

Contents

The Dream to Make a King

1	Labour on the Edge of a Precipice	3
2	Nurturing Black Kid	35
3	Death under a Trapper's Clamp	53
4	Reinventing a King's Moral Character	87
5	Hope and the Next Generation	119
6	Blood over the Blue Sky	141

Wolf Seed

1	A Discarded Police Dog	167
2	Joining a Circus under Freak Circumstances	171
3	Playing Big Grey Wolf	175
4	Fresh Flowers and Applause Do Not Belong to Him	181
5	Falling Prey to Pug Conspiracy	189
6	Bad Wolf? Good Dog?	195
7	A Countryside Encounter with Clouded Leopards	203
8	Righteous Indignation to Redress an Injustice	209

1

LABOUR ON THE EDGE OF A PRECIPICE

I

WOLVES across the world share a peculiar behavioural trait: in the brutal cold of winter they gather in packs, but at other times they live as lone wolves. It is now springtime, a time of pink peach blossoms and green willows and so wolf packs of Mount Riquka follow their natural instinct, breaking up for their members to scatter all over the vast expanse of the Gamar grassland that covers more than 500 square li at the foothill of the snow mountain.

Behind that fan-shaped boulder by a filthy horseshoe pond on the northeastern tip of the grassland lay a she-wolf whose lonesome figure casts an exceedingly long shadow in the setting sun. She has lain here, crouching quietly for hours on end since noon, anxiously hopeful of the sight of a prey, a yellow barking deer, a mountain goat or whatever, here to take a drink of the salt water. Then she could launch a sneak attack that would ensure a delectable meal for the evening. She is lurking from a rather advantageous upwind position at a high vantage point and it is very unlikely that any incoming creature could escape her wolf claws.

The she-wolf is Zilan or Violet Mountain Haze, so named for her coat of fur is a gleaming black, so black that it even radiates a tinge of purple, a deep purple that is rarely seen, whereas the fur on her underbelly is snow white. Her deportment lithe and graceful, when she races she resembles a purplish mountain haze floating and flitting in the air. In lupine aesthetics, Violet is gorgeous. But presently, her slender figure has bloated, her belly is rotund in which little lives are busy. She is pregnant and soon will be in labour.

It is evening and the forest is shrouded in a thin blanket of mist. In the backdrop the snow mountain appears to climb high to the clouds. In the foreground on a patch of pond-side grass, wild flowers flourish, a riot of deep purples and bright reds. A clear water brook runs gurgling and tinkling down its side. All of a sudden she discerns movement in the shrubbery, followed by a rustling sound though there is no wind. The she-wolf freezes in secret excitement, thinking that the moment has come to reward her long wait. She is taut with nerves now but then on closer inspection, she could spot neither yellow barking deer nor mountain goat in the shrubbery. It is a rattlesnake, slithering away with an emerald cuckoo between its teeth.

Wolves abhor poisonous snakes, if not fear them.

Violet is quite disappointed.

Wolves may be savage carnivores, but they too have strong motherly instincts. Violet is expecting her first baby and like all other female mammals in the world of nature, homo sapiens included, whenever the precious little things begin to be naughty, wriggling and kicking in her womb, she would feel a sense of bliss of an expectant mother coupled with a sense of mystery. She would worry deeply over the future destiny of the Little Darlings yet to be born; would she have ample flow of milk to nurture her little darlings till they grow big and strong? Would her Little Darlings be able to evade sudden attacks from marauding natural foes – hunters, tigers and leopards, wild boars and Golden Eagles. Wolves are the elite tribe on the Gamar grassland, masters of the forests, and their life is one of endless bloody slaughters. But still, a cub whose teeth and claws are not fully grown as yet is very easy prey to other predatory carnivores.

To Violet, whether Little Darlings will arrive safely is something very much beyond her control. Wolves are wolves after all, they do not have the benefit of a scientific and impeccable delivery procedure of the humans. Only Fate dictates terms here. Whether in their early years Little Darlings could evade sneak attacks from their natural born enemies also depends partly on fate and partly on her own surveillance and precautionary measures. However it is still a distant issue, no need to crack her brains over it just yet. Her immediate concern is to ensure ample supply of milk to breastfeed the Little Darlings, and to do that she must find ways and means to feed herself well.

