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# The Eagle Huntress

By Randy Sosin

God is great.  
You are an innocent lamb,  
but this eagle deserves an offering.  
My dear eagle.  
The time has come for you...  
to fly up to the sky and be free.  
We have been together for a long time.  
And you have only brought  
good things to me.  
It is not easy for me to let you go.  
But I will release you,  
because everything has its end.  
It's only right to let you go.  
Fly to the sky.  
The lamb is just for you.  
This will be the last meal from me.  
My name is Aisholpan.  
This May I turned 13.  
How were your classes?  
Good. Straight A's.  
I was born in the Altai Mountains.  
A child of the nomads.  
I help my dad a lot.  
We do everything together.  
- There it is.  
- Where?  
There it is.  
Got him!  
I love my dad.  
He's like a teacher to me.  
My dad and my grandpa  
are eagle hunters.  
In our family...  
we have been eagle hunters...  
for generations.  
It is not a choice.  
It's a calling  
that has to be in your blood.  
When it snows...  
we go to the mountains  
with the eagles and hunt foxes.  
A hunter and a catcher  
work together as a team.  
We use the skin for fur hats...

and warm clothes.  
We compete at festivals.  
I have become a champion two times.  
Got into the top five many times.  
I was hooked.  
The horses...  
the clothing, the equipment.  
Looking at my dad and grandpa...  
I want to do the same.  
Let me hold it.  
Ever since she was young...  
Aisholpan has been  
fascinated by the eagles.  
Hold this.  
Please hold it gently.  
She would watch her dad  
feeding them...  
utterly transfixed.  
She definitely takes after him, not me.  
Sadly, that doesn't leave  
much time for me and her.  
But I don't resent that.  
I just want my daughter to love her life.  
Great.  
You're a natural.  
It's being forceful, pressing.  
She holds the eagle with strength.  
She's not afraid of it at all.  
Maybe it's in her blood as well.  
Because all the men in my family  
have been eagle hunters...  
my dream is to become the first  
eagle huntress in Mongolia.  
No.  
- No.  
- Girls do not eagle hunt.  
Elder people disapprove of it.  
Men go eagle hunting.  
This is the legacy of our forefathers.  
Women are weaker and more fragile.  
While men go eagle hunting...  
women are at home  
preparing tea and water.  
They milk cows,

process milk, make kurt.  
It's hard for girls  
to go to the mountains...  
and chase animals on horses.  
They get cold.  
Aisholpan says she wants to be  
an eagle hunter...  
to continue our tradition.  
People say she should not  
be doing this.  
So I worry for her.  
But I think girls and boys are equal.  
Girls can do anything  
boys can if they try.  
My father taught me...  
and I don't want to let her down.  
I began teaching Aisholpan...  
showing her how to cover  
the eagle's head.  
Then she learned...  
to pull the rabbit along.  
Yeah.  
After trying this...  
we tried calling the eagle to eat.  
Where is your voice?  
Raise your arm!  
That's good!  
She learned to fly the eagle  
from the mountain.  
Launch it this way.  
Pay attention. Again.  
Release. Again.  
Okay, good. Congratulations.  
Even some men can't do that.  
Are you hungry? Do your feet hurt?  
Are you tired?  
Are you hot?  
Are you hungry?  
I'll feed you when we get home.  
We go to school by the Syr river...  
because there is no school  
in our area.  
Let's play again!  
I live in the dormitory.

I've been living here  
since the 2nd grade.  
It's been so long since  
we've known each other.  
We've lived together  
for 5 years in the dorm.  
I've lived here for 7 years.  
We are all neighbours.  
We study and work.  
We are at school for only 5 days.  
On Fridays we go home.  
My brother and sister  
live with me in the dormitory.  
I take care of them.  
Good morning, teacher!  
- How are you?  
- I'm fine!  
I feel good.  
I have good grades at school...  
because I want to be  
a doctor someday.  
But right now, all I can think about  
is becoming an eagle huntress.  
Is dinner ready?  
Place the spoons. Bring the onions.  
May God bless you.  
How are your classes going?  
I wrestled everyone in my class...  
including all the boys...  
and won.  
One boy was sitting  
and looking at me as if he was frozen.  
Quick, feed this tough child.  
Since she is serious...  
I figure, let her bring up her own eagle  
and train it.  
It is said that legendary eagle hunters...  
have captured their eaglets  
in these mountains.  
May we be so lucky!  
There it is!  
Oh my God, two eaglets in one nest.  
Some good looking eaglets right there.  
Do you see, my child?

