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I



As Chen Zhen looked through the telescope from his hiding place in the snow cave, he saw the steely gaze of a Mongolian grassland wolf. The fine hairs on his body rose up like porcupine quills, virtually pulling his shirt away from his skin. Old Man Bilgee was there beside him. This time Chen did not feel as if his soul had been driven out of his body, but sweat oozed from his pores. He had been on the grassland two years but still had not lost his fear of Mongolian wolves, especially in packs. Now he was face to face with a large pack deep in the mountains, far from camp, his misty breath quivering in the air. Neither he nor Bilgee was armed—no rifles, no knives, no lasso poles, not even something as simple as a pair of metal stirrups. All they had were two herding clubs, and if the wolves picked up their scent, their sky burial would come early.

Chen exhaled nervously as he turned to look at the old man, who was watching the wolf encirclement through the other telescope. “You’re going to need more courage than that,” Bilgee said softly. “You’re like a sheep. A fear of wolves is in your Chinese bones. That’s the only explanation for why you people have never won a fight out here.” Getting no response, he leaned over and whispered, “Get a grip on yourself. If they spot any movement from us, we’ll be in real trouble.” Chen nodded and scooped up a handful of snow, which he squeezed into a ball of ice.

The herd of Mongolian gazelles was grazing on a nearby slope,

unaware of the wolf pack, which was tightening the noose, drawing closer to the men's snow cave. Not daring to move, Chen felt frozen in place, like an ice sculpture. This was Chen's second encounter with a wolf pack since coming to the grassland. A palpitating fear from his first encounter coursed through his veins.

Two years earlier, in late November, he had arrived in the border-region pasture as a production team member from Beijing; snow covered the land as far as the eye could see. The Olonbulag is located southwest of the Great Xing'an mountain range, directly north of Beijing; it shares a border with Outer Mongolia. Historically, it was the southern passage between Manchuria and the Mongolian steppes, and, as such, the site of battles between a host of peoples and nomadic tribes, as well as a territory in which the potential for struggles for dominance by nomads and farmers was ever present.

Yurts had not yet been assigned to the Beijing students, the so-called educated youth, so Chen had been sent to live with Old Man Bilgee and his family, and given duties as a shepherd. One day slightly more than a month after his arrival, he and the old man were sent to headquarters, some eighty li distant, to fetch study materials and purchase daily necessities. Just before they were to head back, the old man was summoned to a meeting of the revolutionary committee. Since headquarters had said the study materials had to be delivered without delay, Chen was told to return alone.

As he was about to leave, the old man swapped horses with him, lending him his big, dark mount, a fast horse that knew the way. Bilgee warned Chen not to take a shortcut, but to follow the wagon road back; since there were yurts every twenty or thirty *li*, he ought to be able to make the trip without incident.

As soon as he was in the saddle and on his way, Chen sensed the power of his Mongol horse and felt the urge to gallop at full speed. When they reached a ridge from which he could see the peak of Chaganuul Mountain, where the brigade was quartered, he forgot the old man's warning and left the road—which curved around the mountain, adding twenty *li* to the trip—to take a shortcut that led straight to camp.

The temperature began to fall, and when he was about halfway home,

the sun shivered from the deepening cold before retreating to the horizon and slipping from view. Frigid air from the snowy ground rose up, turning Chen's leather duster hard and brittle. The hide of his mount was covered with a layer of sweat-frost. Their pace slowed as the snow deepened and little hillocks rose in their path. They were deep in the wilds, far from all signs of habitation. The horse trotted on, straight and smooth, so Chen relaxed the pressure on the bit to let the horse determine the pace and direction, as well as how hard it wanted to work. For no obvious reason, Chen suddenly tensed; he shuddered, becoming fearful that the horse might lose its way, fearful that the weather would turn ugly, fearful of being caught in a snowstorm, and fearful of freezing to death on the glacial grassland. The only thing he forgot to fear was the wolves.

Just before they reached a ravine, the horse stopped, pointing toward a spot down the ravine. It tossed its head and snorted, its pace no longer steady. Chen Zhen, who had never before ridden alone deep into the snowy grassland, had no inkling of the danger ahead. But the agitated horse, its nostrils flaring, its eyes wide, turned to head away from what lay in front of them. Its intuition was lost on Chen, who pulled the reins taut to turn the animal's head and keep it moving forward at a trot. Its gait grew increasingly jerky, an erratic combination of walking, trotting, and jolting, as if the animal might bolt at any moment. Chen pulled back hard on the reins.

As if frustrated that its warning signals were not being heeded, the horse turned and nipped at its rider's felt boot, and at that moment Chen recognized the danger facing them by the fear in the horse's eyes. But it was too late, for the horse had carried him into the flared opening of a gloomy ravine on trembling legs.

Chen turned to look down the ravine and was so terrified he nearly fell off the horse. There on a snow-covered slope not less than fifty yards away was a pack of golden-hued, murderous-looking Mongolian wolves, all watching him straight on or out of the corners of their eyes, their gazes boring into him like porcupine quills. The closest wolves were the biggest, easily the size of leopards and at least twice the size of the wolves he'd seen in the Beijing Zoo, half again as tall and as long, nose to tail. All dozen or so of the larger wolves had been sitting on the

snowy ground, but they immediately stood up, their tails stretched out straight, like swords about to be unsheathed, or arrows on a taut bowstring. They were poised to pounce. The alpha male, surrounded by the others, was a gray wolf whose nearly white neck, chest, and abdomen shone like white gold. The pack consisted of thirty or forty animals.

Afterward, when Chen and Bilgee were rehashing the circumstances of the encounter, the old man wiped his sweaty brow with his finger and said, "They must have been holding a council. The alpha male was likely passing out assignments for an attack on a herd of horses on the other side of the hill. You'd have realized your luck had you known that when their coats shine, they aren't hungry."

In fact, Chen's mind was wiped clean the moment he spotted them, and the last thing he recalled was a muted but terrifying sound rising up to the top of his head, not unlike the thin whistle you get by blowing on the edge of a coin. It must have been the *ping* his soul made as it tore through his crown on its way out. He felt that his life had stopped for a minute or more.

Long afterward, whenever he recalled his encounter with the wolf pack, he silently thanked Papa Bilgee and his dark horse. The only reason he hadn't fallen off was that the animal had lived its entire life in wolf territory, a battle-tested horse perfectly suited to the hunt. At the critical moment, as their lives hung in the balance, the horse grew extraordinarily calm. Acting as if it didn't even see the pack or that it had no intention of interrupting their council, it continued on at a leisurely, just-passing-through pace. With all the courage it possessed, and in full control of its hooves, it neither struggled to keep moving nor broke into a panicky gallop, but carried its rider at a steady pace that allowed Chen to sit up straight.

Maybe it was the horse's extraordinary courage that summoned back Chen's departed soul, but when that spirit, which had hovered in the frigid air for a moment, returned to his body, he felt reborn and was extraordinarily tranquil.