Talking about food, there goes again, the rumbling in her stomach. The half-grown grouse she devoured in the morning is thoroughly digested by now. Ever since she conceived her appetite has been so enormous it is astounding. She always feels half-fed and there is a perennial feeling of hunger. Lately she has been under a spell of very bad luck and she has not landed any blue

sheep, barking deer, red deer or any such palatable creatures. Sometimes it is only a porcupine or a grass rabbit after a long day's work, barely enough to fill half the stomach. There are worse times, when there is not a single catch to reward her efforts, crouching by the filthy pond till darkness falls. Absolutely ravenous she would resort to burrowing into mouse holes for mice to stave off hunger.

Wolves aren't felines and they find it very difficult to appreciate the peculiar taste of mouse meat.

The lurk and ambush way of hunting for food is all about luck, Violet understands that. Generally speaking wolves disdain this sort of wait-and-kill game which to them is a decidedly foolish way of hunting for food. Instead one should initiate attacks in the vast expanse of the Gamar grassland where flocks of blue sheep, red deer and gazelles roam free. But again, to run down these fellows in an open chase with no possibility of concealment in the rolling grassland is easier said than done. Wildlife all possess certain self-preservation instincts, for instance the blue sheep which as herbivores, are by nature timid and not built to fight back. Nevertheless they are cautious animals, always wary of predation and are almost as fast as wolves on a sprint. It is not without difficulty even for a healthy and well-built male wolf to land a mature blue sheep. What's more Violet, for whom labour is pretty imminent. She did make a few attempts on the grassland but all her efforts suffered ignominious defeat, not even a strand of sheep wool in between her teeth for all her trouble! That can't be helped, the whelps in her womb are a sort of heavy burden that hampers her speed as well as her ability to pounce on her adversary and to bite and grapple with it.

There was a time when she was hot on the heels of a herd of gazelles, no catch, instead she ran into a hungry leopard, an equally ferocious carnivore. Seeing that she was lugging a fat pregnant belly and rather clumsy, the leopard threw himself at her. Had it not been her quick wit, squeezing herself in the nick of time into a narrow crevice in the rocks, she would have, together with her Little Darlings, long become part of the leopard's excrement. If only Violet has an assistant. Having a partner will certainly turn things around, not only will they stop fearing the leopard, then they can roam the Gamar grassland at will, chasing blue sheep and red deer.

At this point, Violet begins again to miss Big Male Wolf Black Mulberry, what an ideal partner he was! Black Mulberry has a coat of fur that is shiny pitch black. Black symbolises power and conquest; tall and sturdy, Black Mulberry is a combination of brains and brawns. Violet is especially infatuated, yes, even crazy over his body scent that is peculiar to male wolves.

As a matter of fact, the whelps in her womb that are about to arrive are Black Mulberry's seeds.

She begins to reminisce the good old days when she was with Black Mulberry, when life tasted honey sweet and time was never enough. Even scrambling for a rabbit with Black Mulberry in times of hunger felt almost like a wonderful and pleasurable thing. No, they didn't fancy rabbit very much those days. They liked to prey on hinds carrying baby fawns. That unformed meat ball in the hind's womb was a delicacy with a special flavour. Once they had identified the target, they would seldom miss. They collaborated as though they shared one mind and there was no need to work out an attack plan in advance, no need to resort to howling for liaison purposes in a contingency. All it took was a twitch of the ear or a wag of the tail to convey a little signal, which both would understand tacitly: a two-prong attack or attack by encirclement, or feint attack, or else one would lay an ambush in the bushes while the other chased their prey to the trap.

Violet heaves a sigh of grief. If only Black Mulberry is still alive. Black Mulberry was ever so caring and tender towards her, he would certainly stay by her side faithfully at such a critical time when she is due to whelp, lick her back with his rough tongue when she is in a bad mood, find food for her in the grassland when she is hungry.

Black Mulberry could not only dispel her dreadful sense of solitude, he could also help shoulder her worries. After she has given birth to the cubs, he would be able to take over the duties of a father, protecting and nurturing the kids together with her, life will certainly be tranquil and care-free. But now all these have become shattered dreams. Black Mulberry is dead. Black Mulberry's body has probably been devoured by bald eagles, or gnawed away till it was finished clean by red-head ants. She still remembers the site where Black Mulberry met his Creator. That's a mountain valley called Ghost Gorge. Everywhere there are hideous looking rocks, with several sparsely grown shrubs of Camel grass to match. Does it resemble an eerie graveyard!

Without Black Mulberry's company and protection, Violet daren't venture out to the grassland in search of food. Her labour is imminent and she is frail. She fears fatigue may trigger off a miscarriage or other mishaps.

The sky grows dark, the nearby shrubbery and the distant grassland have become a blurry silhouette, finally devoured by the pitch-black night. Only that snow peak behind her is emitting a snowy white glow in the deep blue of the night air. Violet's bosom was filled with hope but now it runs cold. Past experience tells her that after dark, timid herbivorous creatures would shy away from the filthy pond. Alas, looks as though it is going to be yet another night of hunger on a flat belly.

