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Huo Qingtong left the camp feeling lonely and confused. "I'll go to my teachers' home at Precious Mountain and lose myself in the desert with them," she thought. She was unwell, and even though her kung fu training enabled her to keep going, after ten days travelling across the desert, she was absolutely exhausted and still four or five days from the home of the Tianshan Eagles. Finally, she stopped beside a small sand dune and let her horse graze on the sparse, dry grasses nearby.

She set up her tent and slept for several hours. In the middle of the night she was awakened by the sound of three horses approaching from the east. As they neared the sand dune, they slowed and headed for the same patch of dry grass that had attracted her mount. The horses were unwilling to continue, so the three riders dismounted to rest. They did not see Huo Qingtong's tent, which was on the other side of the dune. She heard them talking Chinese, but she was still sleepy and did not bother to listen closely. Suddenly, however, she heard one of the men say: "That damned bitch! If I don't skin her alive and rip out all her tendons, then my name isn't Gu."

"Brother Yan's kungfu was excellent," said another. "I don't believe that a girl could kill him without using some sort of trickery."

"Well, of course," added a third. "As I said, we have to be very careful. There are a lot of Muslims around."

Huo Qingtong realised in astonishment that they were the Guandong Devils and that they were talking about her.

"There's not much water left in the satchel and we don't know how many more days we have to go before we find water again," one of them said. "From tomorrow, we'll have to drink even less." Soon afterwards, they went to sleep.

Huo Qingtong was uncertain of what to do. The desert was flat and empty for miles in every direction, so there was no way she could escape if they found her, especially as she was still sick. After some thought, she decided the safest course would be to reveal herself, and find some way to lead the three to her teacher's home.

Early next morning, the Guandong Devils woke to find Huo Qingtong standing in front of them. She examined them carefully. One was a tall man who looked like a member of the gentry. The second had a thick black beard, while the third was wearing Mongol clothes.

"Mistress, do you have any water to spare?" the first man, Tang, asked her, pulling out a silver ingot as he spoke. Huo Qingtong shook her head to indicate she did not understand Chinese. The Mongol, who was named Hahetai, repeated the request in Mongolian and she replied in the same tongue: "I cannot give you any of my water. The Yellow-Robed Lady, Mistress Huo Qingtong, sent me on an important errand and I am now returning to report." She quickly dismantled her tent and mounted her horse. Hahetai ran forward and grabbed hold of her horse's reins.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"We are her friends. There is urgent news we have to pass on to her."

Huo Qingtong pouted. "That's an outright lie! She is at Precious Mountain, but you are heading west. Don't try to cheat me!"

Hahetai turned to the other two and said: "She's on her way to see the damned bitch now."

With her unhealthy appearance and the way she wheezed as she spoke, she did not look at all like someone who knew kung fu. So not suspecting her in the slightest, the Devils took advantage of what they took to be her ignorance of Chinese and loudly discussed how they would kill her when they reached Precious Mountain, and then go to find Huo Qingtong. The bearded man, Gu, could see that she was very beautiful despite her haggard look, and his lust began to stir.

Huo Qingtong noticed him constantly staring at her covetously, and knew that even though they had not recognised her, travelling alone for four or five days with these three Devils was too dangerous. She ripped a strip of material off her jacket and tied it round the leg of one of her two eagles then threw the bird up into the air. It spread its wings and flew off towards the horizon.

"What are you doing?" Tang demanded suspiciously. Huo Qingtong shook her head, and Hahetai translated what he had said into Mongolian.

"There are no more water springs for another seven or eight days. You've got so little water, how could it be enough? I'm letting the eagles go so they can go and find water themselves." As she spoke, she released the second eagle.

"Two eagles wouldn't drink very much water," Tang replied.

"When you're dying of thirst, even a drop may be enough to save your life." Afraid they would try to harm her, she had exaggerated the distance to the next water.

Hahetai mumbled oaths. "Even in the deserts of Mongolia, you would never have to travel for seven or eight days without water. This is a cursed region!"

