

SAMPLE  
TRANSLATION

VITOMIL ZUPAN  
THE TALE OF THE BLACK  
SHEIKH WITH THE RED  
FLOWER

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## Vitomil Zupan: The Tale of the Black Sheikh with the Red Flower

After the mighty samum wind laid waste to the marble capital of the great kings of Al Arida, there arose in the Gah-al-Bahban oasis the white tents of the army of the last son of Al Arida, the great soldier and interpreter of the Quran, Tuein ibn Dehne, the Sheikh of Al Arida.

In the clear morning, the Sheikh of Al Arida, clad in a dusty burnous, stood alone before the tent of his most beloved wife, the young Talan Kao – the Star of Night, princess from the East, looking at the palm leaves above. They were covered with yellow dust, brought there by the evil samum.

Wearily he entered the tent and leaned over the bed. The velvet black eyes of the wife he adored gazed through the opening between the hanging rugs covering the entrance far into the desert.

“During this night of yellow death, on the back of the white camel you gave me as a token of your love, a son was born to us great Tuein of Al Arida. But the white marble of the fireplace of our love has been covered by the desert sand. The white bones of your soldiers, wives and the children of your tribe will show you the way. Our son will be a mighty hero whose name should be Samum, in memory of this night.”

Dawn coloured the desert blood red.

“Nine times eight days on horseback, oh Tuein, from Mauria and Oriaff towards the northeast, lies my homeland. When you have committed my body to the desert sand, ride onwards and erect your tents beside the four blue rivers and conquer the land, so that Prince Samum may grow in a new kingdom of Al Arida.”

Beside the body of his favourite wife Talan Kao, who clasped their son against her cold white breast, Sheikh Tuein Al Arida swore by his sword that he would obey her words.

For nine years Sheikh Tuein attacked the Land of Four Blue Rivers from Kala Kessue fort. Thirty enemy soldiers fell for each one of his, but ninety-nine others replaced them.

Meanwhile, in his nest at Kala Kessue, the young falcon Samum ibn Tuein of Al Arida was growing. When he was nine years old he was given a horse and all that he needed for combat, and he swore by his sword that he would fulfil Talan Kao’s last request.

One evening he was sitting on the walls of Kala Kessue. Suddenly there stood before him a grey-haired old man with a long white beard. The man took Samum's hand and led him away. On Mount Kunlun, beside the scarlet red sea, they sat on a rock of black nephrite and the old man said:

"Samum Al Arida, in your veins flows the blood of the kings of Arida and the emperors of the Han dynasty. You shall be granted the wisdom of Lao Tse and the strength of King Hiang, who drove his enemy away with only his voice. But do not forget Talan Kao's words. And when the eyes of the stone lions in Kala Kessue turn red, you must go to Mount Li-Tie-Guai. A princess from the Chauna dynasty will await you there. The journey will be long and treacherous. You shall have to learn many things in order to fulfil what the gods have intended for you."

Every day Samum ibn Tuein went to see if his time had come. Often he sat on the walls and looked towards the East. When he was away a swift messenger awaited by the lions with a saddled horse. Samum became a hero who was renowned in seven lands and feared by the armies of seven kings. In the heat of the sun, in his burnous, he would ride like the dark night on a black horse, clearly distinguished from his soldiers. And in the evening he would sit in a half-ruined tower, reading old manuscripts and learning the nine earthly wisdoms.

The years went by in combat and learning. Samum became a man.

He forgot the old man on Mount Kunlun and his instructions. One day, Sheikh Tuein fell in combat. Dying, he said to his son:

"You were born for great things. In your empire the sun will never set."

And indeed, land after land fell under Samum's sway.

At the confluence of two blue rivers, Samum built a palace of black nephrite with pillars of transparent crystal. Thick brocade curtains and golden veils covered the walls. Beside beds of ivory, black slaves held pearl vessels in which sweet smelling herbs smouldered, filling with an intoxicating scent the large halls where Samum Al Arida had gathered thirty beauties from across the seas and precious objects from seven kings. He was like the god Indra among the apsaras, the female spirits of the clouds.

One evening, he was walking alone at sunset through his lush garden of blossoming pear trees. Suddenly the old man who had led him to Mount Kunlun in his ninth year appeared before him. The pupils in the old man's eyes shone green.