She heaves a deep sigh and dragging her tired body, leaves the filthy pond on a huff to return to her lair in a stone cave.

The stone cave sits on the foothill of Mount Riquka. Having a mouth that is small but a deep and large belly and with the entrance shrouded by a thick growth of vines, it is well-concealed and very much a wolf's ideal lair. Violet lies in the cave for a long while but sleep would not come. An acute sense of ravenousness keeps gnawing at her.

If it were only her own need for sustenance, Violet could well bear with it. But as a mother-wolf now carrying whelps in her womb, she cannot, must not allow the Little Darlings to suffer the same ill-fate and go hungry with her. The whelps in her womb begin to be restless, as if they are protesting this unbearable hunger. She feels a pang of pain in the heart, almost intolerable. She uses her foreclaws to caress her breasts, which are neither sturdy nor full and well-rounded, in fact for reasons of malnutrition and emaciation, they are rather shriveled. For mammals, on the breasts seats the fountain of life. Naturally she hopes that this fountain of life will ceaselessly secrete, no, gush forth sweet, fragrant mother's milk, to feed and to nurture her Darlings so that they grow healthy and strong. Deep in her heart is also hidden a wild ambition, a hope that one day one of her cubs will rise and ascend to the prestigious throne of the Wolf King. It is such a powerful dream, ablaze and burning so brightly that no bumpy road of life, no twists and turns could extinguish this raging fire of desire. After all this ambition was the unfulfilled deathbed behest of Big Male Wolf Black Mulberry.

Yes, Black Mulberry had told her in no uncertain terms that he wanted to be Wolf King. It goes without saying that all adult male wolves worth their salt covet the throne of the Wolf King. But what set Black Mulberry apart from the rest of the pack was that he yearned for it more earnestly and no aspirant was more impassioned. To realise his fierce ambition, Black Mulberry had arisen on many a mid-night for an entire duration of two years, to tear at tree barks with his teeth like a crazed demon and to sharpen his wolf claws on hard granite in an effort to turn them into a lethal weapon. Violet absolutely admires Black Mulberry for his guts and dogged determination. Perhaps persuaded by her own deep-seated affection for him, Violet thought Black Mulberry exuded a regal demeanour befitting the king of wolves that was inborn and so naturally deserved nothing less than the throne.

The incumbent King Roger is also incomparably ferocious and possesses a brute strength that is rare. By measure of physical constitution Roger and Black Mulberry were equals, but Black Mulberry was also blessed with exceptional intelligence and shrewder than Roger by a mile. Whereas the genuinely strong

should be an excellent combination of brain and brawn, Roger is all muscles and essentially a nincompoop who would mindlessly order his pack of wolves to howl in chorus while out foraging for food in the vast wilderness of snow. The fierce north wind would carry the howling very, very far. It's like sounding an alarm for the benefit of their preys. Even the dull-witted blue sheep would have quickly vanished into thin air. On one occasion the imbecile Roger even led an incursion into a hunter's campsite in broad daylight. It was like moths throwing themselves into flames. It was an exercise in sheer futility that cost the lives of several adult male wolves. If Black Mulberry were Wolf King, he would never do anything that idiotic.

To Violet's mind, for Black Mulberry to replace Roger on the throne would be an eventuality of great merit that would have complied to both celestial justice and the will of the wolf populace. Naturally she was a trusted ally to Black Mulberry, in fact from day one she had been an accomplice to the plot to seize the throne. According to their clandestine scheme, Violet would wait for a rainstorm night to execute the plan. She would pretend to quake with terror as thunder struck and lightning flashed. She would inch close to Roger. Out of a certain vanity of a big male wolf, Roger should open up to embrace and offer solace to the lady in distress. Just when his focus blurred as he indulged in his moments of tender affection, Black Mulberry would sneak up behind Roger and under cover of the sounds of howling wind, pounding rain and rolling thunder, sink his teeth into Roger's right hind leg in a flash and break it. Even should Roger's loyal companions overhear the clamour and dash out to counter-attack, it would have been a tad too late. A lame wolf cannot hope to maintain a firm grip on the throne of Wolf King. It was a wonderful ploy, punctiliously thought out – flawless so to speak, and almost impossible to fail.

Just when Black Mulberry and Violet were ready to launch their complot to seize the throne, out of a clear blue sky, in a ravine known as Ghost Gorge Black Mulberry had his crown ripped open by the vicious buck-teeth of a wild boar. Poor Black Mulberry, what a singularly infelicitous demise for a great wolf!

