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The heroes galloped on after Wen. After a while, they noticed in the distance a column of men and horses strung out over the flat plain. Priest Wu Chen drew his sword and roared: "Chase them!" The figures in front gradually grew larger. Luo Bing's white horse raced round to the front, and in the wink of an eye, she had caught up with the column. With her twin swords in hand, she prepared to overtake it, then block its path. But suddenly, shouts rose from in front, and several dozen Muslims riding camels and horses raced towards them from the east.

This was completely unexpected, and Luo Bing reined in her horse and stopped to see what the Muslims were doing. By now, the Imperial officers and the Bodyguard Agency men had also halted, and gazed in consternation at the Muslims as they bore down on them, sabres glinting in the sun.

Chen ordered the heroes to halt to watch the fight. Suddenly, they saw a rider skirt round the battle and race straight towards them. As he approached, they recognised him as 'Leopard' Wei. He rode up to Chen.

"Great Helmsman," he said breathlessly. "We set up guard at the mouth of the gorge, but this group of Muslims broke past us. There was no way of stopping them, but now they're attacking the Eagle's Claws. It's very strange."

"Priest Wu Chen, Third Brother Zhao, and the Twin Knights," Chen said. "The four of you go and get Fourth Brother's carriage away. The rest of us will wait and see how things develop."

The four heroes galloped off.

"Who are you?" the Imperial officers shouted as they approached. Zhao didn't bother to answer. Two steel darts left his hands, and two of the officers fell dead from their horses. Zhao was nicknamed the 'Thousand Arm Buddha' because he had a kindly face and a soft heart, and was also a master of all types of darts, which he kept secreted around his body.

As the four heroes approached the carriage, a white turbaned Muslim struck out at them with his spear, but they dodged past him, and attacked the bodyguard agency lead escorts who were guarding the carriage. One of the escorts swung his sword at Priest Wu Chen, who blocked the stroke with his own sword, which slid down the other's blade as fast as lightning and sliced off all his fingers then plunged into his heart. He heard the sound of another blade cleaving towards his back, and without turning, drove his sword up and

back so that the blade sliced his attacker in half from left armpit to right shoulder.

Seeing Priest Wu Chen's frightening swordsmanship and two of their own men killed before completing even one move, the other lead escorts' courage broke and they scattered.

Zhao raced up to the carriage and pulled up the carriage curtain to look inside. In the darkness, he could dimly make out a figure wrapped in a coverlet.

"Fourth Brother!" he shouted happily.

"You take Fourth Brother back and I'll go and look for Zhang Zhaozhong to settle accounts with him" Priest Wu Chen said, riding up. He spurred his horse forward and charged into the crowd of fleeing lead escorts and Imperial officers.

"'Firehand Judge' Zhang! Come out and face me!" he called over and over, but no-one answered him.

The Red Flower Society fighters were overjoyed to see Zhao accompanying the carriage back, and all raced up to meet him. Luo Bing galloped into the lead and up to the carriage, jumped off her horse and pulled aside the carriage curtain.

"Fourth Brother!" she called out shakily, but the figure inside made no sound. Startled, Luo Bing leapt in and pulled off the coverlet. By this time, the heroes had all dismounted and were standing closely about, watching.

Meanwhile, a fierce battle was raging between the Muslims on one side and the Imperial officers and lead escorts on the other. Priest Wu Chen continued to move backwards and forwards through the crowd, searching for Zhang. All of a sudden, a horse charged out in front of him, its rider a huge Muslim with a thick beard covering his face.

"Where does this wild reckless priest come from?" he shouted.

The priest replied with a stroke from his sword, and the Muslim raised his sabre to parry the blow. Priest Wu Chen countered with two strokes to the left and right, incomparably fast, and in panic, the Muslim lunged backwards, hooked his right foot into the stirrup and rolled beneath the horse's belly, then urged his horse forward and escaped while still hiding beneath the animal.

"Managing to avoid three strokes from my sword is not bad," Priest Wu Chen smiled. "I'll spare your life." He charged back into the battle.

Meanwhile, Luo Bing pulled the man out of the carriage and threw him on the ground. "Master Wen!" she shouted. "Where is he?" Even before she had finished speaking, tears were coursing down her face.

