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# Crossing the Desert



♥ by Agnes Gabriel

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Hello, everyone. Meet Chang An. He has dark brown hair, big, dark, expressive eyes and a long nose. He had just turned 18 and was very eager to carve a name for himself as a renowned trader. His father was a well-known trader – a gold standard for traders on many trading routes. Chang An wanted to be more famous than his father and was preparing to go to the faraway town of Bao Chan on his first trading expedition.

Chang An lived in a busy trading town named Xi Di, where merchants from all around came to buy and sell things. It was a very busy town, with many shops as well as inns for people to stay in, rest and eat. Chang An wanted to travel to Bao Chan because people there liked the cloth made in Xi Di. He could sell bales of cloth for high prices and he hoped to bring home cartloads of gold and become well-known and rich.



On a bright Sunday afternoon, Chang An and his 40 men loaded up 500 carts with so many bales of fabric that the carts heaved and groaned under the weight. Then, they saddled up their horses and slowly plodded out of town.



Days passed and slowly Chang An and his team found themselves close to the town of Bao Chan. At a small outpost, they swapped their horses for camels. Chang An and his team were excited. Now they just needed to cross the stretch called 'The Lost Wilderness'. It was a large area of desert with

rolling dunes and sand so fine that it would slip through the fingers of a closed fist. In the past, many traders had lost their way and their lives as they travelled through this stretch. As soon as the sun popped up from the horizon, the sand would bake until it felt like they were walking on a large bed of charcoal embers. So Chang An and his team travelled only at night. For safety, they arranged their carts in a circle to form a protective ring. During the day, they used a very large mat as protective covering for the men and animals and waited until the sun set.

When the sun had disappeared and the moon and stars blanketed the wide sky, they would yoke their carts and move forward. Along the way, they saw bleached-white bones half-buried in the sand – a final resting place for lost traders and their animals.

When morning came, Chang An and his team set up their camp and rested again. Shortly before nightfall, excited by the feeling that they were now almost at their destination, Chang An shouted out orders for the men to pour away most of their water and bury most of their remaining food in the sand so that they would bring just enough supplies with them for one more day. Some of the men disagreed with what Chang An was telling them to do, but he stood firm. With a lighter load, they would be able to travel faster. Chang An had proven his leadership by taking them this far on their long journey. They would not have gotten this far without Chang An using his knowledge of the stars and navigational skills. Travelling through the desert was like travelling on a rolling sea with no landmarks in sight. Chang An's skill had enabled the team to make their way through the desert up to this point. So, even though they were not comfortable with the decision, his team members did as they were told.



When the moon rose, they set off again in the cool of night. Even though they were very close to their final destination, everyone on the team had been travelling for weeks and fatigue had set in. Lulled by the rhythmic slow, plodding of the camels they were sitting on and the confidence that they would reach the town the next day, they all fell fast asleep as the camels continued to walk onwards.



At day break, Chang An woke up with a start when he heard loud cries among his men. Shock and horror dawned on his face when he saw where they were. During the night, the camels had walked in a big circle and they were now back at the same place where they had camped the day before, having thrown away almost all of their water and food. The men were hot and dirty, and very angry with Chang An. If all had gone well the night before, they would have been in Bao Chan by now, but instead they were still in the desert.



Heaviness and weariness spread throughout the group.

Chang An felt arrows of anger from his men and realised the folly of his actions. He thought to himself, "If I give in now, every single one of us will die. I will need to find a water source."

Chang An went on a walk around the perimeter of his team's camp, looking for signs of water. He came to a place where he thought there might be water underground. Hurriedly, he ordered his men to bring the spade and he started digging. The men gathered round and joined in the dig. They had only one spade between them, so each of them took turns to dig under the hot sun. After they had been digging for quite some time, the spade hit a rock and broke. The men, hot and sweaty, threw their arms in the air and slumped down on the hot sand feeling defeated.

Chang An climbed into the hole they had dug and put his ear on the rock. With a smile, he stood and faced his tired, dirty, thirsty men. “If we give up now”, he said, “we shall all die. So let’s take heart and be courageous. Bring the sledgehammer and let’s break this rock.” When he said this, many of his men rolled their eyes and sighed with exasperation. However he spoke with so much passion and sincerity that the men also felt his conviction, so they did as he said and went to find the sledgehammer.

It was a wondrous moment when the rock split and a jet of water shot up from the ground. As the water continued to flow, the thirsty men gave thanks and drank to their hearts’ content. With flasks filled with water, they continued on their journey and reached the town of Bao Chan.



The people of Bao Chan loved the cloth. Chang An sold all the bales and returned home a very rich person. He became famous for his actions in safely leading his team to Bao Chan and back. Now, in the comfort of their hometown, his men gathered for a celebration. One of the men asked Chang An how he had known where to dig when they were looking for water in the desert.

Chang An told his men that he had noticed the presence of a sole plant in the area where he had told his men to dig and then, when he placed his ear on the rock, he had heard the gurgle of water under the rock. That was why he had urged them to continue and break open the rock.

With admiration and respect, Chang An’s team stood up and cheered their leader.



# Moral of the Story

When the going gets tough, the tough gets going. In times of duress and danger, it is all the more important for one to stay calm, level-headed and cool as a cucumber. In this way, one can then deal with the adversity in the best and wisest manner possible with resilience and perseverance.

# Vocabulary

1. **expressive** – showing feelings very clearly
2. **gold standard** – a model of excellence
3. **swapped** – exchanged
4. **bleached** – to make white or colourless
5. **protective** – keeping people safe
6. **fatigue** – a feeling of extreme tiredness
7. **lulled** – causing someone to relax or sleep
8. **perimeter** – the outer border around a space
9. **exasperation** – a feeling of extreme frustration and annoyance
10. **sole** – the only one



*Crossing the Desert is a story about Chang An,  
a young man who faced unforeseen danger,  
and how he and his team, through resilience, wits and  
perseverance overcome these challenges and  
found victory and success in the end.*

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