Violet could recall it to its last minute detail. After that horrible wild boar was finally torn to shreds by the wolf pack she rushed to see Black Mulberry. All his four claws facing the sky, Black Mulberry was lying supine on a rock stained a filthy black by wolf blood. His body had turned cold and stiff and yet the pair of wolf eyes were wide open, gazing at the pale sky, gazing at the icy cold sun of winter with a deep, fathomless glow that could only belong to a wild wolf. Among the pack of wolves none knew why Black Mulberry died with his eyes wide open.

Only Violet could understand. Black Mulberry died discontent for his lofty aspiration was unfulfilled and two years of hard work went down the drain. In the final moments of his life, Black Mulberry was doubtlessly not bothered by the pain of bleeding the last drops of wolf blood. Neither was he heaving a sigh of grief for having to bid farewell to this world. It had to be the pang of eternal regret for not been able to continue with Violet the struggle to realise their lofty dream to be Wolf King, a yearning they held day and night. As life ebbed away, that eternal regret crystallised forever in the gaze of Black Mulberry.

Violet stood long before Black Mulberry's body. All of a sudden she was moved by a mysterious communion with the deceased, almost like there was an invisible hand that extracted the very essence of Black Mulberry to transplant it to her own heart, almost like sowing a seed in her bosom. She could feel the spirit of Black Mulberry imploring her to safeguard it, to use her very life to water and nurture the seed, watch it germinate, watch it flower and blossom.

Affirmative, Black Mulberry is gone forever from the surface of the earth, but he had left in her womb his seeds. Put it this way, the blood-line of Black Mulberry will be kept alive, indeed further extended. As a matter of course Black Mulberry's wild ambition and ideals will have a successor.

Violet is well aware that in the matter of succession neither abdication nor hereditary practice has any place in the world of wolf packs. The only path to the throne is through a bloody and relentless contest and that entails a vigorous and strong physical constitution as well as outstanding courage and resourcefulness. To acquire those assets, a stringent regime of training and schooling is important, though proper nutrition for the young ones is equally crucial. A wolf cub that has to live in constant hunger cannot hope to grow into an exceptionally robust adult.

Animal instinct tells Violet that labour is imminent. May be tomorrow afternoon, latest by the day after, the Little Darlings will first see the light of day. She cannot possibly usher in her Little Darlings with shriveled and dried-up breasts, can she? But then full breasts and a gush of mother's milk presupposes an ample supply of food. This is especially so during the first week after delivery. Should she continue to feed on mice, the babies she suckles will most likely grow up as emaciated, as wretched as those mice. Among wolf packs, there were even times when wolf cubs had starved and perished because their mothers did not have sufficient breast milk.

More than anytime ever before, Violet now yearns to lay her claws on a live red deer. How she looks forward to guzzling the fishy-smell deer blood

that is scalding hot! That way her breasts will grow full and well-rounded. She hopes to eat to her heart's content a meal of succulent deer meat, that will give her enough strength to bring the babies to the world safely. But where to get a red deer?

All of a sudden an intriguing thought flashes across her mind. Not too distant from the stone cave is a stockade settlement called Langpa. Right before Langpa lies a deer farm in which are kept a large herd of red deer, frisky and full of vim and vigour. So thrilled by the sheer audacity of the thought is she that she rises and leaps to her feet out the cave and scrambles up the hilllock behind it. From her vantage point she gazes off into the distance. Mother earth is a gigantic ball of pitch black but on the furthest edge of the grassland can be seen several slivers of lights. That is where the humans breed their herds of deer. A sudden impulse surges up her bosom and she feels the urge to race to the deer farm even now to show off her stuff. Just then, a gush of cool night breeze brushes her face to send a cold shiver down her back. The enthusiasm and the zest for adventure that is burning with ardour just a moment ago quickly turns cold.

Correct, a large herd of fat and brawny red deer can be found in the deer farm. What's more, they are been kept in a fenced enclosure with extremely limited space, there for the taking. But there too is a hunter, gun ever in hand, who keeps a vigilant watch. And then an utterly loathsome big, white dog whose keen sense of smell and hearing are in no way inferior to those of the wolves. Even before you can get near the fence, Big White Dog would have raised the alarm, barking loudly to alert the hunter. It brings back memories of her companions Jack and Joe. For trying to help themselves to the deer here in the pursuit of a gourmet's palatal pleasures, Jack had his skull smashed by a shotgun whilst a lead bullet went clean through Joe's stomach. Gleaming brains and wolf's scarlet entrails covered a large patch of ground for all to see.