They saw the man was old and wizened, dressed as a Yamen officer with his right hand in a sling. Luo Bing recognised him as the Officer Wu from Beijing whose right arm had been broken by Wen at the inn. She gave him a kick, and wanted to question him again, but her voice failed her.

'Leopard' Wei put one of his steel hooks close to Wu's right eye, and shouted: "Where is Master Wen? If you don't talk I'll put out this eye for a start!"

"Zhang Zhaozhong took him off a long time ago," Wu replied sullenly. "He told me to ride in the carriage. I thought he was being nice and giving me a chance to rest my arm, but he was using me, setting me up while he himself goes to Beijing and collects all the honours. Damn him!"

By this time, all the heroes were standing round the carriage.

"Gather all the Eagle's Claws and lead escorts together and don't let any of them get away!" Chen called out.

The heroes encircled the Yamen officers and the Bodyguard Agency men, who were still fighting furiously with the Muslims. 'Buddha' Zhao waved both his hands and three darts shot out, simultaneously felling two officers and one lead escort.

The Muslims realised the Red Flower Society heroes were friends, and they gave a great cheer. The large Muslim with the thick whiskers galloped forward and shouted: "I don't know who you are, but you who have drawn your weapons to assist us, and I thank you." He raised his sword in salute.

Chen returned the salute. "Brothers, let's all take part!" he shouted, and the heroes rushed at the enemy, all except for Luo Bing, who was too confused to care.

By this time, most of the good fighters amongst the Yamen officers and lead escorts were either dead or seriously wounded, and many of their number were kneeling on the ground begging for mercy as the battle continued.

Suddenly, Priest Wu Chen galloped out of the melee, and shouted to the heroes: "Come and look! This young girl's swordmanship isn't bad!"

They all knew that the Priest's skill with a sword was unrivalled throughout the land, so hearing him praise another's swordmanship, and a girl's at that, they all pressed in to watch. The thickly-whiskered Muslim

shouted a few phrases in the Muslim language, and the other Muslims gave way and made a place in the circle for the Red Flower Society fighters.

Chen looked into the centre of the circle and saw a girl in yellow robes fighting closely with a short, stocky man wielding a pair of Five Elements Wheels. On his back was a red knapsack.

"The girl is named Huo Qingtong," Lu said to Chen. "She's a pupil of the Tianshan Twin Eagles. The man using the Five Elements Wheels is surnamed Yan. He's one of the Six Guandong Devils."

Chen started in surprise. He knew that the Tianshan Twin Eagles were leading members of the fighting community in the Muslim border regions, and also that relations between them and his own teacher, Master Yuan, were strained. Focussing his attention on the duel, he saw the yellow-robed girl attack ferociously with her sword, but Yan withstood the onslaught with the help of his Five Element Wheels. The Muslims shouted their support and some edged in closer, obviously eager to intervene to help the girl.

Yan parried and attacked, then suddenly retreated a step. "Hold it," he shouted. "There's something I want to say."

The Muslims moved up even closer, and it looked as though he would be carved up before he chance to say anything. Yan shifted both wheels to his left hand and grabbed the red knapsack off his back. He held the wheels up high.

"If you are going to rely on numbers to beat me, I'll cut up the knapsack now," he shouted.

The razor-sharp teeth of the Five Element Wheels twinkled, and the Muslims, greatly afraid, retreated.

"There are many of you," he shouted. "Taking my life would be as easy as turning your hand over. But I will never surrender unless it is a one-to-one fight. If anyone of you can defeat me singlehandedly, I will freely hand over the knapsack. Otherwise I would prefer to take it with me."

Zhou Qi leapt into the circle. "Right," she yelled. "Let's match ourselves against each other." She brandished her sword, ready to charge forward, but Huo Qingtong shook her head.

"Thank you, sister, but I will fight first," she said. "If I cannot beat him, I will invite you to lend me a hand."

"The knapsack contains something that is very precious to this Muslim tribe," Lu Feiqing interrupted. "She must recover it with her own hands."

Yan slung the knapsack onto his back. "Who's going to come against me, then?"

