

## XV

The old queen effortlessly flexed her broad wings to take advantage of the powerful updrafts generated by the wind howling through the gorge below and was instantly rewarded with a speedy ascent. From her vantage point several hundred feet in the air, her acute eyesight, perfectly designed to take advantage of the tiny amounts of light generated by the splash of stars overhead, studied the terrain carefully. As she did so, she noted with satisfaction the others following at a respectful distance, careful not to draw too near nor lag too far behind. The three large females and eleven males that made up her entourage knew their order in the pack, and they rarely made an effort to challenge her authority. Only once in her forty years had another female dared to battle her for leadership of the pack, and that one still bore the gruesome scars of that brief fight. Now she followed well below and behind, demonstrating that the queen's authority over them was absolute and uncontested.

Taking advantage of a whirling eddy of air, the queen wheeled

abruptly and flapped her great wings twice as she studied her entourage for sign of the hatchling. She finally spotted the tiny creature struggling mightily against the columns of turbulent air that swirled about him, his wings beating furiously against the night sky in an effort to keep up with the larger adults. The pace was brutal, but it was necessary for the little one to struggle so; it was the only way to strengthen the still developing muscles he would one day need to be able to fly as effortlessly as the others. In a few months, he would be full grown and capable of taking his place among the hierarchy of the pack, and it was their job to make him ready for that day.

Satisfied the hatchling was keeping up, she wheeled again into a steep right-hand turn, folded her wings close to her body, and dove for the darkness below. It wasn't until she could sense the full fury of the column of air blasting upward from the chasm below that she unfolded her thick, black wings and let the air currents shoot her skyward again. It was a maneuver she enjoyed profoundly, and it was this ability to dive fast and silently and recover her glide just feet from the ground that made her the deadly predator she was.

It was just as she reached the upper levels of the air currents that she noticed it. Far below, just a short distance from the rim of the canyon, the queen spotted something her eyes had never seen before. It was large, with a body nearly as large as her own, but it did not seem to be alive. Still, she knew it wasn't a bit of rock or some other natural part of the plateau floor, and she was quite certain it hadn't been there during the previous evening's unsuccessful hunt.

With a single shrill squeal that warned the others to stay back, she maneuvered toward the object, flapping her wings slowly in an effort to gradually bleed off speed. Crossing the gorge slowly and using the updrafts to further slow her, she landed softly just behind the strange object, her great taloned feet slicing into the soft, cool earth. Fluttering her wings furiously to both brake and balance, a second later she came to a full stop and tucked her wings away to their fully recessed position. Crouched low, her thick neck and tooth-filled jaws hovering just feet above the surface, she moved cautiously forward, her leg and belly muscles fully taut and prepared to jettison her skyward instantly if danger presented itself.

The scent of game filled her nostrils as she closed on the object. A musty smell she had encountered before told her the two-legged animals were nearby, and she felt saliva begin to well up in the back of her throat in anticipation. She had not eaten her fill for many weeks, and now the smell of prey was maddening. She moved closer to the object, curious as to where the two-legged animals were, but certain they were, somehow, *inside* the object. Knowing that the others awaited her signal to join her, she shrieked twice and a few seconds later the sky was filled with the sound of fluttering wing beats.

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Lieutenant Guoyang felt himself gliding through that gray area between alertness and lethargy and shook his head hard, trying to clear it of slumber. Glancing at his watch, he noted it

was twenty minutes after three a.m., which meant he was nearing the end of his shift. In a few minutes he would wake one of the soldiers to relieve him of the tedious duty of standing guard, at which point he would finally be able to let sleep overtake him. Until then, however, he knew he had to remain diligent.

He looked over at the pilot dozing peacefully beside him in his seat and then looked back at the snoring forms of the two enlisted men, curled up behind them on the cold, hard floor of the chopper's passenger bay. It had been a long day of inactivity, he mused. Baby-sitting a helicopter on the windswept plains was not only a monotonous chore, but an exhausting one as well—in a non-physical way. It was also a huge waste of time, the lieutenant thought, though he would never admit such a thing to a man like Colonel Deng. Besides, what could he do? The colonel had ordered them there and he must have a good reason for doing so, though Guoyang couldn't begin to imagine what it might be.

Suddenly he remembered what the colonel had told him the previous evening when he asked about the nature of their mission. They were hunting "dragons," he had told him. *Dragons, for god's sake!* As the colonel was not known for his sense of humor, at the time he had been astounded by the statement, but since then he had had time to think about it and decided that "dragons" must be some kind of euphemism for something else—rebel insurgents, perhaps, or terrorists. Whatever it was, he hated it when his colonel spoke in riddles.