We can well say that the deer farm is in name and in fact the valley of death. Salivate all they can over those well-fed and now fat and meaty red deer, but rare is the wolf that dares to take the risk. So long, let's call it a day. Better to exercise a little restraint, we can still have mice to appease hunger, reflects a crestfallen Violet.

But soon a motherly love that is determined to bring up her progeny to be strong and healthy, coupled with the reminder of a lofty dream to raise a new Wolf King begin to join force with an irrepressible yearning born of hunger, together they lay a great temptation before Violet's soul. The hunter isn't unassailable and Big White Dog isn't omnipotent. To her mind, both

hunter and Big White Dog are out in the open and so vulnerable, whilst she can hide and lurk in the dark. Circumstances favour a sneak attack. It is a moonless night, even the stars have gone into hiding amidst a furious wind that is blowing hard. The dark night and strong wind facilitate concealment. The elements are certainly on her side. Besides, she is by nature prudent, not rash like Jack and Joe. She just might be able to make it.

Having mulled over factors that are advantageous to her, Violet regains some measures of confidence. She is at once itching to have a go. Truly it is wiser to poach a deer right now than to take a reckless move driven by hunger post-labour. Then she would be even more frail and enervated compared to now, movements would be more difficult, prospect of success remote.

At long last Violet is persuaded by herself that it's the way to go.

She races down the hillock and takes a swill of cool and refreshing pond water. Then she tightens her abdominal muscles, the Darlings in her womb are placid, at least for now and there is no sign that labour is about to take place. She wiggles her hips and wags her tail and reckons she does have sufficient strength to have a good run at the deer farm.

Violet leaves the stone cave and stealthily makes for the large expanse of coal-black called Gamar grassland.

II

HUMANS are humans, truly shrewd and clever. The thatched shed at the east-side of the deer farm that serves as a watch tower is built two storeys tall, good for look-out and surveillance. The hunter on night-watch has kept a bonfire burning in the shed. He is seated by the side of the bonfire, sucking on his hookah. Tucked under his arms is none other than the shotgun that has struck terror into the hearts of all carnivorous and predatory animals in the forests and grassland. Big White Dog on his part is loitering about the fence of the deer farm.

To venture out now is to invite no uncertain death. Violet hides behind a thicket of wormwood far away from the deer farm where he waits patiently. Her coat of fur has turned soggy, dampened by the night dew. Well, that's all right, Violet thinks, it could help mask some of her pungent body odour peculiar to wolves.

Venus the northern star has arisen, appearing like a diamond embellished on jet-black satin. Eventually the bonfire in the thatched shed begins to die out slowly, leaving behind a clump of ember in a dark red glow. The

hunter by its side drops his head rhythmically in a prelude to slumber. That Big White Dog curls up his tail and settles himself by a bamboo ladder in the shed, canine head buried between two forelegs. Master and dog have worked hard for a long night and both are quite worn out now. It is nearly break of dawn and since it has been a peaceful night, they have let their guard slip. Violet is excited. She has soaked in the ice cold mist for one very long night waiting exactly for an opportune moment such as this to launch a sneak attack.

She begins to move. An east wind is blowing, so she takes a detour to the west end of the deer farm. Here it is not only secluded and quiet but also downwind. This way, however powerful his sense of smell, there is no way Big White Dog could pick up Violet's scent.

The fence, constructed with stakes fashioned out of chestnut tree trunks each thick as the lip of a rice bowl, is taller than a man and considerably sturdy. But to Violet that isn't much of a problem. A wolf's ability to bound and leap is far beyond the imagination of man and it won't take much exertion for her to clear the fence. All she needs to do is to tap the rough chestnut tree bark with her front claws, then in a flying leap sail over the obstacle. Her only concern is that she might cause a hubbub among the herd that would arouse Big White Dog and his master. A red deer has rather keen senses of smell and hearing. Besides it is by nature wary and startles very easily. The slightest movement would be enough to make them snort wheeze and grunt.

She is also dithering for she is well-aware that red deer in a deer farm continue to keep their wildlife habit of posting a watch deer at night despite living in a safe enclosure, closely guarded by hunters and Big White Dog. As the herd sink into deep slumber, an adult buck will be perpetually standing watch, vigilant with its ears erect and its eyes a piercing gaze.

To Violet that isn't exactly an amiable gesture.