Silently, the old man took Samum's hand and within a moment they were standing before Kala Kessue, which was in ruins and overgrown with thistles. Only the two stone lions stared at Samum with eyes as red as rubies.

"You have fulfilled Talan Kao's prophecy, Samum ibn Tuein Al Arida, descendant of the Han family on your mother's side, but you have thoughtlessly neglected what lies ahead," said the old man in a hollow voice.

"I don't care for Princess Chauna, my harem is full of the most enchanting beauties," said Samum Al Arida. "With this hand and this sword I shall conquer the lands from East to West."

The sound of his sword hitting the stone plinth at the lion's feet rang out.

“No one can nor should resist the will of the gods!” the old man said threateningly. He took Samum by the hand and in a moment the young Al Arida was once more beneath the fragrant trees in his garden.

One day Indra stayed away from his apsaras. In the night a woman’s image had appeared to him in his dreams, with a proud face and almond eyes and hair the colour of sunlight, the body of the goddess of passion and the loveliness of a houri. And so Samum Al Arida began to look for the woman in his dreams whom he named Alni the Peerless.

He named his palace the Castle of Cold Splendour. On his swift black horse named Chesme – the Dark Spring – he rode beneath the burning sun and the wings of night around the lands beyond the Mountain of Burning Blossoms, searching for her – for Alni the Peerless.

The young Samum Al Arida gave his thirty odalisques as wives to his best soldiers. He abandoned his fruitless search and dejectedly erected his father’s tent beneath the mango trees on a river island. His horse Chesme grazed before the tent.

It was then that Arida’s armies were crushed in the Land of the Green Dragon. Enemy hordes attacked his land from seven sides while the melancholy Samum Al Arida laid on the rugs in his tent, telling his horse Chesme, who stood before the entrance, about her – about Alni the Peerless, waiting to perhaps see her again in his dreams.

When the enemy was only a day’s ride away, Samum Al Arida decided to gather together his army. All he could find was a handful of the most faithful. They mounted their horses and rode to Kala Kessue, where in the midst of the ruins stood the two lions with ruby eyes. In his rage, Samum grabbed a rock and knocked out the red eyes. Four bloody tears ran from the empty eye sockets. The faithful soldiers jumped back on their horses and galloped off in fear. They were followed through the desert by the half-crazed laughter of the last Al Arida.

Days and nights went by. One morning, Samum found himself in the Gah-al-Bahban oasis, where his faithful horse Chesme had carried him.

Al Arida paid his respects to the ghost of Talan Kao – the Star of Night, and rode to where rulers with his blood in their veins once held sway. He followed the bones of people and animals and reached a ruin shaded by sparse palm trees. There, an old man with yellow eyebrows appeared before him, the ghost of the desert thieves, and asked his name.

“I am Samum ibn Tuein Al Arida, a prince of the Han dynasty.”

“Ha ha, you’re the prince of the Land of White Bones,” said the old man, pointing all around with his bony yellow hand.

“On the mountain where the sun goes to sleep, there is someone in the old temple who can cure you.”

He left along the path on which he had come. It was no longer the great Al Arida who rode off, but the prince of the Land of White Bones.

The prince returned to the Waffra oasis to gather his soldiers and conquer land after land, as in the past. But as he rode beneath the first palm, he saw among the Moss-roses the ghost of the desert thieves, who called out:

“Behold the prince of the Land of White Bones, the first and last master of his land. The first thanks to the power, strength and speed of his sword, his mind, his noble blood, but the last on the scales of love. Your soldiers lie weary in the white hot desert sand and vultures cool them with the flapping of their wings. Go to the mountain where the sun goes to sleep.”

One night, the prince rode across the blue river and set off eastwards to the mountain mentioned by the old man.

On his way he came to the valley of a dragon with a fiery mirror in its jaws, which lit up the eternal night. He stopped by the lake on whose shores grew luminous blades of grass that shone like golden lamps and in whose light a person’s insides could be seen. The prince leaned over the surface of the lake. He could see his heart and in it a picture of her – Alni the Peerless. Around her were thorn bushes with red blossoms, surrounded by yellow sand littered with white bones.