There, next to that yellow stone...  
there are two eaglets.  
They used to say the eagles  
were strong enough...  
to bring you little  
mountain goats.  
Do you see them?  
We're going to have to  
climb up that side...  
and then descend from the top.  
This is going to be tough.  
We'll need to use the rope.  
Do not be afraid, okay?  
It's a strong knot!  
Should I climb down here?  
Toward that outcrop over there?  
Just be careful, use your arms  
to steady yourself.  
Yep, that's the way.  
Hold on tightly.  
In the name of God.  
Never let go of the rope.  
Don't worry. Okay, go.  
- Give me some more rope, Dad.  
- Back, back. Steady.  
Grab onto the stone tightly.  
Don't be scared.  
Keep on moving down.  
It's getting tough there.  
Let the rope out, Dad.  
Give me some slack!  
Just hold on tight.  
Hold tight I said.  
Yeah, yeah.  
Go slowly. No more slip-ups!  
More rope!  
That's enough.  
Are you holding on tight?  
Yes.  
Look! There they are!  
I'm getting close!  
Still more rope, Aisholpan?  
Yes, more rope.  
More blue rope! I'm with the eaglets!

You made it?  
I'm really there!  
A little more line.  
There are two eagles  
nesting side by side.  
- Should I send down the blanket?  
- Yep!  
You got it?  
Bring it over this way.  
- Which way?  
- This way.  
Let it go a little bit more.  
That's it.  
Try to cover the female.  
- Say again?  
- Pull it.  
What? The blue rope?  
Yeah.  
Here you go.  
Hurry up! The mother is coming.  
Please, please, more blue rope.  
Please release more rope!  
- Hurry!  
- Don't pull.  
She fell down.  
She keeps falling away from me.  
Keep at it!  
Give me some slack on this other rope.  
Let it out more!  
Is that enough?  
Hurry up! The mother is coming.  
Shoo! Go away!  
Caught it!  
My child, is it ready to go?  
Wait a sec, let me tie this off.  
All right, ready.  
Should I reel it in now?  
We did it!  
Now, let's see what we've got here.  
Oh, God. Oh, God, look at this!  
You did really well.  
Was it difficult to get to the nest?  
You've found yourself  
a really great specimen!

All being well...  
we can start to train  
your baby eagle this autumn.  
This eaglet is a sign of good luck!  
She will bring good fortune  
to our home.  
Pop it there.  
By God, a little female eaglet!  
So you took it all by yourself?  
Yup, I went and got it.  
It was tough.  
I've never seen a nest  
that was so hard to reach!  
- Was it tough? Are you tired?  
- Nope, I'm fine.  
As for me, I got all sweaty.  
I'm exhausted!  
I started slipping on the rocks...  
but I grabbed the rope  
and hauled myself back up.  
You proved yourself today.  
You were as brave as any man.  
You really showed that nest  
who's boss!  
Thanks.  
I already love this eagle.  
I'm going to raise her and we are  
going to the eagle festival together!  
Since the Altai Mountains are high...  
it takes a strong bird to nest there.  
It's a very beautiful bird indeed.  
So it matches Aisholpan.  
She is a very brave  
and courageous girl.  
Weather forecast.  
Weather will be cloudy,  
without precipitation.  
Wind speed will be from 3 to 8  
metres per second.  
Air temperature will be  
8 to 13 degrees Celsius.  
Dear radio listeners...  
from October 2nd to October 3rd...  
the annual eagle festival



is to take place.

Father?

Let me compete

in the festival this year!

Oh, my Child, it's difficult.

Please?

Don't worry!

Does the eagle's neck revolve?

Its neck revolves all the way around.

Were you afraid

when you first touched the eagle?

Nope.

We would freak out like crazy!

- And you fly it from your hand?

- Yes.

- And it returns?

- Yes.

Do you call, "Hey, eagle,  
come back here, please?"

What do you shout

when you call the eagle?

Huukaa! Huukaa!

Is it afraid of other people?

Of course! It can bite like this!

We too want to be eagle hunters.

But we're afraid of eagles.

My father taught me...

so we went to him for advice...

and to ask for his blessing.

Aisholpan's very own eaglet.

This kind of bird is called Ice Feet.

Hard bird to catch.

Aisholpan is going to be

an eagle hunter.

Really?

Yes, some people see it as wrong.

We have been hunting with eagles

from our forefathers.

My father and his father...

taught how to train eagles.

I have trained, teach her.

This is an important task.

Both are young. I will train them.