Looks as though she has to count on the natural shrewdness of wolves to launch this sneak attack. Violet studies the topography carefully before proceeding to a triangular-shaped bog where she wallows about to plaster her entire body with a coat of mud paste. That should totally take care of the choking stench of blood that is on a wolf's body. But still she doesn't feel safe, as she passes a shrub of mountain ebony, she bites off a large bunch of the flowers and clutches it in between her teeth. Then without making a sound, she crawls near the fence to reconnoitre further. It is only when she is satisfied that the adult buck keeping watch as well as the hunter in the shed and the Big White Dog are all completely in the dark that she leaps like a flash of lightning and jumps over the fence that is taller than a man.



Violet cuts a beautiful arc in the air, her leaping style is so elegant it is as if she is performing in an artistic gymnastics competition. In mid-air she stretches her hips, tucks in her belly and curls up her legs, then she floats like a falling leaf, making the slightest sound possible as she lands. She has determined her point of landing well in advance so that as she touches ground, she has her head face towards the big adult buck on watch duty. Now she huddles quietly under the large bunch of mountain ebony, motionless with bated breath and rapt attention.

Absolutely as she has anticipated, the moment she touches ground, Big Buck on watch raises its amber antlers in a sudden jerk and gets ready to crane its neck to make an alarm snort. At that split second that will decide between life and death, however, Big Buck becomes hesitant.

It opens its mouth but stays silent.

In the hazy darkness Big Buck thinks he sees a bunch of pure white mountain ebony descend gently. Then Big Buck catches the strong fragrance of flowers. A deer is by nature irresolute and slow and this has affected Big Buck's sense of judgement. For a moment Big Buck cannot decide whether to sound the alarm. He fears becoming a laughing stock among his pals should he awake them with a false emergency alert that turns out to be just a bunch of falling flowers. Still, having an overly suspicious nature like all deer means Big Buck cannot set his mind at rest, not after this sudden occurrence. Hence his expression and body language is frozen in a tentative state between wanting to snort and remaining mute.

This is a contest of wisdom.

Violet maintains his composure and keeps still as a stone. Her patience soon bears fruit. A few minutes later that slow-witted Big Buck finally accepts that it was indeed some harmless bunch of mountain ebony that flew over the fence. Thus his antlers draw level slowly and his neck contracts, the taut nerves in his entire system ease off.

That very instant Violet suddenly leaps and lunges at a doe she has already marked as target. The doe is in her dreams and under her soft belly can be seen the little furry head of a fawn. Violet has all of it figured out, there is no way she could steal an adult buck or doe, they being too bulky and heavy for Violet to hold between her teeth and over the sturdy wooden fence that is taller than a man. She could only steal a fawn. Like a whirlwind she charges at the ill-fated doe and stabs hard at the doe's eyelid with the bunch of mountain ebony held between her teeth. By then the doe has already been waken by the stench of blood the wolf exhales. She opens her eyes only to see a white flash of flowers. Instinctively she pulls back her body in an evasive

action. Violet seizes the moment to sink its teeth into the neck of that hapless fawn beneath her mother's belly and drags it out. Before she realises what happens, the doe has lost her precious baby.

Big Buck the watch deer has noticed that bunch of mountain ebony moving towards the herd and has felt it strange. Now it occurs to him that he has been fooled. Once again he raises his antlers and cranes his neck, intending to make the alarm snort. But that too takes a few seconds and those precious few seconds is all Violet needs to leap over the fence with the fawn in the grip of her jaws.

Big Buck finally bleats and snorts. In an instant the whole herd of deer are awakened, panic-stricken, there is complete pandemonium. Then the bark of Big White Dog reciprocated by the woof of a host of canines in the stockade and the loud boom of shotgun shatters the pre-dawn peace and tranquility on the Gamar grassland.

But it is too late. By now Violet has fled from the furthest boundary of the stockade settlement of Langpa.

III

IF divine providence has been kinder and has sent a heavy downpour to wash away every bit of trace and scent that Violet leaves behind in the grassland, the Big White Dog wouldn't have been able to stay hot on her trail, however sharp-witted he may be. By the same token if Violet has taken the fawn direct to her stone cave with no stop in between, however fleet-footed Big White Dog maybe, he could not hope to catch up with her.

Initially it hasn't been the intention of Violet to halt half way through the flight but the fawn in her jaws proves so fragile, kicking and struggling at first but gradually turning motionless all too soon. In fact Violet hasn't given it a death-dealing bite, the little thing is probably asphyxiated due to hysteria triggered off by panic.