He forced himself to sit firmly in the saddle. Taking his cue from the horse, he pretended not to have seen the pack, though nervously keeping them in sight. He knew all about the speed of wolves on the

Mongolian grassland. It would take but seconds to close the gap. And he knew how important it was not to show fear. That was the only way to avoid an attack by these grassland killers.

He sensed that the alpha male was gazing at the hill behind them; all the other members of the pack turned their pointed ears in the same direction, like radar locking on to a target. They silently awaited orders as the unarmed man and his horse pranced boldly past them; the alpha male and his followers were not sure what to make of this.

The sunset slowly faded away as man and horse drew ever nearer. The next couple of dozen steps comprised the longest journey of Chen Zhen's life. A few steps into that journey, he sensed that one of the wolves had run up to the snow-covered slope behind him, and he knew intuitively that it was a scout sent by the alpha male to see if other troops lay in wait. Chen felt his soul straining to leave again.

The horse's gait faltered slightly; Chen's legs and the horse's flanks were trembling. The horse turned its ears to the rear, nervously monitoring the scout wolf's movements. Chen imagined himself passing through an enormous wolf's maw, with rows of razor-sharp teeth above and below; once he was in the middle, the mouth would snap shut. The horse began to gather its strength in its rear legs, preparing for a mortal engagement. But the burden on its back put it at a terrible disadvantage.

Suddenly, Chen Zhen, like the shepherd he was supposed to be, appealed to Tengger, Mongol heaven, in a moment of peril: Wise and powerful heaven, Tengger, reach out and give me your hand. Next he summoned Papa Bilgee under his breath. In the Mongol language, *Bilgee* means "Wise One." If only the old man would find a way to transmit his knowledge of the grassland directly into his brain. No echoes anywhere disturbed the stillness of the Olonbulag. Gripped by despair, Chen raised his eyes, wanting the last thing he saw to be the ice blue beauty of the heavens.

Then something Papa had said dropped from the sky and struck his eardrum like a thunderclap: Wolves are afraid of rifles, lasso poles, and anything made of metal. He had no rifle and no lasso pole, but did he have anything made of metal? His foot felt warm. Yes! There under his feet were two large metal stirrups. His legs twitched excitedly.

Papa Bilgee had lent him his horse, but the saddle was Chen's. No wonder the old man had picked out the largest stirrups he could find for him at the beginning; it was as if he knew that someday they would come to Chen's rescue. Back then, when he was learning to ride, the old man had said that not only did small stirrups make staying in the saddle difficult, but if the horse bucked you off, your foot could get caught and you could be dragged along, which could lead to serious injury or death. These stirrups, with their large openings and rounded bottoms, were twice the size of the more common small-mouthed, flat-bottomed ones, and double the weight.

The pack was waiting for the scout's report; horse and rider were now directly opposite them. Chen quickly removed his feet from the stirrups, reached down, and pulled them up by their leather straps. Holding one in each hand, and calling upon all his strength, he spun the horse around, roared in the direction of the wolf pack, raised the heavy stirrups chest-high, and banged them together.

Clang clang...

A crisp, ear-splitting clang, like a hammer on an anvil, tore through the silent air of the grassland and straight into the ears and seats of courage of every wolf in the pack, like a sword. Nonnatural metallic noises frighten wolves more than any thunderstorm; they produce a sound that has a greater and more devastating impact on them than the snap of a hunter's trap.

The wolves trembled when the first clangs from Chen's stirrups resonated in the air. The next burst sent them turning away; led by the alpha wolf, they fled into the mountains like a yellow storm, their ears pinned against their heads and their necks pulled into their shoulders. Even the scout abandoned its mission and followed the other members of the pack in flight.

Chen Zhen could hardly believe his eyes as he watched the wolves frightened off by a pair of metal stirrups. As his courage made its belated return, he banged the stirrups together wildly, then windmilled his arms like a shepherd and shouted, "Hurry! Hurry! There are wolves everywhere!"

For all he knew, the wolves understood Mongol and knew the mean-

ing of human gestures; perhaps they'd been frightened into dispersal by what they'd assumed was a trap laid by hunters.

But they dispersed in orderly fashion, maintaining the ancient organizational unity and group formation characteristic of grassland wolves: The most ferocious members serve as a vanguard, with the alpha male out in front, the pack's larger wolves behind it. There is never any of the confusion commonly seen among fleeing birds and other wild animals. Chen was overwhelmed by the sight.

In a moment, the pack had vanished without a trace, and all that remained in the ravine were a white mist and swirling flakes of snow.

By then night had fallen. Before Chen could step fully into the stirrups again, his horse took off like a shot, racing toward the nearest camp. Frigid air seeped into Chen's collar and sleeves; the cold sweat on his body had turned to ice.

Having escaped from the wolf's maw, he became an immediate convert to the devotion paid to Tenger, just like his Mongol hosts. He also developed a complex attitude of fear, reverence, and infatuation toward the Mongolian wolf. It had touched his soul. How could it possess such a powerful attraction?

Chen did not catch sight of another wolf pack over the next two years. During the day he tended his sheep, occasionally spotting a lone wolf, maybe two, off in the distance. Even when he was far from camp, he never saw more than four or five at one time. Often, however, he came across the remains of sheep or cattle or horses that had been killed by wolves, individually or in packs. There might be one or two dead sheep, two or three cows, and maybe three or four horses; but sometimes carcasses would be strewn over a wide area. When he was out making calls on people, he regularly saw wolf pelts hanging on tall poles, like flags waving in the wind.

Now Bilgee lay flat in the snow cave, not moving a muscle, his eyes glued to the gazelles grazing on the slope and the wolf pack that was inching nearer. "Stay calm," he whispered to Chen. "The first thing you need to learn as a hunter is patience."

Having Bilgee beside him was comforting. Chen rubbed his eyes to clear away the mist and blinked calmly at Bilgee, then raised his telescope again to watch the gazelles and the wolves. The pack still had not given itself away.

Since his earlier encounter with the wolves, he had come to understand that the inhabitants of the grassland, the nomads, were never far from being surrounded by wolves. Nearly every night he spotted ghostly wolf outlines, especially during the frigid winter; two or three, perhaps five or six, and as many as a dozen pairs of glittering green lights moving around the perimeter of the grazing land, as far as a hundred yards or more distant. One night he and Bilgee's daughter-in-law Gasmai, aided by flashlights, counted twenty-five of them.

Like guerrilla fighters, nomads strive for simplicity. During the winter, sheep pens are semicircles formed by wagons and mobile fencing, with large felt rugs that serve as a windbreak but cannot keep out the wolves. The wide southern openings are guarded by packs of dogs and women on watch shifts. From time to time, wolves break into the pens and fight the dogs. Bodies often thud into yurt walls, waking the people sleeping on the other side; twice that had happened to Chen Zhen, and all that had kept a wolf from landing in bed beside him was that wall. Frequently nomads are separated from wolves by no more than a couple of felt rugs.