Can you give your blessing

to Aisholpan?  
Aisholpan!  
Hey, Aisholpan!  
Aisholpan!  
This is a hard bird to catch, my child.  
Well, my child.  
May God help you  
pursue the hunter's path.  
May God keep you healthy.  
May you grow old like me  
with yellow teeth.  
May no bird escape your hands...  
and may no horse  
leave you on your journey.  
God is great.  
I entrust that eagle to you.  
This will be a beast catching bird.  
Let it get old with you.  
Stay safe!  
This is not good.  
This sets a precedent.  
Eagle hunters  
will train their daughters...  
to ride horses...  
then hold a bird.  
It is a shame to do so for the bird.  
They do not know how to properly  
approach the eagle.  
The eagle is very picky about people.  
It demands respect and courage.  
It's not like you hold an eagle  
and show off...  
and become an eagle hunter.  
No way.  
Anyhow, she will have to get married...  
at one point or another.  
When it's warm, we live in gers...  
when cold in regular houses.  
It's all we've ever known.  
Nature is great here.  
It is like our mother.  
Good morning, dear radio listeners.  
Near Ulgii, it will be cloudy  
with no precipitation.

Only four weeks left  
until the long-awaited eagle festival.  
Eagle hunters are busy preparing  
their eagles for the event.  
Okay.  
My child, I will teach you how to train  
for the festival.  
Our region's people are  
fully in preparation for this event.  
We plan to present a beautiful show...  
for our foreign guests and tourists.  
Aisholpan!  
Let's go.  
I will show you how to call it  
from those rocks.  
Probably the most important part  
of the festival.  
Let's go.  
Release!  
Congratulations! The bird did well.  
My child, now you need  
to call the bird yourself.  
I'll be up there.  
Okay, raise your hand and shout!  
With calling...  
the judges look at...  
horse riding style...  
eagle's landing...  
and eagle flying style.  
This process is timed  
and every second counts.  
- Get ready.  
- Okay.  
Seeing her bird land beautifully  
on her arm...  
I realised that she is ready.  
Don't hurry. Eat slowly.  
Ready for tomorrow?  
There will be lots of people tomorrow.  
Are you ready?  
Everything will be good.  
Are you full now?  
Don't be angry. Are you full now?  
Don't be angry.

Don't make such noises.  
You have an important  
festival tomorrow.  
You might not be able to fly  
if you eat too much.  
Do you want me to paint your nails?  
If you do not mind.  
When do you leave?  
Tomorrow.  
Will there be any other girls?  
No. Just me.  
Mostly older men.  
Okay, my child, we have to leave soon.  
It is a long ride.  
Come, my eagle, come, your eagle.  
I'm worried for her.  
This is her first festival.  
You need to take better care  
of your hair.  
Be the head of this home  
while I am away, okay?  
She decided on her own  
to be an eagle hunter.  
And I believe  
it's a woman's right to choose.  
There are so many strong  
eagle hunter men.  
All I wish for is her  
safety and wellbeing.  
Is this okay? Not too tight?  
Be careful when you ride.  
Let me look.  
We should have cut it shorter.  
It's okay, it's girl's hair!  
In the name of God.  
All the best, stay safe!  
Okay, good luck!  
Let's let the horses drink.  
They must be tired.  
- Are you tired?  
- Nah.  
God willing, we are almost there.  
Sometimes I worry...  
people might think it's strange...

because she does something  
that men usually do.  
But she shows extraordinary strength...  
regardless of her gender.  
Good morning, dear radio listeners.  
The day of the eagle festival is upon us!  
We are all hugely excited.  
Around 70 eagle hunters  
from all over the region...  
are currently making their way  
to the festival ground.  
You see, my child.  
There it is.  
People are here already.  
Peace be with you,  
dear festival participants.  
Our people have found  
their fortune in the sky.  
Our men have found  
a way to stand out...  
and find happiness  
through the centuries.  
Welcome to the eagle festival.  
What a beauty it is to see  
a bird in the sky...  
a fox on the land...  
and a fast horse.  
We have an 80-year-old  
eagle-hunter among us.  
Do not be afraid, okay?  
She is a young girl.  
Contestants...  
take your places please.  
People come from all over the world.  
The winner must be the best...  
among 70 great eagle hunters.  
Time to start!  
Here are the eagle hunters...  
who have made us  
known to the world.  
They are the ones  
who have cared for eagles...  
passed down to us  
from our great ancestors.

Please give your applause...

to these highly honoured  
eagle hunters.

Peace be upon you.