By now Violet has put far behind her the deer farm with its glimmering lights, the barking of dogs, the gunshots and the noises of brouhaha among the herd of deer – sounds that are fast fading, fast becoming inaudible. Considering that she is out of danger, her flurried footsteps at once turn calm and poised. In a brisk trot she continues her journey home to the stone cave as the fawn dangling from her jaws sways from side to side. The fawn is in its last twitches. Violet knows very well that once a prey breathes its last, the body will slowly turn cold, its blood will coagulate and cease to flow. She really yearns for the scalding hot blood of a deer for

it is her fervent hope that deer blood will provide a timely tonic before her labour, hopefully even to cause her shriveled breasts to balloon.

Considering that a brief pause is quite unlikely to cause any trouble, she stops behind an anthill. With a bite deftly executed she has ripped open the windpipe of the dying fawn. Instantly a rush of viscous, scalding hot blood injects into her thirsty mouth, sweet and fragrant yet smelling like fish. A tingling sensation of pleasure runs through her entire body, her dry and shriveled breasts seems to begin to blossom full all at once. Desperately she sucks the exquisite wine of life, till there one drop of blood left in the windpipe of the fawn. Feeling a little somnolent, she does a long stretch and then rubs her wolf face on the blades of grass splattered with beads of dewdrops. She pulls herself together. She picks up the fawn again, intending to slowly savour it once back in the stone cave.

If Violet could foretell the future, she would have known that the few moments she spends behind the anthill are harbingers of a catastrophic turn of event. Those few mouthfuls of deer blood that she so craves is in reality a bowl of Fate's bitter wine. If she knows she would rather make a beeline for the stone cave, even if it means the fawn's blood in its body would cool and coagulate.

There is no way one could resist Destiny.

As Violet is about to leave the anthill with the fawn in the grip of its teeth, suddenly from the pitch-dark thick growth of grass out leapt a blurry white shadow of something followed immediately by woof woof, two sharp shrieks from an angry dog. Violet is taken aback, she never expects that loathsome big white dog to pick up her scent and follow her all the way here. She strains her ears and hears the bellow of the hunter coming from a considerable distance behind Big White Dog. She daren't take it lightly. Turning her head round she dashes in the direction of the wilds. Big White Dog gives chase.

Generally speaking, on a run a wolf outspeeds a dog. But Violet is carrying a fawn in between her teeth. Though not particularly heavy it is a burden that slows her down. Big White Dog is relentless in pursuit of Violet, and whatever she tries, she just couldn't shake him off. If she discards the fawn she could quickly lose Big White Dog, but she simply cannot bring herself to do that. The fawn is her prize for risking life and limbs, how could she part with it so easily?

Thus Violet and Big White Dog are engaged in a marathon contest on the vast expanse of Gamar grassland, pursuer and quarry often separated only by a few paces.

Her four paws as if on fire, Violet tears across the Gamar grassland, over small streams and marshes and across the filthy pond, in no time reaching the edge of the grassland. Here she comes to a fork in the road, one leads to her stone cave lair at the foothill of Mount Riquka whilst the other runs straight to a dried-up riverway of old. For a moment, she vacillates over the options. Then she turns into the ancient riverway.

A primal instinct of animals to protect their lair dictates that she should avoid courting danger in the vicinity of her home. Besides, she is on the verge of delivering her whelps who doubtlessly will live in the cave for a long, very long period of time after birth. She doesn't imagine the consequences should her lair be found out by Big White Dog and his master.

Violet persists in her run for a very long time on the ancient riverway which is paved from side to side with cobblestones. First light gradually breaks through the pitch-black sky and then a ray of the rising sun with a rose red hue floats over the horizon. She is utterly weary from the marathon but she could hear the Big White Dog behind her huffing and puffing too, so exhausted even his barking has grown hoarse. From experience Violet knows that the dog's master has been left far behind, but Big White Dog shows no sign of letting up. Violet is both indignant and baffled. Logically speaking a dog is no match for a wolf, one to one. If a dog appears to be intrepid and battle-hardened even when faced with a ferocious wolf, that is because it knows it could count on the might of its master, as the idiomatic expression goes: a dog intimidates people on the strength of its master's power. Once the master isn't by its side, the dog's facade of aw-inspiring power crumbles quickly, the valiant gladiator transforms into a yellow-belly in flight with its tail between its hind legs.

At this juncture the Big White Dog's master is nowhere to be seen and Big White Dog isn't dumb, he ought to be well aware of that, but why on earth is he still so unrelenting in pursuit? Has the Big White Dog taken the elixir of leopard gut? Or perhaps he is just a psychopathic case? Then again, Violet conjectures, this big white dog may yet turn out to be a fine army dog pedigree. An army dog is a dog's elite and warrior-hero whose courage and physical strength are comparable to a wolf. If that be the case, Violet has indeed fallen on evil days.