At night, when the wolves came out to hunt, Chen would sleep lightly. He had told Gasmai to call him if a wolf ever broke into the pen when she was on guard duty, assuring her that he would help drive the animal away, fight it head-on if necessary. Bilgee would stroke his goatee, smile, and say he'd never seen a Chinese so fixated on wolves. He seemed pleased with the unusual degree of interest displayed by the student from Beijing.

Late one snowy night during his first winter, Chen, flashlight in hand, witnessed at close quarters a battle between a wolf, a dog, and a woman.

“Chenchen! Chenchen!”

Chen was awakened by Gasmai's frantic cries and the wild barking of dogs. After pulling on his felt boots and buttoning up his Mongol

robe, he ran out of the yurt on shaky legs, flashlight and herding club in hand. The beam of light sliced through the snow to reveal Gasmai holding on to the tail of a wolf, trying to pull it away from the densely packed sheep. The wolf tried desperately to turn its fangs on her. Meanwhile, the stupid, fat sheep, petrified by the wolf and nearly frozen by the wind, huddled together and kept backing up against the windbreak, packed so tightly the snowflakes between their bodies turned to steam. The front half of the wolf was immobilized; it could only paw at the ground and snap at the sheep in front of it, all the while engaged in a tug-of-war with Gasmai. Chen staggered over to help but didn't know what to do. Gasmai's two dogs were hemmed in by the huddled sheep. Unable to get to the big wolf, they were reduced to wild, impotent barking. At the same time, Bilgee's five or six hunting dogs, together with their neighbors' dogs, were fighting other wolves east of the pen. The barks, the howls, and the agonizing cries of dogs shook heaven and earth. Chen wanted to help Gasmai, but his legs were so rubbery he could barely move. His desire to touch a living wolf had vanished, replaced by paralyzing fear.

Gasmai cried out anxiously, "Stay where you are! Don't come near us! The wolf will bite you. Get the sheep to move! Let the dogs in!"

Gasmai was tugging so hard on the wolf's tail she was nearly falling backward, her forehead bathed in sweat. Her grip on the tail caused the wolf so much pain that it had to suck cold air through its bloody mouth. Desperate to turn and claw its tormentor and seeing it was futile to press forward, the wolf abruptly backed up, spun around, and came at Gasmai, fangs bared. With a loud ripping noise, the lower half of her leather robe, her deel was torn off. A panther-like glare flashed in her Mongol eyes, and she refused to let go of the tail. She jumped backward, straightening the animal out once more, and began dragging it over to the dogs.

Thrown into a panic, Chen raised his flashlight and shone it on Gasmai and the wolf to help her see better and avoid getting bitten; then he brought his herding club down on the head of the sheep next to him. That threw the flock into chaos. Frightened of the wolf in the dark, they fought to huddle against the light shining in their midst; Chen

had failed to get them moving. Even worse, he saw that Gasmai was losing the tug-of-war with the wolf, which was dragging her forward.

“Mother! Mother!” The fearful screams of a child tore through the air.

Gasmai’s nine-year-old son, Bayar, burst out of the yurt. The moment he saw what was happening, there was a change in his screams. He ran straight to his mother and, as if mounting a pommel horse, flew over the sheep and landed next to her, where he grabbed hold of the wolf’s tail.

“Grab its leg!” she shouted.

Bayar let go of the tail and grabbed one of the hind legs, pulling it backward and slowing the animal’s forward progress until the two of them managed to stop it altogether. Mother and son staunchly held their ground, making sure the large wolf in their grasp was unable to drive any sheep out through the felt-topped windbreak.

By then Bilgee had reached the flock, pushing the sheep out of the way as he called to his dog: “Bar! Bar!” In Mongol *bar* means “tiger”; Bilgee’s was the biggest, most ferocious wolfhound in the camp. It was not as long from nose to tail as one of the large wolves, but it was taller and broader in the chest, thanks to its partial Tibetan lineage. At the first call of its name, it withdrew from the battle outside and rushed to its master’s side, where it stopped, its mouth reeking of wolf blood. Bilgee took the flashlight from Chen Zhen and turned its light onto the wolf, which was still imbedded in the flock of sheep. Bar bounded over the backs of the sheep, stepping on heads along the way, rolling and scrambling as it charged the wolf.

“Drive the sheep toward the wolf,” Bilgee shouted. “We’ll pen it in so it can’t get away!” He took Chen Zhen’s hand, and the two of them herded the sheep toward the wolf and Gasmai.

Finally, Bar, his breath fouled, blood spurting from his nose, was standing beside Gasmai, but the wolf was still wedged in tightly among the sheep. Mongolian hunting dogs are trained not to bite wolves on the back or other spots on the torso, so as to preserve the hide. Bar was going crazy trying to find a spot to sink his teeth into. Seeing Bar there beside her, Gasmai turned sideways, lifted one leg, and grabbed the

wolf's tail with both hands, laying it across her own leg. Then with a shout, she cracked the tail over her knee. With an agonizing howl, the wolf loosened its claws in the dirt, allowing mother and son to jerk it free of the sheep. The big animal, its body convulsing with pain, turned to look at its wounded tail, which gave Bar an opening to go for its throat. Letting the wolf claw at will, Bar pressed down with his front legs on the animal's head and chest, and as he bit down, two streams of blood spurting from the wolf's carotid arteries. It struggled madly for a minute or two before going limp, its long, bloody tongue slipping out through its teeth. Gasmai wiped the wolf's blood from her face and panted. To Chen Zhen her face, red from the bitter cold, looked as if rouge made of wolf's blood had been smeared over it. She struck him as the picture of prehistoric woman—brave, strong, and beautiful.

The rank smell of blood rose into the air from the dead wolf, and the growls from dogs off to the east ceased abruptly as the other wolves fled, vanishing in the dark of night. Moments later, from the marshland in the northwest came the mournful bays of wolves venting their grief over the loss of one of their own.

"I'm worse than useless," Chen said with a sigh, deeply ashamed. "Gutless as the sheep. A dog is worth more than me, not to mention a woman. Even a nine-year-old boy showed me up."

With a smile, Gasmai shook her head. "No," she said. "If you hadn't come out to help, the wolves would have gotten our sheep."

Bilgee smiled too. "This is the first time I've seen a Chinese student help get sheep moving and light the area up with his flashlight."

Chen Zhen bent over and felt the still-warm body of the dead wolf. He hated himself for not having the courage to help Gasmai pull on the animal's tail while it was alive, and for passing up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a Chinese student to know what it's like to fight a wolf with his bare hands. The wolf was as intimidating dead as it had been alive. Chen rubbed Bar's big head, then found the courage to squat down and, with his thumb and first finger, measure the dead wolf, from its nose to the tip of its tail. It was longer than he was tall. He sucked in a breath of frigid air.

Old Man Bilgee checked out the flock of sheep with the flashlight.

The thick tails of three or four of them had been bitten off and eaten by the wolf, leaving a bloody mess that had already frozen. “Trading a few sheep tails for a wolf this big counts as a good deal,” Bilgee said as he and Chen dragged the carcass into the yurt to keep greedy neighboring dogs from venting their anger and ruining the hide.