They camped that night in the middle of the desert. Huo Qingtong could see Gu's gaze constantly sweeping over her and became very worried. She went into her tent, drew her sword, and sat down beside the tent entrance, not daring to sleep. Towards midnight, she heard someone tiptoeing over. Suddenly, the tent flap opened and Gu crept inside. He began feeling about in the darkness for her, and an instant later, felt an icy coldness on his neck as a sharp blade gently touched it.

"If you so much as twitch, I will run it through you," Huo Qingtong whispered. "Lie on the ground!" He immediately complied. She placed the tip of the sword on his back, then sat down and wondered what she should do.

"If I kill him, the other two won't let me get away with it," she thought. "It's probably best to wait for my teacher to get here."

A couple of hours later, Tang woke and noticed Gu was missing. He jumped up and began shouting "Brother Gu! Brother Gu!"

"Answer him quickly," Huo Qingtong whispered fiercely. "Tell him you're here."

"It's all right, Brother, I'm here!" he shouted back, well aware that he had no choice.

Tang laughed. "You horny old thief! You'll never change."

The next morning, Huo Qingtong waited until the other two were up before letting Gu out.

"Brother Gu," Hahetai berated him as he emerged. "We have come to seek revenge not to make trouble." Gu's teeth were almost chattering with hate but he didn't tell them what had happened. If he did, the shame of it would follow him for the rest of his life. But he decided that he would have the girl the following night and then kill her.

At about midnight, Gu advanced on Huo Qingtong's tent again, a spear in one hand and a torch in the other. As he entered, he saw her crouching in the far corner and lunged at her triumphantly. But suddenly he felt something cut into his legs as a rope noose hidden on the ground caught him. Huo Qingting gave it a tug and he overbalanced and fell heavily.

"Don't move!" she hissed, and placed the tip of her sword against his stomach. She didn't think she could not stand another night like the previous one, but killing Gu was not enough. She had to finish off all three.

"Tell your elder brother to come over here," she whispered. Gu guessed what she was planning and remained silent. She increased the pressure so that the sword cut through his clothes and the top layer of skin. Gu knew a sword in the stomach was the most painful way to die. "He won't come," he whispered back.

"All right, then I'll kill you first," she replied, and the sword moved again.

"Elder Brother! Come here! Come quickly!" Gu called frantically.

"Laugh," Huo Qingtong ordered. Gu frowned and uttered several dry laughs.

"Laugh more happily!"

He silently cursed her, but with the sword already inside his flesh, he forced out a loud hysterical laugh. Tang and Hahetai had already been awakened by the racket.

"Stop playing around, Brother, and conserve some of your strength," Tang yelled.

Huo Qingtong could see he wouldn't come. "Call the other one," she hissed, and Gu shouted out again. Although he was a bandit, Hahetai did not take advantage of women, and he was very unhappy with Gu's behaviour. But he was his sworn brother, so he just pretended not to hear.

"If I don't kill these three, it is going to be difficult to free myself of today's shame," she thought. Holding the sword in her right hand, she wound the rope round and round Gu until he could not move. Only then did she relax. She leant against the side of the tent, but did not dare to fall asleep.

The next morning, as it grew light, she saw that Gu was fast asleep and angrily whipped him awake with her horse's whip. She placed the tip of her sword on his heart and said: "If you so much as grunt, I will skewer you!" She wondered again whether she should kill him, but decided that it would immediately bring disaster down on her head. She estimated her teacher should reach them by that afternoon anyway, so after untying the rope, she pushed Gu out of the tent.

Tang looked at the bloody welts on his face suspiciously. "Who is this girl?" he asked in a low voice. "What's she up to?"

Gu glanced meaningfully at him. "Let's grab her," he said. The two men started to walk slowly towards her, but she saw them coming and ran over to

the horses. She pulled out her sword and punctured Gu's and Hahetai's water bags, then grabbed the largest of Tang's water bags and jumped onto her own horse. The Three Devils stood watching dumbly for a second as the precious water drained out of the two water bags and was instantly swallowed by the sand, then charged at her angrily.

She lay along the horse's back breathing heavily. "If you come a step closer, I'll slash this bag too," she wheezed. The Three Devils stopped.