Suddenly Guoyang was startled by the fluttering noise of what sounded like a large bird landing. There were birds that inhabited the plateau, of course, including some sizable herons and

eagles, but this one sounded immense, and it was loud enough that the flapping of its wings could even be heard over the sound of the steady easterly wind from within the enclosed confines of the *Haitun*.

The young lieutenant looked out the windscreen toward the back of the chopper but could see nothing in the darkness. Instantly deciding he had been mistaken, he had just settled back in his seat when a pair of high-pitched shrieks of the sort a bird might make, only throatier and seemingly very near, shattered the stillness. Curious as to what sort of animal was capable of producing such a sound, he slowly opened the chopper door and slid out of the cockpit, landing softly in the red sand without a sound. Keeping his hand on the holstered pistol on his hip, he began walking slowly toward the back of the chopper, his eyes searching the darkness frantically as he tried to determine the source of the shrill cries.

Seeing nothing, he began to wonder if his somewhat sleep deprived imagination hadn't gotten the best of him. He also knew that the wind was capable of producing all kinds of unusual noises if it blew across the plains a certain way. Was it possible it could have made the hellacious sounds he'd heard?

Deciding that had to be the answer, he was about to return to the relative shelter of the chopper when he suddenly became aware of another sound coming from somewhere behind him. This time, however, it wasn't the flapping of wings or a screech, but the sound of heavy breathing, deep and labored, issuing from the shadows.

Guoyang spun around only to be met with a sight that was so

unexpected and so utterly fantastic that he was unable to register anything but astonishment. A massive head, in many ways reminiscent of a crocodile's but sleeker and less scaly, looked down at him from the end of a wide, sinuous neck the thickness of a telephone pole. Though definitely reptilian, it also possessed remarkably bird-like characteristics as well, and he watched in fascination as the creature's luminescent, amber-colored eyes stared unblinking at him, the pupil jerking spasmodically as it studied him carefully for a few seconds.

Letting out a silent gasp of surprise, Guoyang watched as the head reared back and emitted a wailing, almost mournful shriek that finally managed to snap the young lieutenant out of his astonishment. Fumbling for the pistol strapped to his hip, he had just about wrestled it free of its holster when the beast's tooth-studded jaws engulfed his head and pulled him bodily off his feet. With a single flick of its powerful neck muscles, the lieutenant's skull detached and his lifeless form fell limp to the ground, spraying the chopper with thick, red blood as it did so.

Within seconds the air was filled with the shrill, piercing shrieks from the rest of the pack, who quickly landed and clamored around the headless body of their prey, which they immediately began tearing to pieces in a feeding frenzy. Others, however, driven insane by the smell of fresh blood, moved cautiously toward the helicopter in eager anticipation of finding more of the succulent two-legged creatures that had become a favored meal as of late, hoping that their empty bellies would be filled once more. Finally, one of the big females made her way to the front of the machine and, spotting more prey inside, shattered the wind-

screen with a single, quick thrust from her snout. Pulling the still uncomprehending pilot from his seat, she flung him skyward and watched as he landed with a soft thud a short distance away. She coldly studied him for a moment as he desperately tried to crawl away on all fours before she and several of the males simultaneously flung themselves upon him, tearing him to pieces as his screams filled the night air.

The two young soldiers in the passenger compartment were the last to die. They might have been able to put up a fight from within the confines of the helicopter if they had kept their heads about them, but one of them panicked and opened the cabin door in an effort to make a run for it. Naturally, this gave the dragons easy access to the interior of the craft and they flung themselves at the terrified men, their teeth-lined jaws snapping in a ravenous frenzy of bloodletting. Rocking the helicopter violently as several of them pushed their way inside the machine, it took them only seconds to drag the terrified men outside and soon their combined screams also faded into the darkness.

With their deaths, a macabre silence returned to the wind-swept plains, the only sound that of gusting wind and the crunching and snapping of bones along with the occasional shrill cry of one of the creatures proclaiming its territorial rights over another. The queen, her belly finally full, permitted one of the males to lick the blood from her jaws and neck while she watched the scene in quiet satisfaction. Even the hatchling seemed to be asserting himself, she purred, as she watched the small one struggle to rip a bit of flesh from a man's detached foot.

It had been a good hunt.