The wolf’s paws were much bigger than a dog’s; measuring one against his palm, Chen saw that they were about the same size. No wonder wolves ran so effortlessly through snow and across rocky hills.

“Tomorrow,” Bilgee said, “I’ll teach you how to skin a wolf.”

Gasmai carried a big pot of meat outside to reward Bar and the other dogs. As Chen Zhen followed her out, he rubbed Bar’s big head and stroked his back, which was the size of a small table. The dog wagged his tail gratefully. “Were you scared back there?” Chen asked.

“Sure,” Gasmai said with a little laugh. “Of course I was. I was scared the wolf would drive the sheep out of the pen. I’d lose all my work points. I’m the head of a production team, and you can imagine what a humiliation it would be if I lost my sheep.” She bent down to pat the big dog’s head and said, “*Sain Bar*” (Good Bar), over and over. Bar dropped the bone he was chewing and raised his head to nudge his mistress’ hand, then stuck his nose up her sleeve, happily wagging his tail and sending out little eddies of air. “Chenchen, I’ll give you a puppy after New Year’s,” Gasmai said. “There are all sorts of ways to raise a dog. Do a good job, and it’ll grow up to be like Bar.”

He thanked her repeatedly.

Back in the yurt, Chen admitted that he’d been scared to death. Old Man Bilgee laughed. “I could tell when I grabbed your hand. You were shaking like a leaf. Do you think you could hold a knife in a fight like that? If you plan to stay on the grassland, you’ll have to learn to be tougher than the wolves. One day I’ll take you out to hunt them. Back when Genghis Khan formed his army, he always picked the best wolf hunters.”

Chen nodded. “I believe that,” he said. “I really do. If Gasmai rode into battle, she’d be more fearful than the female general Hua Mulan.”

“You Chinese don’t have many Hua Mulans, but there are lots of

Mongol women like Gasmai. At least one in every family.” The old man laughed again like an alpha wolf.

After that incident, Chen Zhen wanted to get as near to the wolves as possible so that he could study them. He sensed that only by gaining an understanding of the wolves would he be able to comprehend the Mongolian grassland and the people who lived there. He even entertained the idea of stealing a cub from its den and raising it one day.

Although Bilgee was the most renowned hunter on the Olonbulag, he seldom went out hunting, and when he did, it was for foxes, not wolves. People had gotten so caught up in the Cultural Revolution over the past couple of years that the traditional life of the grassland—a mixture of tending sheep and hunting wild animals—had been turned upside down, like a flock of sheep scattered in a blizzard. Then, in the winter of that year, herds of Mongolian gazelle migrated across the border into the Olonbulag, and the old man decided it was time to fulfill his promise to Chen to take him to see the wolves at close range so as to boost the young man’s courage and increase his knowledge.

Chen Zhen felt the old man nudge him with his elbow and saw him point to the snow-covered slope. Chen trained his telescope on the spot. The gazelles were still grazing nervously. He watched as one of the wolves left the pack and ran off to the mountain west of them. Chen’s heart sank. “I guess they aren’t going to attack,” he whispered. “Apparently, we’ve let ourselves freeze for nothing.”

“The pack won’t pass up an opportunity like this,” Bilgee said. “The leader must have felt there are too many gazelles, so he sent a runner to bring more troops. An opportunity like this comes maybe once every five or six years, and it seems they’ve got quite an appetite. They’re getting ready for a major battle. You’ll see that this was worth the wait. As I said, patience is the key to a good hunt.”

2



Six or seven new wolves quietly joined the encirclement, its three sides formed and ready. Chen Zhen covered his mouth with the horseshoe-shaped sleeve of his heavy fur robe and said softly, “Are they going to close the circle now?”

“Not quite yet,” Bilgee replied softly. “The alpha male is waiting for the right moment. Wolves are more meticulous about their encirclement formations than we are. See if you can figure out what he’s waiting for.” Each time the old man’s bushy white eyebrows twitched, shards of frost fell to the ground. A frost-covered fox-fur cap with flaps that fell to his shoulders covered his forehead and much of his face, but not his light brown eyes, which gave off a heavy sheen, like pieces of amber.

They had been hiding in their snow cave for some time already, and now they turned their attention to the gazelles grazing on the slope. The herd numbered as many as a thousand, of which several large males, with long black horns, kept watch as they sniffed the air. The others were grazing the land under the snow.

The area was a winter reserve pastureland for the Second Production Brigade, a defense line against natural disasters. Measuring roughly twenty square miles, it was a large mountain pastureland where, protected from the wind and relatively free of snow, fine grass grew tall and thick.

“Watch carefully, and you’ll understand,” the old man whispered.

“This is an ideal spot, open to the northwestern winds that keep the snow from piling up. When I was eight years old, the Olonbulag was hit by the largest snowstorm in centuries, a true white scourge. The snow covered our yurts. Fortunately, under the leadership of some old-timers, most of the people and animals managed to get out. When the snow was still only up to our knees, our several thousand horses were brought out to trample a path in the snow. Then several dozen oxen tamped it down more, opening up a trough through which our sheep and carts could travel. It took three days and nights to reach this pastureland in safety. Here the snow was only a foot or two deep, allowing the tips of the long grass to push through. Cows and sheep and horses, all half dead from the cold and hunger, made a dash for it as soon as it came into view. As for the people, they threw themselves down onto the snow and wept, then banged their heads on the ground in thanks to Tengger, until their faces were covered with snow. The sheep and the horses knew how to move the snow out of the way to get to the grass, while the more passive cows simply followed along behind them to forage. It was enough to sustain the greater half of the animals until the snow melted in the spring. People who hadn’t moved their animals in time lost them. They themselves made it to safety, but their animals were buried in the blizzard. If not for this stretch of pastureland, every inhabitant of the Olonbulag, human and animal, would have died. We stopped being afraid of white scourges after that; we knew that if one came along, we could move to this pastureland and take refuge here.”

The old man sighed. “This spot is a gift to the Olonbulag people and animals from Tengger, our sustenance. In the past, herdsmen made an annual trek to the top of that mountain to worship Tengger and the Mountain God. But with the current political situation, no one has dared go up for a couple of years. But we still worship in our hearts. This is our sacred mountain. Even if there’s a drought and no grass to forage, the mountain is off-limits to herdsmen from spring to autumn. Preserving it is particularly hard on people who tend horses. The wolves also preserve the mountain, and once every five or six years they go on a killing spree of gazelles, their sacrifice to the Mountain God and Tengger. The mountain doesn’t only save people and their animals; it

also saves the wolves, who are cleverer than both. In the past the wolves arrived ahead of the people and their animals, and during the day they hid among the rocks on the mountaintop or behind the mountain, where the snow had turned to ice. They came down at night to dig up cows and sheep that had frozen to death. Wolves won't bother people and their animals as long as they have food to eat."

Patchy clouds floated above. The old man gazed up into the icy blue of Tengger, a look of devotion on his face.