"I agreed to take you to see Mistress Huo Qingtong and in return you bully me," she added when she had recovered slightly. "From here to the next water is six days travelling. If you don't leave me alone, I'll slash this bag too and we will all die of thirst."

"We won't harm you," protested Tang.

"Let's go," she ordered. "You three first." So they rode on across the desert, the three men in front, the girl behind.

By noon, the burning sun was riding high in the sky, and their lips and tongues were parched dry. Huo Qingtong began to see stars before her eyes and moments of faintness swept over her. She wondered if she was going to die.

"Hey! Give us some water!" she heard Hahetai shout. She shook herself awake.

"Take out a bowl and put it on the ground," she replied. Hahetai did as she said. "Now retreat one hundred paces." Gu hesitated suspiciously. "If you don't, you won't get any water," she added. They cursed her, but retreated. Huo Qingtong rode forward, undid the cap of the water bag and filled the bowl, then rode away again. The three men ran over to the bowl and took turns at gulping down the liquid.

They continued on their way, and about four hours later green grass began to appear beside the road. Tang's eyes lit up. "There must be water ahead!" he shouted. Huo Qingtong was worried. She tried to think of some course of action, but her head was splitting with pain. Suddenly, there was a long eagle's cry from above and she looked up to see a black shape swooping downwards. Overjoyed, she raised her arm and the eagle landed on her shoulder. She saw a piece of black material fastened to one of its legs and knew her teacher would arrive soon.

Tang could see something funny was going on, and with a wave of his hand sent a sleeve dart flying towards Huo Qingtong's right wrist, hoping to knock the sword from her grasp. But she blocked the dart with her sword and with a wave of the reins, galloped around them and into the lead. The

Three Devils began shouting and chased after her. After two or three miles, her legs and arms were numb, and she could hold on no longer. The horse gave a jolt and she toppled to the ground.

The Three Devils spurred their horses on. Huo Qingtong struggled to get back onto the horse, but she was too weak. Then in a flash of inspiration, she slung the water bag's leather strap over the eagle's neck and threw the bird up into the air. Tang and the others forgot Huo Qingtong at the sight of their water bag being carried away and chased frantically after the eagle. The water bag was almost full of water and not light, so the eagle was not able to fly high or fast, and the three were able to keep up with it.

A few miles further on, the eagle glided downwards just as two riders appeared in a cloud of dust ahead of them. The eagle circled twice and landed on the shoulder of one of the riders. The Three Devils spurred their horses on and saw that one of the strangers was a bald, red-faced old man, and the other a white-haired old lady.

"Where's Huo Qingtong?" the old man barked, and the three stared at him in surprise. The old man removed the water bag from the eagle's neck and hurled the bird back into the air. He gave a harsh whistle and the bird answered with a squeak and headed back the way it had come. The old couple took no further notice of the Three Devils and galloped past them, chasing after the eagle. Tang saw the old man still had the water bag, and with a wave of his hand to the others, followed along behind.

The two old people were the Tianshan Twin Eagles, Bald Vulture and Madame Guan. After three or four miles, they saw the eagle glide downwards to where Huo Qingtong was lying on the ground. Madame Guan leapt off her horse and grabbed the girl up into her arms and began sobbing.

"Who has been treating you so badly?" she demanded, looking down at the girl's deathly appearance. Just then, the Three Devils rode up. Huo Qingtong pointed at them, then fainted away.

"Well, are you just going to sit there?" Madame Guan demanded angrily of her husband. Bald Vulture wheeled his horse round and charged at the three, and began fighting furiously with them.

Madame Guan slowly poured water into Huo Qingtong's mouth and the girl gradually regained consciousness. Only then did she look round to see how her husband was doing. He was struggling to keep the three at bay, and so she drew her sword and jumped into the melee. She struck out at Tang, who swung round to counter the stroke, but immediately found her style had changed. Amazed that this thin old woman could be such a formidable swordswoman, he concentrated completely on defence.

Huo Qingtong sat up and observed the Twin Eagles gradually gaining the upper hand. As she watched, she faintly heard a strange sound floating towards them on the wind from far off, a sound full of violence and dread, hunger and evil, as if hundreds of wild beasts were howling in unison.