The prince went on. He fought bandits; he chopped three poisonous heads from the snake Chala Kai. The first head was of gold, the second of amethyst and the third of clay.

Tired from his journey he arrived beneath the mountain where the sun goes to sleep and saw a half-ruined temple. He dismounted and left his faithful horse Chesme in the shade of the kisang trees. The prince stepped into the gloom of the temple.

There, beneath a stone statue of a god with thirteen arms, sat someone in a white robe. The prince suddenly felt his eyes fill with sleep. He sat on a fallen pillar and dozed off. In his slumbers, he was approached by a white figure and he could only see its two eyes like two pieces of glowing coal. They grew, turned to fire and within a second everything around him was in flames. But the prince remained seated and was not afraid. He heard a voice:

“Your courage and physical skills have been tested. You have learned nine earthly wisdoms. Now go to the mountain that is above you, following the footsteps of eight immortals. In the cave there is someone who will teach you unknown disciplines; great things lie ahead.”

The prince was sitting on the fallen pillar as if just awoken from a dream. On the stone plinth of the statue of a god there sat a small green insect with eyes like two bright glowing points. Suddenly it flew off and as the prince followed it with his eyes, it became bigger and bigger and rose into the sky as a divine dragon. It was one of the eight immortals.

The prince led his horse Chesme to the green grass by the stream and then set off for the mountain, following the footsteps that had been imprinted into the stone. He came to the cave. In it sat a thousand-year-old man in a coat made of wind and a cap made of eternal snow. The prince bowed to him. All day and all night the old man explained to him strange arts. He taught him how to take on the shape of animals and other beings, how to make rain and wind, how to summon rivers and mountains, how to tame panthers and tigers, snakes and dragons, how to call up spirits and how to make himself invisible, to walk on clouds and sea waves, and many other unknown arts.

Before the prince left, the old man invited him to dine. He broke off a piece of rock, crumbled it onto a small table and treated the prince to the red chestnuts of immortality and the juice of dawn. As it got dark, he attached to the wall a paper circle that shone like the moon. The prince drank the juice of dawn from a stone jug and felt a strange intoxication. The old man

picked up a chopstick from the table and threw it at the moon. Instantly the most beautiful girl could be seen emerging from the light. At first she was only a foot high, but when she touched the ground she became as tall as any human. She danced a rainbow dance and sang with a voice that was as clear as a silver flute. She sang a song about a queen of enchanting beauty and the almighty emperor who was coming for her. She twirled, jumped onto the little table and changed into a fairy. Meanwhile, the old man slowly entered the moon. He was clearly visible sitting in the fading light. When it expired, the prince set off down the mountain in darkness. He broke off a piece of stone and threw it at the sky. The sun shone. When he came to the stream, he saw that the blossoms had fallen off twice while he was gone and his horse Chesme stood there weak and emaciated on the stream bank. The prince searched for the mushroom of life and gave it to the horse. Life returned to it and it neighed once more in a clear voice. The prince mounted the horse and rode through a field of tall millet. He threw a grain into the air and it turned into a bird. The prince told it to lead him to where she lived – Alni the Peerless.

He followed the bird through the Dead City, the marshes of Ancient Mist and the Land of Clouds of Happiness and, finally, by the Jasper Lake, the bird alighted on an orange branch. At that spot, the prince threw an orange into the green water. The waters parted and he was able to walk to an unimaginably beautiful castle, guarded by water dragons and winged snakes. At a mere word from him the amber door opened, the dragons remained calm and the snakes hid. Then she – Alma the Peerless, the queen of his dreams, stepped from the castle, clad in a rainbow dress and a white coat, looking more beautiful than the eye was capable of perceiving.

“Who are you that has come?” she asked softly. The prince drowned in her velvety almond-shaped eyes and said:

“A prince from the Land of White Bones who has come for you, my spring dream, Alni the Peerless.”

She bowed her head slightly and said:

“I’m waiting for another, for my mighty lord. Young prince, I cannot go with you.”

With a sad look, she turned around and the amber door closed silently behind her.

The prince returned to the orange tree and said to himself:

“I am not mighty enough for her.”