The snows had come early this year and had stuck, covering the bottom half of the grass before it turned yellow; now the grasses were like greens trapped by ice. The subtle fragrance of tasty grass emerged from the hollow stalks and the cracks in the snow. The smell of grass drew starving gazelles across the border from the blizzard-ravaged neighbor to the north; to them the spot was a wintry oasis—they ate until their rounded bellies looked like drums, making running all but impossible.

Only the alpha male and Bilgee knew that the gazelles had made a tragic mistake.

It was not a particularly large herd. During his first year on the grassland, Chen had often seen herds of ten thousand or more. A cadre at brigade headquarters had said that during the three difficult years in the 1960s, soldiers from northern military regions had come in vehicles and mowed down vast numbers of gazelles with machine guns to supply food to their troops; as a result, they drove the surviving gazelles out of the area. But in recent years, given the tense military situation in the border regions, large-scale hunts had ceased, and the Olonbulag had witnessed the return of gazelles in spectacular numbers. Chen frequently encountered large herds when he tended his flock, a vast sea of yellow close to the ground, passing by his sheep, relaxed and carefree, but causing his animals to huddle together in fear, watching bug-eyed with a mixture of alarm and envy as their wild cousins raced past, free as the wind.

Mongolian gazelles ignore unarmed humans. On one occasion, Chen Zhen had ridden down the middle of a dense herd with the idea of roping one to get a taste of gazelle meat. He failed. The fastest four-legged animal on the grassland, the gazelle can outrun hunting dogs,

even wolves. Chen whipped his horse and charged the herd, but they kept passing on both sides, no more than ten or twelve yards away, then flowed back together ahead of him and continued on their way. He could only watch in awe.

The gazelles they were observing now may have comprised no more than a medium-sized herd, but Chen was sure it was too big for a pack of wolves numbering in the dozens. People had told him there is no more determined an animal than a wolf, and he was eager to see not only just how great the wolves' appetite and determination might be but also what kind of hunters they were.

For the wolves, this was too great an opportunity to miss. Their movements were slight and slow. When the male gazelles looked up, the wolves flattened out and did not move; even the steam in their breath was light and gentle.

The herd continued its desperate grazing, and the human observers settled in to see what was going to happen.

"Gazelles are a scourge on the grassland," the old man whispered. "They run like the wind and eat all the time. Just look how much good forage they've already gone through. The brigade has done everything it can to keep this pastureland in good shape, but the gazelles will have destroyed nearly half of it in days. A few more herds like this, and the grass will be gone. The snows have been heavy this year, and a blizzard is always a possibility. Without this pastureland in reserve, we'd probably not survive—neither us nor our animals. Luckily, there's the wolf pack. Within days this herd will be driven off, those that aren't killed, that is."

Surprised by this comment, Chen looked at the old man and said, "No wonder you don't hunt wolves."

"Oh, I hunt them," the old man replied. "But not often. If we killed them off, the grassland would perish, and then how would we survive? This is something you Chinese cannot understand."

"It's starting to make sense to me," Chen said. He was getting excited, without quite knowing why. The vague image of a wolf totem formed in his head. Before leaving Beijing two years earlier, he'd read and collected books on the inhabitants of the grassland, and had learned that

they revere a wolf totem, but only now did he have an inkling of why they treated the wolf, an animal despised by the Chinese and by all people who tilled the land, as a beastly ancestor, as their totem.

The old man looked at Chen; his broad smile turned his eyes to narrow slits. "You Beijing students threw up your yurt more than a year ago," he said, "but you don't have enough felt padding around it. We'll take a few extra gazelles back with us this time and trade them at the purchasing center for some felt. That way the four of you will be a bit warmer this winter."

"That's wonderful," Chen said. "We've only got two layers of felt now, and even our ink bottles freeze inside the yurt."

The old man smiled again. "Well, take a good look, because this pack of wolves is going to hand you a nice gift."

On the Olonbulag at the time, a full-grown frozen gazelle, meat and hide, sold for twenty yuan, equivalent to a herder's wages for two weeks. Considered choice material, its hide was used to make pilots' jackets. But China's pilots could not get them, since the gazelle hides produced in Inner Mongolia were for export only, a commodity of exchange with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries for steel, automobiles, and munitions. The choice meat cuts were canned and exported. The remaining meat and the bones were targeted for domestic consumption but only occasionally appeared in butcher shops in the Mongolian banner territories, where ration coupons were required.

In the winter of that year, great quantities of gazelles had streamed across the border, creating excitement among leaders of the various Mongolian banners. Purchasing stations made space in their storerooms for the carcasses. Officials, hunters, and herdsman were like fishermen who had been told the fish were schooling. Nearly all the hunters and herders had saddled up the fastest horses and were heading out with hunting dogs and rifles to kill as many gazelles as possible. That did not include Chen Zhen, who had his hands full with his sheep and, of course, had no rifle and no ammunition. Besides, a shepherd was given only four horses, while the horse herders had seven or eight, and as many as a dozen for their exclusive use. So the students could only look on enviously as the hunters went out. A couple of nights before, Chen

had visited the yurt of the hunter Lamjav. The gazelles had only been in the region for a few days, yet he had already bagged eleven, once bringing down two with a single shot. For a few days of hunting he had earned nearly as much as a horse herder made in three months. Proudly he told Chen that he'd already taken in enough to supply himself with liquor and cigarettes for a year. After a few more days out on the grassland, he planned to buy a Red Lantern transistor radio, leaving the new one at home and taking the old one to the herders' mobile yurt. That night, for the first time in his life, Chen had a true taste of the wild grassland. There is no fat on gazelles, and the leanness of their meat, which tastes like venison, can be attributed to their perennial battle with wolves.

Once the gazelles had migrated onto the Olonbulag, the Beijing students were demoted to second-class citizens. In their two years on the grassland, they had learned to tend cows and sheep by themselves, but they were incompetent hunters, and in the nomadic existence of people in eastern Inner Mongolia, hunting ranks higher than tending livestock. The Mongols' ancestors were hunters in the forests surrounding the upper reaches of the Heilong River who slowly migrated onto the grassland, where they lived as hunter-herdsmen. Hunting was a significant and often a major source of income. On the Olonbulag, horse herders held the highest status among the herdsmen, and most of the hunters came from their ranks. Hardly any of the Beijing students managed to rise to that level, and for those few who did, the best they could hope for was an apprenticeship to a full-fledged herder. And so, on the eve of the big hunt, the students, who had begun to consider themselves a new breed of herdsmen, were left out completely.

After finishing his meal, Chen took the gazelle leg Lamjav had given him and, somewhat dispirited, ran over to Bilgee's yurt.

Even though the students now had their own yurt, Chen often went to visit Bilgee, whose yurt was larger, nicer, and much warmer. The walls were hung with Mongol-Tibetan religious tapestries, and the floor was covered with a rug that had a white deer design; the tray and silver bowls on the squat table and the bronze bowls and aluminum teapot in the cupboard were polished to a shine. In this remote area, where

“heaven is high and the emperor far away,” the Red Guards’ fervent desire to destroy the Four Olds—old ideas, culture, customs, and habits—had not yet claimed Bilgee’s tapestries or rug.