"Teacher, listen!" she cried. The Twin Eagles disengaged themselves from the fight and cocked an ear to listen carefully. The Devils had been hard pressed to hold their own, and did not dare to attack the old couple.

The sound increased slightly in volume, and the Twin Eagles turned pale. Bald Vulture ran over to his horse and stood on its back.

"Come and look!" he shouted. "See if there's anywhere we can take cover."

Madame Guan picked Huo Qingtong up and placed her on her own horse, then vaulted up onto her husband's horse and stood on his shoulders.

The Three Devils looked at each other, absolutely baffled. Their attackers had broken off the fight when they had already won, and were now building human pyramids on a horse's back.

"What devilry are they up to?" Gu growled darkly. Tang had no idea what was happening and could only concentrate on being prepared for anything.

Madame Guan gazed about in all directions, and then shouted: "I think there are two big trees to the north!"

"Whether there are or not, let's go!" her husband replied. Madame Guan jumped over to Hua Qingtong's horse, and they galloped off north without taking any further notice of the Three Devils.

Hahetai noticed that in their hurry to get away, they had left the water bag behind, and bent down to pick it up. By now, the terrifying howling sound was becoming even louder. Gu's face turned grey. "It's a wolf pack!" he cried. The three leapt onto their horses and galloped after the Twin Eagles. Looking back, they saw large wild cats, camels, goats and horses racing for their lives before a grey tide of thousands of hungry wolves.

A few dozen yards ahead of the multitude was a rider, galloping along as if leading the way. In a flash, his powerful horse raced up and passed the Three Devils, who saw he was an old man. The rider turned to look back at them, and shouted: "Do you want to die? Faster!"

Tang's horse was scared out of its wits by the mass of animals bearing down upon them, and it stumbled and threw him. Tang leapt to his feet as a dozen wild cats rushed past him.

"I'm finished," he thought, and began screaming at the top of his voice. Gu and Hahetai heard his screams and turned and headed back to rescue him, the wolves bearing down upon them. A huge wolf, its snow-white teeth bared, charged at Tang, who drew his sword to defend himself even though he knew it was useless. Suddenly, there was the sound of horse's hooves behind, and the old man galloped up, grabbed Tang by his collar and threw his fat body towards Hahetai. Tang somersaulted through the air and landed in a sitting position on Hahetai's horse. The three riders pulled their horses round, and flew for their lives.

The Twin Eagles had lived in the desert many years and were well aware that even the most ferocious animal could not survive an encounter with the wolf pack. They galloped on, and as the two tall trees rose before them, thanked the Heavens that they had once again avoided ending up in a wolf's stomach. Once at the trees, Bald Vulture leapt up in to the branches of one, and Madame Guan handed Huo Qingtong up to him. The wolf pack was approaching fast. Madame Guan whipped the backs of their two horses and shouted: "Run for your lives! We cannot help you!" The two horses dashed away.

Just as the three of them had found somewhere to sit in the branches, they noticed the grey-gowned rider galloping along ahead of the wolf pack. As the rider passed by below, Bald Vulture embraced him with his free hand and lifted him up.

The old man was taken by surprise. His horse shot onwards, while he himself was left dangling in space, a host of animals passing under his feet. He performed a somersault, and landed on his feet on a branch further up the tree.

"What's wrong?" said Bald Vulture. "Don't tell you're afraid of wolves too, Master Yuan?"

"Who asked you to interfere?" the old man replied angrily.

"There's no need to be like that," Madame Guan interrupted him. "My husband just saved your life."

The old man laughed coldly. "Saved me? You've messed up everything!"