Let Ongarbay come forward.

They begin with judging  
the hunter's outfit.

10-10-10-8.

They assess the horse...  
the clothes and equipment.

6-8-10-10.

Next is Ardak...

son of a famed eagle  
hunter from Altai.

10-10-10-10.

Really nice! Great!

Next, we have an eagle  
hunter from Altai.

Let's go.

Stand over here.

Make it fit your head.

Let me look.

- Who is next you say?

- Aisholpan.

Aisholpan is that girl?

- Come here. Come here.

- Do not worry.

- Please hurry up. Hurry up.

- Ready.

You are awesome.

Since Aisholpan is a girl...  
it was important to make sure...

her riding and hunting  
styles are flawless.

Awesome.

That was good.

Next event...

"Calling."

An animal skin target...  
attracts the eagles...  
and we measure their speed.

Aisholpan calls.

I release the eagle.

8-10-8-6.

When you perform for the first time...  
you become very nervous.  
So I was worrying for her.  
Next is Aisholpan.  
Here we go!  
I told her to be careful with the horse.  
It can get scared and run into  
the crowd of people.  
Where is your voice?  
In the name of God.  
Go fast!  
Really nice! Great!  
Guests, you are invited  
for tea and lunch.  
In the name of God.  
Aisholpan's bird flew very well.  
Didn't it?  
- This bird is very special.  
- Simply amazing, how well it flew.  
All birds flew well.  
Not everyone who has  
an eagle at home...  
is a real eagle hunter.  
Women are not supposed to do it.  
You can relax at home.  
This is just the beginning.  
This is just the beginning.  
More to come.  
This event tests our eagle  
hunters' ability...  
to call a bird from afar.  
When the blue flag drops...  
release your eagles.  
Speed and skill are  
the most important part of this event.  
This is the only event...  
where people's eyes  
are genuinely full of fire.  
Quickly, quickly, quickly.  
Your applause please.  
Who's next? Who's the next person?  
It won't go where it is supposed to.  
We worry that our birds...  
may not land in our hands...

when we call them  
in front of a crowd.  
Hey, that eagle flew away!  
Why don't you run and get it!  
Everyone starts laughing at you.  
Satibaldy has issues with his eagle.  
Let the next one get ready.  
Who's next?  
Come on, Aisholpan. Let's go.  
- Raise your arm.  
- Don't worry.  
Loud voice!  
Look at the flag!  
You're up after the old man.  
My heart is beating fast.  
A very good score! Really nice!  
Where's my dad? Is he up there?  
Yes, he's already up there.  
Aisholpan!  
Whose bird is that?  
Aisholpan's.  
A lady.  
Women are supposed to stay indoors  
and quarrel for the gifts after parties...  
while men are meant for the outdoors,  
and we quarrel for the catch.  
I was worried of course.  
I figured...  
it's all in God's hands.  
Aisholpan, the youngest participant  
and the first female...  
in this eagle hunting festival.  
Great! Amazing!  
Come on!  
Amazing! Great! This is awesome.  
Run towards your daughter, man!  
Her bird was the only one  
to do it in 5 seconds!  
Aisholpan may have a record time.  
Everyone saw it, both the audience  
and the judges.  
She managed to catch the bird  
in her hand in only five seconds.  
That requires unique talent.



Not just anyone can do that.  
I'm kind of trembling.  
My hands are trembling.  
Funny feeling!  
Dad!  
Come here, my daughter.  
Stand by me.  
Her bird was fastest and actually  
broke the record for speed.  
When I heard this, I felt so proud.  
Eagle hunters, please come forward.  
Listen, ladies and gentlemen.  
Today's event was special...  
because a little girl participated  
in this celebration.  
Please make some space.  
We will now award the eagle hunters.  
As the saying goes:  
"If two old ladies compete,  
one has to be first."  
Therefore, let me start with  
the third place.  
Third place goes to Nurbolat Tana.  
Second place, Orazkhan.  
Dear people, please listen.  
Our winner today is...  
Aisholpan!  
Aisholpan is our winner!  
May your art prosper.  
May our offspring be like her!  
Congratulations.  
I was so happy.  
I had tears in my eyes.  
The 13 year old girl won the contest.  
But I don't believe it myself.  
She won.  
Of course it helps that she is a girl.  
Interesting for tourists, of course.  
She came in first today...  
but to say...  
that she can eagle hunt  
in the mountains in winter...  
I have my doubts.  
To hunt, one must travel