The four students in Chen’s yurt had been classmates at a Beijing high school; three of them were sons of “black-gang capitalist roaders” or “reactionary academic authorities.” They shared similar circumstances, ideology, and disgust for the radical and ignorant Red Guards; and so, in the early winter of 1967, they said good-bye to the clamor of Beijing and traveled to the grassland in search of a peaceful life, where they maintained their friendship.

For Chen, Old Man Bilgee’s yurt was like a tribal chief’s headquarters where he benefited from his host’s guidance and concern; it was a safe and intimate refuge. There he was treated as a member of the family; the two cartons of books he’d brought from Beijing, especially those dealing with Mongol history, in Chinese and in English, had established a close bond between him, a Han Chinese, and his Mongol host, who often entertained guests. Among those guests had been musical performers whose songs were replete with Mongolian history and legends. As soon as he saw Chen’s books, in particular those with maps and illustrations, Bilgee became interested in Mongol histories written by Chinese, Russian, Persian, and other scholars. With his limited Chinese, he took every opportunity to teach Chen Mongol, wanting to have everything in the books explained to him; he reciprocated by telling Chen Mongol stories. Over the two years, these conversations in Mongol and Chinese between the two men—one old, the other young—had progressed smoothly.

Chen did not want to leave Bilgee’s yurt, but the quantity of livestock kept growing on the lush pastureland. The number of sheep in his flock, after the birthing of the latest batch of lambs, exceeded three thousand, far more than any one shepherd could tend. So they were divided into smaller flocks, requiring Chen to leave his patron’s yurt and follow his sheep. He and his three classmates set up a yurt and began living on their own. Fortunately, the two camps were close enough that the bleating of sheep and the barking of dogs in one camp could be heard in the other, so they met on their way out in the mornings and back at night.

A man could reach his neighbor's place before his saddle was warm. Chen often visited the old man's yurt to continue their conversations, but now he wanted to talk about gazelles, and wolves.

Chen parted the door curtains, thick felt sewn into auspicious patterns with camel hair, and joined Bilgee in a cup of butter tea.

"Don't envy people just because they've bagged gazelles. Tomorrow I'll take you out and you can get a wagonload of your own. I've been up in the mountains the past few days, and I know where to find them. This will be the perfect opportunity to get firsthand knowledge of a wolf pack. That's what you've been wanting, isn't it? You Chinese have the courage of sheep, who survive by foraging grass. We Mongols are meat-eating wolves, and you could use a bit of wolf courage."

Early the next morning, they traveled to a southwestern mountain slope, hiding themselves to watch. The old man had brought neither a rifle nor a dog along, only his telescopes. Chen had hunted with Bilgee before, but only for fox, and this was the first time he'd gone out empty-handed. "We're not going to try to bring down a gazelle with a telescope, are we?"

The old man smiled and said nothing. He was always happy when his apprentices came loaded with curiosity and doubts.

Finally, when Chen spotted the wolf encirclement through his telescope, the old man's hunting plan became clear, and Chen was delighted. Bilgee flashed a crafty smile. Chen forgot the cold the moment he spotted the wolves; blood seemed to race through his veins, and the terror he'd experienced the first time he saw the big wolves vanished.

There wasn't a breath of wind deep in the mountains; the air was cold and dry, and Chen Zhen's feet were nearly frozen. The blasts of cold air were getting stronger. If only he had a wolf pelt to lie on! He turned to the old man and whispered something that had been bothering him: "Everyone says that wolf pelts make the warmest bedding you can find anywhere, and the people around here, hunters and herdsman, kill plenty of wolves. But I've never seen them in a herdsman's home. Why is that? The only pelts I've seen are a wolf-skin mat in the home of

Dorji and a pair of chaps his father wears over his sheepskin pants, with fur on the outside.”

The old man replied, “Dorji is a northeastern Mongol. They’re farmers who own a few cows and sheep, but they’ve been around Chinese so long they’ve begun following Han customs. People who come here from the outside have forgotten the Mongol gods and their own origins. When someone in their family dies, they put him in a box and bury him in the ground, instead of feeding him to the wolves, so of course they don’t see anything wrong with using wolf pelts as chaps. Here on the grassland, wolf pelts are the thickest and the densest, so there’s nothing better for keeping out the cold. Two sheepskins put together won’t keep you as warm as a single wolf pelt. But we don’t use them as bedding. We respect the wolves too much. Any Mongol who doesn’t isn’t a true Mongol. Out here, a Mongol would freeze to death before he slept on a wolf pelt, since doing so would offend the Mongol gods, and their souls would never go to Tengger. Why do you think Tengger bestows its favors on wolves?”

“Didn’t you say that wolves are the protective spirits of the grassland?” Chen Zhen asked.

“Right,” the old man said, his wide smile slitting his eyes. “That’s it exactly. Tengger is the father, the grassland is the mother, and the wolves kill only animals that harm the grassland. How could Tengger not bestow its favors on wolves?”

There was movement in the wolf pack, and the two men trained their telescopes on a pair of wolves that had looked up. The animals quickly lowered their heads. Chen searched through the tall grass but saw no more movement by the wolves.

The old man handed his glass to Chen so that he could observe the situation with a full pair of binoculars. The original double-tube glass was Soviet military issue. Bilgee had found it on the Olonbulag twenty years earlier, on an old battlefield from the Soviet-Japanese war. During World War II, a major battle between the Russians and Japanese had occurred nearby to the north. Toward the end of the war, the Olonbulag had been the primary military artery for the Russo-Mongolian

army into Manchuria. Even now there were deep ruts left by tanks, as well as the hulks of Russian and Japanese tanks and armored vehicles.

Nearly all the old herders owned Russian or Japanese bayonets, canteens, spades, helmets, binoculars, and other military equipment. The long chain Gasmai used to tether calves came from a Russian army truck. But of all the military equipment left behind by the Russians and the Japanese, binoculars were the herders' favorite and had become an important tool for production.

The herdsmen, who treasured things they could not produce themselves, usually took the binoculars apart to make a pair of "telescopes," for the reduced size made them easy to carry and doubled their usage. "These have helped us in hunting," Bilgee said, "and have made it easier to find lost horses. But the wolves' eyesight seems to have improved, and if you observe a wolf through one of these things, sometimes you'll see that the he's looking right back at you."

One day after Chen had been living in the old man's yurt for six months, Bilgee took a telescope out of the wagon box and handed it to him.

The Russian telescope was old and the copper nonskid surface had been worn smooth in places, but the powerful lens was of the highest quality. Chen treasured the gift, which he wrapped in red silk, using it only when he was helping cowherds run down strays or horse herders find lost horses, or when he went hunting with Bilgee.

Chen surveyed the area through his telescope; his latent hunting instincts were awakened as he looked through his "hunter's eye." These hunting instincts had awakened too late in his life, he felt, and he was saddened to have been born into a line of farmers. Farmers had become as timid as sheep after dozens, even hundreds, of generations of being raised on grains and greens, the products of farming communities; they had lost the virility of their nomadic ancestors, going back to the legendary Yellow Emperor. No longer hunters, they had become the hunted.