He went to the court of the mighty and cruel emperor Wu Jia. The prince put up his tent and challenged the imperial heroes to combat. When their heads adorned the entrance to the prince’s tent, the emperor became scared and at night sent an army to destroy him. The prince picked a shield from the floor and threw it at the sky. The shield grew and grew and when it fell to the ground, it crushed the imperial army into dust. Now the emperor began to negotiate. But when he heard that the prince was demanding his crown and throne, he called the three-eyed wizard Sa Dali and promised him a yearly income if he killed the unknown hero. The wizard changed into a dragon that blew fire and sprayed poison, and he leapt towards the tent before the court. The prince uttered strange words and changed into a column of stone. The dragon smashed into it and collapsed onto the golden paving. The prince cut off his head and a raven

flew out of it. The prince aimed his bow and shot the bird with an arrow. The wizard, pierced through the heart, fell to the feet of the emperor, who became so scared that he fled his land.

The prince of the Land of White Bones proclaimed himself emperor. At the coronation, the dukes and courtiers looked on sullenly. But when the crown was put on the new emperor's head, the star of the Han dynasty shone above it. The courtiers prostrated themselves, saying:

“Behold, a descendant of the Han imperial dynasty.”

After the coronation, the emperor rode to the Jasper Lake, but the same thing happened as before. He laid his empire and sword before Alni's feet, but she just turned sadly away and the amber door closed behind her.

The emperor climbed the tower of his castle and at the full moon stuck a paper moon on the wall and uttered a secret word. The moon shone and in it, like in a mirror, there appeared the form of the thousand-year-old man. He stepped from the moon and said:

“Take seven drops of blood from seven loves, mix them together and you shall have a precious ruby that will open the heart of the one that you desire. But do not discard the stone of love!”

He saddled Chesme, the Dark Spring, and the emperor, king, prince and sheikh went to find seven drops from seven loves.

He obtained the first drop from the breast of a mother nursing her baby. The second came from the pierced heart of a man who had in battle shielded his friend with his own body; the third drop was drawn from the shoulder of a man torn apart by a beast in a struggle for the life of the wife he had loved. When in the land of Hara a man allowed himself be thrown into jail in place of his brother who supported a family, the emperor saved both and caught the fourth drop of blood from the hands injured by the shackles.

He spent a long time looking for the fifth, sixth and the last drop of blood. The messengers he sent around the country came back empty handed. They told him:

“People no longer spill their blood for love of the gods, nor for love of gold, nor for the love they feel for their people, nor even the love of fame and honour. They prefer to live.”

The emperor at first felt sad and then vexed. He went into his gardens. There, on a flower covered terrace, he saw a dog. He aimed his bow and shot an arrow towards it. At that instant, a weak old man, one of the gardeners, jumped before the animal. The arrow sunk deep into his flesh. The emperor asked him why.

“He's the only friend I have.” The emperor took the fifth drop of blood and rewarded the old man richly.

The search continued. People spilled their blood out of hatred and avarice, envy and passion, but never out of love.

Finally a messenger arrived with a drop of blood from a son who had sacrificed himself for his father and mother, and so the emperor had six drops. The seventh was impossible to find. He gathered the army and attacked the neighbouring land in anger. Like a wave he advanced from East to West. Crowns fell and armies disintegrated into nothing before him. Wherever his sword shook the earth a ditch full blood appeared and wherever Chesme struck with his hoof a lake of blood was created. This is how Samum Al Arida Ho Han fulfilled the old prophecy and

allowed himself no time to think of her – Alni the Peerless, whom he had also named Tuai Li – the Unreachable Star.

One evening, dusty, tired from all the fighting and restless from inner turmoil, he was sitting beside a fish pond, where a single lotus flower blossomed. It floated by the shore, swaying on the ripples. In a moment of dark passion, the emperor took his sword and brandished it at the blossom. At that moment a small white hand grabbed the sword's sharp blade and a drop of blood slid down the wrist. A small, slender girl stood on the bank, staring at him with her dark eyes in a cold, frightened face.

“Please soldier, leave me the blossom. I talk to it on quiet mornings.”

The seventh drop of blood was the most beautiful.