far into the mountains.  
There will be snow, storms, etc.  
Yes, that is a real test.  
It is tough. She won't endure.  
If she can go eagle hunting  
in winter...  
then she is a true eagle hunter.  
It is proof of a sort.  
Some of the hunters...  
refused to accept her  
as a real eagle hunter.  
As for the jealous ones, it's okay.  
Not all people are same.  
I will prove that I am  
a real eagle huntress.  
Dad, we haven't had tea  
since this morning.  
Bring tea!  
Daddy, when will we go hunting?  
We will go hunting...  
in 6 or 7 days.  
So we put horseshoes on the horses...  
and prepared for the ice and snow.  
How are you? Please come in.  
You've travelled a long distance,  
150 kilometres.  
But the kid is strong.  
Dalaikhan and my dad have competed  
in all of the festivals.  
He's like my uncle.  
There are a lot of lessons  
to be learnt here.  
Have you seen Aisholpan's eaglet?  
Yes, you seem to think it is ready.  
We will see tomorrow.  
Lots of foxes and other animals.  
But the land is slippery...  
the winter began harshly.  
Even guys can't take it as of late.  
But the kid has to be alert.  
Watch out for the kid.  
Yes, of course.  
We will always worry for our children.  
Yes indeed.

I'm really surprised.  
We didn't think Aisholpan  
could eagle-hunt.  
She is doing what she saw as a child.  
Are we ready now?  
Great.  
In the name of God.  
There is a saying in Kazakh:  
"What a baby sees in the nest,  
it then repeats when it grows up."  
Turn here.  
Look at this. The whole steppe  
is blanketed in snow!  
Hunters call this first big snowfall  
of the year "Kansonar."  
We don't take easy roads  
when we go out hunting.  
There's little comfort  
in these bitterly cold conditions.  
It's not unheard of for horses to slip  
and fall off the side of a cliff.  
Stay close.  
Stay sharp.  
The stones...  
the cliffs, the snow.  
It all takes a toll.  
The temperature regularly plummets  
as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit.  
Basically, we freeze.  
Let's get these horses  
something to drink.  
Your horse has quenched his thirst.  
It's time to find some fox tracks.  
Come closer. It's slippery here.  
Hold on tightly.  
Check out those paw prints!  
Yes, these are fox tracks.  
They're still fresh.  
Let's find this fox.  
Let's go.  
My guess is he went to that mountain.  
Look! More tracks!  
There it is!  
Time to move it!

Where is it? Where'd it go?  
Here it is! It's on! You head that way!  
The eagle hunter finds  
the highest place with the best view.  
The catcher tries to chase the fox...  
until it becomes visible  
to the eagle hunter.  
Eagles make mistakes  
the first time they hunt.  
Were you afraid, my dear?  
Is it hard hunting  
so far away from home?  
We'll all do better this time.  
You shoot up that mountain over there.  
The hunter and chaser  
work as a team.  
Only if they work together  
can they hope to be successful.  
Don't be disheartened, my child.  
First those mountains.  
Then this mountain.  
It can easily jump from one to another.  
The fox is a very sly animal.  
Not in a hurry to give up its life.  
But your eagle has real talent.  
She just needs her moment.  
Let's make for that mountain,  
that's the spot.  
Let's move out.  
We should watch our step around here.  
That's some heavy snow.  
Come on, let's keep going.  
Turn it around! Turn it around!  
Secure your eagle!  
Hold on tight to your eagle!  
Just get off your horse  
and lead it by the bridle.  
Stop right there.  
Get off your horse  
and walk the rest of the way.  
He won't budge!  
Then give him a proper yank!  
Keep going.  
Follow in my footsteps.

Ride faster!  
We caught it! We caught it!  
Okay, my child!  
Did you see the catch?  
Yes.  
Let go.  
Let go.  
Let go.  
Thank God.  
She's caught her first fox.  
You released her beautifully.  
Thanks.  
Did the fox bite your leg?  
You did very well for your first time.  
You're very brave.  
Your eagle did a great job.  
First you won the eagle contest.  
Now you've caught your first fox.  
To be sure, this is no ordinary bird.  
This was a tough endeavour.  
We'll tie this fox to your saddle.  
You get to carry home your first catch...  
and Mom can make it into  
a warm fur coat for you.  
Okay!  
Okay, my child, let's make for home.  
Yes.  
Do you think Mom will be happy?  
She'll be thrilled.  
And very proud, I'm sure.  
Grandpa will be happy, too, right?  
Of course he will be!  
How about you?  
Are you happy now?  
Yes. I'm truly happy.  
Frank B