"No matter what the outcome, you will give up the Sacred Book," Huo Qingtong said to him. "If you win, you will be allowed to leave. If you lose, you will give up your life as well."

Her sword cut in from the side, thrusting at his left shoulder, and Yan countered using the sixty-four moves of the combined Five Elements and Eight Diagrams styles, which are designed to wrest away an opponent's weapon while maintaining a very tight defence.

Chen motioned 'Scholar' Yu over. "Fourteenth Brother, go immediately and find out what happened to Brother Wen. We will follow after you," he said.

Yu nodded and retreated from the circle. He glanced over at Luo Bing and saw her looking dazed. He wanted to go over and comfort her, but changed his mind and galloped off.

Huo Qingtong attacked again using a slightly faster sword style. Yan, who had been trying to seal off her sword with his wheels, now found this impossible.

After another twenty or so moves, Huo Qingtong's cheeks began to flush slightly and small beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. But she was full of spirit and her footwork never faltered. Her sword style suddenly changed to the Tianshan School's Mirage technique, combining feint with force. The heroes held their breaths, completely absorbed. Suddenly, Huo Qingtong's blade slashed forward and struck Yan's right wrist. He cried out in fright and dropped the wheel in his right hand as the crowd roared in unison.

Yan leapt back wards. "I accept defeat! The Sacred Book is yours!" he cried and began to undo the red knapsack on his back. An expression of joy filled Huo Qingtong's face and she replaced her sword in its scabbard and moved forward to accept the Koran which her tribe held so sacred. But as she approached, Yan waved his right hand and three darts flew towards her chest. She had no time to dodge out of the way, so with an 'Iron-Plated Bridge' move, she bent straight over backwards and the darts flew just over her face. Having started, Yan could not stop half way, so he quickly followed with three more darts. At that moment, Huo Qingtong was facing the sky, and was unaware of the disaster that was about to strike. The onlookers gasped in fear and anger.

As she straightened up again, she heard three noises, "Ding, Ding, Ding," as the three darts were hit by three projectiles and fell to the ground by her

feet. She broke into a cold sweat and quickly re-drew her sword. Yan lunged forward with all the power of a crazed tiger and his Five Elements Wheel smashed straight down at her. With no time to escape, all the girl could do was to raise her sword and solidly block the stroke. For a while, they were deadlocked. But Yan was very strong, and the Five Elements Wheel slowly pressed down towards her head until the sharp blades on the wheel were touching the turquoise feather on her cap. The heroes were about to move forward to assist her when there was a flash of blue as Huo Qingtong drew a dagger from her waist with her free hand and rammed it into Yan's belly. He cried out once, then toppled over backwards, dead. The crowd cheered as one in approval.

Huo Qingtong untied the knapsack from Yan's back. The black-whiskered Muslim walked over to her, praising her and calling her "Good Child". She held the knapsack in both her hands and presented it to him with a modest smile. "Papa," she said. He took the knapsack and the cheering crowd of Muslims pressed forward.

Huo Qingting saw a boy jump off his horse, pick up three round white objects from the ground and present them on his palm to a young man in the crowd, who picked them up and put them in his bag.

"It must have been him who deflected that villain's darts and saved my life," she thought. She took a closer look at the young man and saw that he was graceful and charming. He wore a light gown tied loosely around the waist and fanned himself with a folding fan. Their eyes met, and he smiled at her. Blushing, she lowered her head. She ran over to her father and whispered into his ear. Her father, who was named Muzhuolun, nodded, walked over to the young man and bowed before him. The young man hurriedly dismounted and returned the bow.

"Thank you sir, for saving my daughter's life," Muzhuolun said. "I am extremely grateful to you. May I ask your honourable name?"

"My name is Chen Jialuo," he said. "We have a sworn brother whom we thought was being held captive by this band of Eagle's Claws and came here to save him, but he is not here. However, the fact that you have recovered your honourable tribe's Sacred Book is very pleasing."

Muzhuolun called his son, Huo Yayi, and his daughter over, and the three bowed before Chen in thanks.

The son had a square face, large ears and a thick beard. His sister, on the other hand was very graceful: as delicate as a spring flower. Earlier, Chen had concentrated on watching her sword style, but now with her standing

close to him, he found his heart beating fast at the wonder that such a perfect girl could exist.