The wolf pack still showed no signs of attacking, and Chen was beginning to lose patience over their extraordinary ability to hold back.

“Are they going to complete the encirclement today?” he asked. “Are they waiting until it gets dark to attack?”

“War demands patience,” the old man replied softly. “Opportunities present themselves only to the patient, man and beast, and only they take advantage of those opportunities. How do you think Genghis Khan was able to defeat the great armies of the Jin with so few mounted warriors? And all the nations that fell to him? Displaying only the power of wolves isn’t enough. You must also display patience. Even the largest and mightiest armies can stumble. If a mighty horse stumbles, it is at the mercy of even a small wolf. Without patience, you are not a wolf, you are not a hunter, and you are not Genghis Khan. You are always saying you want to get an understanding of wolves and of Genghis Khan. Well, then, lie there and be patient.”

There was an angry edge to the old man’s comment. So Chen tried to cultivate a bit of patience. He trained his telescope on a wolf he’d observed several times already. It lay there as if dead. After a few moments, the old man softened his tone and said, “After lying here all this time, have you figured out what the wolves are waiting for?”

Chen shook his head.

“They’re waiting for the gazelles to eat their fill and doze off,” Bilgee said.

“Are they really that smart?” Chen asked in amazement.

“You Chinese don’t know a thing about wolves. People aren’t as clever as they are. Here, I’ll test you. Do you think a single wolf, even a large one, can bring down a gazelle?”

Chen thought a moment before answering: “No, you’d need three, two to chase it and the third lying in ambush. No wolf could do it alone.”

The old man shook his head. “Would you believe that one ferocious wolf can bring down a gazelle all by itself?”

“Really?” Chen said, finding it hard to believe. “I can’t imagine how.”

“Wolves have developed a special skill. In the daylight, a wolf will concentrate on a single gazelle but do nothing until nightfall, when the gazelle will look for a place with tall grass out of the wind to lie

down and sleep. That still isn't the time to strike, because even though the gazelle is asleep, its nose and ears remain alert. At the first sign of danger, it will leap up and run off, and the wolf won't be able to catch it. So the wolf waits, all through the night, lying nearby. At sunrise the gazelle gets up with a full bladder, and now the wolf is ready to pounce. A gazelle can't urinate while it's running, so before it's gone far, its bladder bursts, its rear legs cramp up, and it stops. You see, a gazelle can run like the wind, but not all the time, and wise old wolves know that's when they can bring one down alone. Only the cleverest gazelles are wise enough to forsake the warmth of sleep to get up to relieve themselves at night. They never have to worry about a wolf running them down. Olonbulag hunters get up early in the morning to claim gazelles taken down by wolves, and when they open up their bellies, there's urine everywhere."

Chen Zhen laughed softly. "I couldn't have come up with that strategy under the threat of death. That's remarkable. But Mongol hunters are crafty too!"

The old man laughed. "They're the wolves' apprentices, so they have to be."

Finally, most of the gazelles looked up. Their "drums" were tauter than ever, more than a night with a full bladder. Some were so full their legs were splayed in four directions. The old man looked through his telescope and said, "They're so full they can't run. Watch closely. It's time for the wolves to strike."

Chen tensed. The pack was slowly tightening the semicircle; there were now wolves to the east, north, and west of the gazelles. A line of mountains lay to the south. Chen assumed that wolves on the other side of the mountain were waiting for the main body to drive the gazelles toward where they lay in wait, and the slaughter would begin. Herdsmen had said that wolves often employ this tactic. "Papa," he said, "how many wolves are there behind the mountains? Enough to close the circle on all these gazelles?"

"There are no wolves behind the mountain," the old man replied with a sly smile. "The alpha male wouldn't send any over there."

"Then how will they close the circle?" Chen asked doubtfully.

“At this time, in this place, they can get more with a three-sided encirclement than a full circle.”

“Then I don’t understand what they’re doing.”

“One of the biggest and best-known snowbanks on the Olonbulag is on the other side of that mountain. The grazing land here is a windward slope, and during a blizzard the snow is blown to the other side of the mountain, turning it into a basin with snow from a depth of waist-high to higher than a flagpole. Pretty soon the wolves will drive the herd to the other side of the mountain. As they press forward, they’ll tighten the circle. What do you think it will look like?”

Everything turned dark for Chen, as if he’d fallen into a snowdrift that kept out all light. If he’d been a Han soldier in ancient times, he was thinking, he could not have seen through this strategy, this trap. Now he began to understand why the great Ming general Xu Da, who had driven the Mongols back onto the grasslands, had won every battle he fought south of the Great Wall but had seen his armies annihilated on the grassland. He also understood why the other great Ming general, Qiu Fu, with his hundred thousand soldiers, had driven the Mongol hordes to the Kerulen River in Outer Mongolia, only to be ambushed. When he was killed, his army’s morale plummeted, and all the Han soldiers were taken prisoner.

“In war,” the old man said, “wolves are smarter than men. We Mongols learned from them how to hunt, how to encircle, even how to fight a war. There are no wolf packs where you Chinese live, so you haven’t learned how to fight. You can’t win a war just because you have lots of land and people. No, it depends on whether you’re a wolf or a sheep.”

The attack was launched. The wolf with the gray neck and chest led two large wolves on the western flank in a lightning assault on a hilly protuberance near the gazelle herd. This, obviously, was the final gap in the three-sided encirclement. By occupying this hill, the wolves completed the encirclement. This sudden action was like sounding the bugle for all three sides to charge. The wolves, which had patiently lain in wait for so long, rose up out of the grass and charged the gazelles from the east, west, and north. Never had Chen Zhen witnessed such a terrifying attack. When men charge the enemy, they shout “Charge!”

or “Kill!” Dog attacks are accompanied by frenzied barking to intimidate and instill fear. But when wolves attack, they do so in silence—no shouts, no wolfish howls. Warrior wolves!

The wolves flew out of the tall grass like torpedoes armed with the sharpest, most fearsome teeth and menacing glares, heading straight for the herd.

Stuffed from overeating, the gazelles were thrown into a panic. Denied their primary weapon—speed—they were now little more than sheep, nothing but meat on the hoof. Chen imagined their great terror. Souls had probably already fled from most of them and were on their way up to Tengger. Many merely stood where they were and quaked; others crumpled to the ground as if kneeling, their tongues out, their short tails twitching.

Chen was witness to the wolves’ intelligence and patience, their organization and discipline. Faced with a combat opportunity that came around only once every few years, they were still able to wait patiently, keeping their hunger and their appetite in check, then disarm the enemy—the herd of gazelles—with ease.