He was Great Helmsman Chen's teacher, Master Yuan. He and Madame Guan had grown up together in central China and had fallen in love. But they had argued constantly, and eventually Yuan left and spent more than ten years travelling in the Northern Deserts. There was no news of him, and Madame Guan presumed he would never come back. Eventually, she married Bald Vulture, but shortly after the wedding, Yuan unexpectedly returned

home. Both Yuan and Madame Guan were heart-broken although they never spoke of the matter again. Bald Vulture was also very unhappy, and on several occasions went after Yuan to get revenge, but his kung fu was not good enough, and only Yuan's regard for Madame Guan's feelings kept her husband from being seriously hurt. So Bald Vulture took his wife and travelled far away into the Muslim regions. Yuan, however, could not forget her, and also moved to the Tianshan Mountains. He never visited them, but just living close to the woman he loved made him feel a little happier. Madame Guan did all she could to keep from seeing her former lover, but Bald Vulture would not let the matter drop, and the couple had fought and argued for decades since. All three were now old and white-haired, but a day did not pass when they did not think of the entanglement.

Bald Vulture was very pleased with himself for having saved Yuan. You have always had the upper hand, he thought, but perhaps you'll show gratitude towards me after this. Madame Guan, however, was puzzled by Yuan's anger.

"What do you mean, 'messed everything up'?" she asked. "Messed what up?"

"This wolf pack is growing bigger and bigger, and has become a real plague on the desert," Yuan replied. "Several Muslim villages have been completely wiped out already. The wolves eat people, animals, everything. So I prepared a trap and was just leading them to their deaths when you interfered."

Bald Vulture knew Yuan was telling the truth, and felt acutely embarrassed.

Yuan saw the apologetic expression on Madame Guan's face and brought his anger under control. "But you were doing what you thought was best," he added. "I thank you, anyway."

"What sort of trap is it?" asked Bald Vulture.

"Save them!" Yuan suddenly shouted, and jumped down from the tree into the midst of the wolves.

The Three Devils had already been overtaken by the wolves, and their horses had been ripped to shreds. The three of them were standing back-to-back fighting furiously, and although they had killed more than a dozen wolves, others continued to lunge at them. All three were already wounded in several places, and it looked as if they could not hold out for long. Yuan raced over, his hands flew out and smashed the skulls of two wolves. He picked Hahetai up and threw him up into the tree, shouting "Catch!", and

Bald Vulture caught him. In the same way, Yuan threw Tang and Gu up, then killed another two wolves, grabbed one of the corpses by the neck and swung it round and round, opening up a path to the tree, then leapt up into the branches. The Three Devils, having been literally snatched from the jaws of death, showered him with thanks. They were astonished by the speed and strength he had displayed, and the way he made killing wolves seem as easy as catching rabbits.

Several hundred wolves circled the base of the tree, scratching at the trunk, raising their heads and howling. A short distance away, several dozen of the fleeing animals had been cut off and encircled by the wolves, who filled the air with their cries and howls. The animals leapt frantically about as the wolves tore and gnashed at them. It was a horrible sight. In only a moment, the animals had all been ripped apart and eaten. Those sitting up in the tree were all brave fighters, but it was the first time any of them had witnessed such a terrifying scene, and they were very frightened.

Bald Vulture eyed the Three Devils suspiciously.

"They are not good men," Huo Qingtong told him.

"All right, then," he replied. "They can go and feed the wolves." Just as he was about to push them off the tree, he looked down once more at the tragic scene below and hesitated just long enough for Tang to shout: "Let's go!" He leapt over to the other tree and Gu and Hahetai followed him.

Madame Guan looked at Huo Qingtong. "My dear, what do you say?" She wanted to know if the girl wanted them to chase after the three and kill them.

Huo Qingtong's heart softened. "Forget about it," she said.

"I am Huo Qingtong," she shouted to the Three Devils. "If you want to get your revenge on me, why don't you come over?" Tang and the others were astonished and infuriated by her words, but they did not dare to return to the other tree.

The wolf pack came fast, and left fast too. They swirled around the trees for a while, howling and barking, then chased off after the remaining wild animals.

Madame Guan told Huo Qingtong to pay her respects to Master Yuan. Seeing her sickly appearance, Yuan took two red pills from his bag and gave them to her, saying: "Take them. They're Snow Ginseng Pills." Snow Ginseng pills were made from the rarest medicinal herbs, and were well known for their ability to even restore life to the dying.

Just as Huo Qingtong was about to bow before him, Yuan jumped down from the tree and ran off. In a moment, he had become just a black dot amidst the swirling desert dust.