"If you had not saved me, I would have fallen victim to his cunning designs," Huo Qingtong said quietly. "Such great kindness, I would never forget."

"Please, there is no need for thanks," Chen replied. "I am already fortunate that you are not offended by my interference. I have long heard that the Three Part Sword Style of the Twin Eagles of Tianshan was the most advanced of their time. The style truly lives up to its reputation."

Huo Qingtong held a low-voiced discussion with her father, who nodded rapidly. "Yes, yes," he said. "That is what we should do." He walked over to Chen.

"Thanks to your assistance, our business has now been completed," he said. "I heard you mention that you have to rescue one of your number, and I would like to order my son and daughter together with several companions to act under you to help save him. Their kung fu is poor and they will probably of little use, but they may be helpful running errands and the like. Will you give your permission, sir?"

"That is very good of you," Chen replied, and immediately introduced the other members of the Red Flower Society to him.

"Your swordsmanship is extraordinarily fast," Muzhuolun said to Priest Wu Chen. "I have never in my life seen anything like it. It is lucky your hand was stayed by mercy, otherwise... hah..."

"I must beg your pardon," the priest replied with a smile. "I hope you won't take offence."

While they were talking, a horse galloped up from the west. A youngster dismounted and address Lu Feiqing as "teacher". It was Li Yuanzhi who by this time had changed into her boy's clothes. She caught sight of Huo Qingtong, and ran over and grasped her hand.

"Where did you go that night?" Yuanzhi asked. "I was worried to death about you! Did you get the Sacred Book back?"

"We just recovered it," Huo Qingtong said happily. "Look." She pointed at the red knapsack now on her brother's back.

"Have you opened it to have a look? Is the Sacred Book inside?"

Huo Qingtong nodded and hurriedly undid the knapsack. Inside, was a pile of waste paper.

Muzhuolun grabbed a bodyguard agency caller who was squatting on the ground and boxed his ears. "Where has the Sacred Book gone?" he roared.

"I don't know anything...about what the lead escorts do," he mumbled, and pointed at Lead Escort Qian who was sitting with his head in his hands. Qian had received several light wounds in the confused battle, and had surrendered after most of the others were killed. Muzhuolun dragged him over.

"Friend," he said. "Do you want to die or live?"

Qian said nothing. Muzhuolun angrily raised his hand to strike him.

"The other lead escorts took the book with them," Qian said.

Muzhuolun was skeptical and ordered his subordinates to search the mule train thoroughly, but they found no trace of it. He now realised why Yan had been unwilling to hand over the knapsack.

Meanwhile, Yuanzhi was questioning Lu on what had happened since they had parted. "I'll tell you about it later," he replied. "Go back now, your mother will be worried about you. Don't say anything about what you've seen here."

"Of course," she said. "But who are these people? Introduce me to them."

Lu considered Yuanzhi's position as the daughter of a provincial commander-in-chief and decided it would be better not to. "I don't think it's necessary," he said.

Yuanzhi pouted. "I know you don't like me," she said. "You prefer that martial nephew of yours, 'Golden Flute Scholar', or whatever he's called. Anyway, I'm leaving."

She mounted her horse, galloped over to Huo Qingtong, bent down and embraced her shoulder, then whispered a few words into her ear. Huo Qingtong laughed, and Yuanzhi spurred her horse forward and raced off back the way she had come.

Chen had watched the whole incident, and was astonished to see Huo Qingtong being so familiar with this handsome youngster. Conflicting feelings swept through his heart and he stood staring dumbly, a vacant expression on his face.

"Great Helmsman," Xu said, walking over. "Let's discuss how we are going to save Fourth Brother."

Chen started, and then collected his thoughts. "That's right," he said. "Xin Yan, you ride Sister Luo Bing's horse and go and get Brother Zhang Jin." Xin Yan nodded and left.

"Ninth Brother," Chen continued, turning to 'Leopard' Wei. "Patrol around and look for indications of where the Eagle's Claws are. Come back this evening to report." Wei likewise assented and left.

"We will camp here tonight," Chen said to the rest. "We can resume the chase early tomorrow morning."