Now he understood how the great, unlettered military genius Genghis Khan, as well as the illiterate or semiliterate military leaders of peoples such as the Quanrong, the Huns, the Tungus, the Turks, the Mongols, and the Jurchens, were able to bring the Chinese, whose great military sage Sun-tzu had produced his universally acclaimed treatise *The Art of War*, to their knees, to run roughshod over their territory, and to interrupt their dynastic cycles. They had the greatest of all teachers in military strategy; they had an excellent and remarkably clear model of actual combat; and they had a long history of struggle with crack lupine troops. To Chen, these hours of exemplary combat tactics had proven more enlightening than years of reading Sun-tzu or Clausewitz. He had been smitten by the study of history at a very young age, obsessed over solving one of the great mysteries of world history: Where had the tiny race of people who had swept across Asia and Europe and created the Great Mongol Empire, the largest landholding in the history of the world, learned their military secrets? He had asked that question of Bilgee more than once, and this old man, whose

educational level was low but whose erudition was broad, had gradually answered all his questions by enlightening him on the combat methods of wolves. Chen felt a sense of deep veneration for the grassland wolves and for the people who worshipped the wolf totem.

The battle and the observation continued.

The moment had finally arrived when the herd of gazelles began to stir. Only those older members with previous battlefield experience and the herd leaders had been able to resist the seduction of fragrant, mid-winter grass and had not eaten a quantity that would impede their speed; they immediately took off running toward the mountains, at the same time urging the rest of the herd to run for their lives. But they didn't have a chance, given their full bellies, the deep snow, and the angle of the slope. It was a bloodbath, a punishment by the wise on the stupid and careless. In Bilgee's view, this was a sacred cleansing of the grassland, a good and benevolent deed.

Ignoring those fallen gazelles who had eaten so much they could not run, the wolves went straight for the standing clusters of animals. The larger wolves quickly brought down victims and bit through their throats, sending crimson streams gushing into the air and staining the snow. The frigid air suddenly filled with the heavy stink of blood. The gazelles, with their keen sight and smell, were so terrified by this strategy—killing the chickens to frighten the monkeys—they broke for the mountain. Several large bucks led families of gazelles up to the top of the slope, where they stopped and ran around in circles, unwilling to go down the other side. Obviously, the lead animals had discovered the danger in the white snowdrift, where not a single stalk of grass was visible; the older animals, who were familiar with the landscape, had seen through the wolves' strategy.

All of a sudden, the closely packed group of gazelles turned and came back down, like a landslide, as a dozen or so large males weighed the dangers they faced. They decided on the least risky choice by turning to break through the encirclement.

The bucks knew that their fate hung in the balance. In groups of four or five, shoulder to shoulder, they lowered their heads to create a

phalanx of deadly horns and charged the wolves. Other gazelles that could still run fell in behind them.

Chen knew the damage those horns could do. On the grassland, herdsmen used them as leatherworking needles; so sharp they could penetrate cowhide, wolf skin would be no problem. The counterattack worked as they tore a hole in the encirclement, through which a yellow flood poured. Chen Zhen tensed, afraid that this rent in the line would ruin the wolf pack's plans.

But then he discovered the pack leader standing near the break in the line, looking untroubled, like a man opening the dam to release floodwaters. As soon as the gazelles that had maintained their running speed and kept their horns out in front had passed through the open dam, he led his troops in closing the breach. Now the encirclement contained only gazelles that could not run fast, had no weapons, and were not very smart. A ragtag pack of them, now that their leaders and more powerful males were outside the circle, terrified to face the charging wolves, ran up the slope and then down into the deep snowdrifts. Chen knew at once how the pursued animals—with their pointed hooves, thick legs, and bellies filled with grass—would end up.

Both gazelles and wolves disappeared where the mountain met the horizon. As a thousand gazelles ran for their lives, the blood-soaked encirclement area went quiet. Seven or eight carcasses lay on the grassy slope; other injured members of the herd struggled weakly. No more than ten minutes had passed from the moment the attack was launched until the battle was over. It seemed to Chen that he had held his breath the whole time; his heart was racing.

The old man stood up and stretched, then sat cross-legged in tall grass on the edge of the snow cave, where he took a pipe with a jade mouthpiece out of his felt boot. He filled it with tobacco, lit it, and, covering the opening with a lid made of an old silver coin, inhaled a mouthful of smoke.

Chen knew that as a young man, Bilgee had given a Han Chinese trader from Zhangjiakou twenty fox pelts for this pipe; the students considered it a bad deal, but the pipe was one of the old man's prized

possessions, and he had sympathized with the trader, who'd had to travel all the way to Mongolia to do business, risking death at the hands of highwaymen along the way.

The old man kept smoking. "We can head back after this pipe," he said.

But Chen was still on a hunting high. "Aren't we going to take a look on the other side?" he asked anxiously. "I'd like to see how many gazelles the wolves trapped."

"That's too dangerous. Anyway, I know without looking. There will be hundreds of them. Outside of the young animals, plus the thin ones and the lucky ones that can somehow make it out of the snowdrift, the rest are all fated to go to Tengger. You needn't worry. This pack of wolves won't be able to eat all their kills, and even after our group goes out and brings back all we can, there'll still be plenty left out there."

"The young animals, and the thin ones, how do they manage to get away?"

The old man's eyes crinkled in a smile as he said, "Young animals are thin, which makes their bodies light, so they don't go deep into the snow. They can usually find a way out, and the wolves won't go after them." He beamed. "My boy, today you've witnessed the virtues of wolves. Not only do they watch and preserve the grassland, but they've delivered New Year's gifts to us. Thanks to them, it's going to be a good year. There's a grassland rule here that the spoils of a hunt belong to whoever sees them first. Since you and I are the witnesses, we'll make sure your yurt gets a bit extra. We Mongols place much importance on repaying debts of gratitude. In the future, don't waste your time talking about the wolf hunt with other Chinese or outsiders."

Chen Zhen could barely contain his excitement; he was impatient to fill a wagon with gazelle carcasses and take them back to the yurt. "In the two years I've been here," he said, "the wolves have caused me nothing but trouble. I never expected that one day I'd benefit from their efforts."

"We Mongols benefit from their efforts all the time," the old man

said. He raised his herding club and pointed to a mountain range behind them. “There’s another range of mountains behind that one. It’s not part of our pastureland, but it’s famous around here. The old people say that Genghis Khan’s great general Muqali fought a battle there. He drove several thousand mounted Jurchen warriors of the great Jin dynasty into a snowdrift, and the following spring he sent men back to collect the spoils of war. There were mountains of swords and spears and bows and arrows, plus helmets and armor, and saddles and lanterns. Where else could he have learned that but from wolves? If you add up all the major battles involving Mongols, more than half were fought with skills learned from the wolves.”

The two men walked back to the ravine behind them, and when the dark horse saw its master, it jerked its head up and down excitedly. Every time Chen saw this horse, which had once saved his life, he patted it on the head to once more show his gratitude. The horse accepted his thanks by nudging him on the shoulder. This time, however, Chen felt a powerful impulse to somehow pat a wolf on the head.

They removed the cowhide fetters from the horses’ hooves, mounted up, and rode off at an easy canter toward home.

The old man looked up at the sky, “Tengger is protecting us,” he said. “The weather will hold tomorrow. If a blizzard came tonight, we wouldn’t wind up with a single gazelle.”