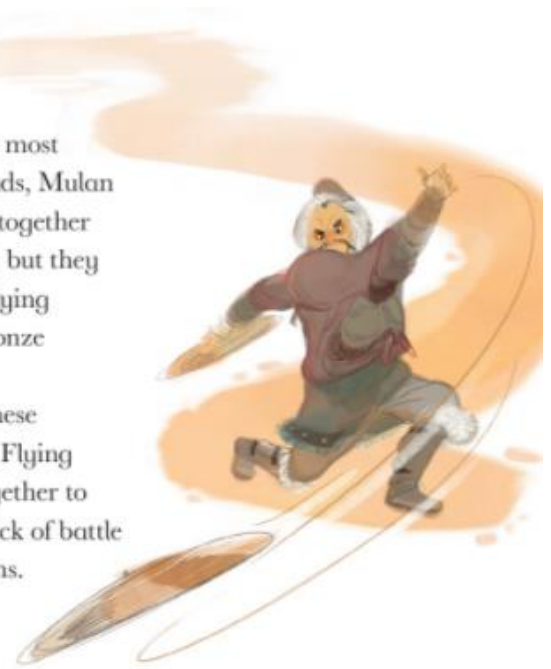
In the middle of the mountain range a path snaked up the cliff. Barely wide enough for a single horse, it led to Five Zhang Pass and the forest hideout of Flying Swallow's bandit horde.

Thirteen times in three weeks, the imperial cavalry had toiled up that path in the hope of breaking through. Whenever they got to Five Zhang Pass though, bandit arrows fell on them like rain and drove them back down to their camp, wretched and bloodied.



Their last attempt was the most terrible. Shields over their heads, Mulan and Niu He fought their way together to the top of Five Zhang Pass, but they found their way blocked by Flying Swallow himself, two huge bronze cymbals in his hands.

Mulan had heard about these cymbals. Every day at dawn, Flying Swallow would clash them together to wake his camp, and in the thick of battle he would hurl them as weapons.



Mulan channelled her life-force to her torso just in time. The first cymbal knocked her off her horse and winded her, but it did not break her ribs.

The second cymbal found Niu He completely unprepared. Mulan staggered down the mountainside that day with her friend's body over her shoulder and Flying Swallow's laughter ringing in her ears.

“Men, we have failed,” announced Xin Ping that night. “Five Zhang Pass is the only way to Flying Swallow’s cave.”

Mulan scowled. *Remember Daiyu*, she thought to herself. *There’s never just one way.*

She removed her boots and armour and leaped from rock to rock along the base of the cliff. Stopping behind a roaring waterfall, she pressed her back against the rock and watched the curtain of water plummet into a churning pool.

Still facing outwards, using only her elbows and bare heels, Mulan skittered up the rock face like a butterfly lizard.



Having scaled the mountain, Mulan ran the length of Taihang Ridge, which snaked among the clouds like a dragon’s back. As the noise of the waterfall faded behind her, she heard the melody of a reed pipe and the crack of an axe through firewood. The bandits’ camp was close.



Mulan leaped from the rocky ridge onto the twisted bough of a plum tree, and dropped down silently into the fork of its trunk. Directly below her, a black-capped cook was stirring four gigantic cauldrons of steaming rice — food for the troops, no doubt.

Mulan cupped her hands around her mouth and whistled softly.

A bird alighted on a branch above Mulan. Moonlight fell on its green-tipped feathers and scarlet beak. It cocked its head and whistled.

Mulan's hand shot up to grab the bird. It struggled free from her grasp and rose into the night air, squawking furiously.

The cook looked up. Mulan pressed herself against the gnarled trunk and prayed he would not notice her.

When the danger had passed, she looked down at her hand. Four green-tipped *zhen* feathers lay across her palm. *That's enough*, she thought.

The cook added plenty of ginger and bok choy to the rice that night. He knew all the vegetables and spices of Taihang, but he knew nothing about its birds. He had never even heard of the *zhen* bird, whose diet of viper heads makes its feathers deadly poisonous.



In the heart of Pengcheng, the Heavenly City, the mighty Tuoba Khan sat on his Dragon Throne and surveyed the ranks of Xin Ping's returning army.

"Tell me," the emperor bellowed. "Where is the noble man who single-handedly won the War of Five Zhang Pass? I shall bestow on him a golden girdle, and he will come and serve me in my court."

Mulan stepped forward. "Hail, Exalted One! Forgive my boldness, but you're wrong!"

The palace fell as silent as a cicada in winter. The emperor's courtiers held their breath.

"The warrior who opened Five Zhang Pass was not a man," continued Mulan, unfastening her armour. "She was, and is, a girl."

A gasp arose from the army ranks.

The mighty Tuoba Khan scowled.

Xin Ping stared.

"My name is Mulan. Now if it please your Majesty, I want to go home."

The emperor got up from his Dragon Throne and glared around him. He tugged on his left earlobe, a sign of respect for Mulan, and then addressed the imperial army in a booming voice. "If our men were half as noble as our girls," he declared, "this empire would endure a hundred thousand years."

THE END