The prince and emperor mixed the seven drop of blood from seven loves and an exquisite dark ruby appeared, which he had set into a golden ring. Immediately he rode to the Jasper Lake and the waters parted. There were no snakes or dragons and no castle. On a green meadow, among peach trees, there stood Alni the Peerless, Tuai Li, the Unreachable Star in rainbow clothes and a white coat. There was no sadness on her face. He lifted her onto his horse and took her to his castle where a thousand dark skinned slaves waited to serve her.

Meanwhile, he went far south, to the land of Kama Dewa, the god of love. Beneath the mountain with seven springs, a thousand slaves built a dwelling for their love.

And when he brought her on his horse Chesme to Kama Dewa, a fabulous land awaited them – as in the ancient stories.

The vast gardens of red flowers were suffused with intoxicating scents. The edges of dark ponds and lakes were overgrown with water lilies and on the island in the middle of the most beautiful lake, among palm and kisang trees, there floated a colonnade of white quartz and a staircase of coral. Hidden choirs sang and played on harps and silver flutes, and strange colourful birds flew above them. A light bridge made of bamboo sticks connected the island to the shore like a breath. At the entrances to the gardens black tigers were fastened by heavy chains.

As they stepped beneath the quartz colonnade, where the floors were covered with precious fur, she said: “I love you.”

They strolled around the garden filled with red flowers and bathed in the scented waters. Weeks of love passed like days. Once she asked him what his name was and a voice from the tree tops replied:

“The prince of the Land of Red Flowers. The first lord of his land.”

Then he was no longer Samum ibn Tuein Al Arida Ho Han or the prince of the Land of White Bones. He was the prince of the Land of Spring Dreams and the Land of Red Flowers.

Chesme the horse grazed sadly on the shores of the dark lake and the kingdom its master had created fell apart. Meanwhile, the prince of the Land of Red Flowers sat with Alni the Peerless in his lap as she wrote words of love on the water lily petals and threw them into the ripples caused by a zephyr.



When the flowers began to lose their petals, one day the prince began to feel a restlessness and doubt in the power of the red stone of love set in the ring he wore on his hand. At first he felt something like slight jealousy that kept growing and overflowing inside him:

“Does she love me only because of this stone?”

One sunny morning he sank the stone of love to the bottom of the lake and returned to her who had been making his morning tea when he left.

He found her lying on the marble floor and from her peach-like breast the ivory handle of a small dagger protruded. Her golden hair mingled with the fallen petals. In her pale face there was no fear and her dark eyes shone with the same sadness as when he had seen her for the first time. She said quietly:

“I love you, prince of the Land of Red Flowers, I’ve loved you ever since I first saw you. But I must die because I did not submit myself to the great prince of the Han and Arida dynasties who will unite the East and the West and become the world’s mightiest ruler.”

The prince knelt beside her. “Who are you?” he asked faintly.

“I’m a princess of the Chauna dynasty, whom you, my darling, called Alni the Peerless”

Her head fell to the side and she was a dead petal among other dead petals on the marble shrine of their love.

As the prince kissed in vain the lips that were growing cold, he cursed the gods of his ancestors and the deceptive arts that he had learned on the mountain where the sun goes to sleep. He drained the lake and set the stone of love into a diadem he put on her forehead. He picked the red flowers in his gardens and covered her body with them. Then he built a red granite temple over the catafalque of red blossoms. A large rock protected the entrance.

He killed thousands of slaves and ordered their ghosts to serve Alni the Peerless. He unchained the black tigers by the entrances and ordered them to guard her shrine. He covered his fabulous gardens with desert sand and stuck the last wilted flower onto his shield. Then he mounted Chesme and slowly rode away from Kama Dewa.

Dark as night he rode to the ruins of Kala Kessua, where the two lions still stood by the entrance, staring at him with their empty eyes. He found eleven of his soldiers in the ruins, who were faithfully awaiting their chief. He ordered them to mount their horses and they galloped into the desert.

The voice ghost of the desert thieves trembled from the ruins:

“Sheikh Kara Samum, Black Wind, the last lord of the Al Arida desert.”

To this day, when the night is clear, caravans are filled with fear upon seeing him riding through the Al Arida desert, surrounded by eleven white riders - the Black Sheikh with the red flower.