Violet's worries are rather redundant for Big White Dog isn't an army dog and his breed is nothing to shout about. He belongs to those mongrels so common on the plateau of northern Yunnan. Big White Dog is just an ordinary house dog kept by Ankedu, deer breeder in the stockade settlement of Langpa. He is not on any elixir of leopard gut either. Neither is he suffering

from schizophrenia. She is pressing on tenaciously with the pursuit motivated by his hope to seek forgiveness from his master.

Is he currently under the spell of an evil star, or is he at the lowest point of his biological clock? Big White Dog seems to be jinxed lately, nothing goes right. The other day at mid-noon a python devoured a young fawn at the grazing ground while he was feeling drowsy. On another day at midnight, after his master has fallen into deep slumber, Big White Dog had sneaked into the stockade for a tryst with a female dog named Xinuer. That was the time a cursed leopard pried open the fencing and its iron lock with its teeth and carried off a three-year-old buck from among the herd.

Consequently the master incurred a heavy loss and naturally became very resentful. Deemed criminally guilty of dereliction of duty, he became the object of his master's wrath. In the past the master doted on him and used to clasp him in his arms, stroke his back and plant kisses on his cheeks. But after the serial losses, the master has taken back his love and with that all those gestures of affection. This is especially obvious after the three-year-old buck on whose crown had grown tall antlers was snatched away by the leopard, when the master, his face contorted to present an expression of utter disgust, gave his dog two hard kicks on his belly. Put it this way, the grievous hurt was felt not so much on the skin as it was in the heart.

He knows it for a matter of fact that since time immemorial dogs had been dependent on man for survival. Losing the love of a master means forfeiting the means to stay alive. He has seen with his very own eyes how his pals met with a tragic end after losing the favour of the master. The master once kept an old bitch called Lolo who as old age crept in became lethargic and slothful, her legs grew so weak she couldn't even keep up with the deer. For a paltry ten bucks the master sold her to a butcher of dogs. Needless to say what awaited her was a boiling cauldron in the slaughterhouse. Word had it that during Lolo's younger days she used to be the master's inseparable companion.

Big White Dog worries that because of his incompetence and dereliction of duty, the master will eventually discard him too. A dog has no right to self-determination and it counts on the master's charity for its well-being. It follows that the only way to ensure survival and happiness is to regain the master's favour. The customary apple-polishing and attempts at flattery, the usual begging for mercy and acts of coquetry – none of these work now. He must make up for his blunders with concrete contributions, which is to say, he must see to it that the master's wealth in the form of red deer will not be touched by a thief ever again. The vermin that has the audacity to affront the master must be seized. In a nutshell this sums up the mental and spiritual

basis behind the Big White Dog's decision to break with convention and keep up the chase although separated far from his master.

Big White Dog is in no way moronic. He knows too that he is not supported by that shotgun of the master and that challenging a wolf in a duel is dangerous business wherein he hardly enjoys any edge over his opponent. If things went bad he might even have to pay with his own life. And all for nothing! Canine instinct keeps urging him to cut short the dangerous chasing game. Call it quits before the fugitive Big Bad Wolf collects itself and turns back to pounce on you!

But when he catches a glimpse of Violet's rotund, bulging belly that has swollen to its limits, he finds it hard to give up the venture. Who knows I'm in luck today, the dog thinks to himself, the Big Bad Wolf on the run before him hasn't dared to turn back to counter-attack. Certainly that is because of debility due to pregnancy, for all he knows, the she-wolf might even have lost her ability to make a lunge and bite. This is a heaven-sent opportunity to redeem himself. Take out this vicious wolf and not only will he reclaim the master's love, he will also enjoy a tremendous boost to his prestige and status in the canine world. Wow, lone dog vanquishes lone wolf. His heroic fame will spread far and wide to the four corners of the Gamar grassland!

Out of vanity and hopeful of a fluke victory, Big White Dog banishes from his mind any thought of dogly disadvantages and resumes his pursuit courageous and dauntless.

IV

VIOLET finds it almost impossible to move another step. Strings of slobber dangle from the edge of her mouth and her belly suffers bouts of rippling and twitching spasm. The fawn held in between her teeth has become a cumbersome liability. She realises that if she stubbornly continues this way, it won't take very long before she tires out and froths at the mouth to collapse dead on the ancient riverway. Rather than dying the miserable death of a wretched fugitive, it may be a better idea to halt, turn back and launch a counter-offensive at Big White Dog. That way there may be still a glimmer of hope of survival.

At the thought of this Violet abruptly takes a sharp turn into a tributary of the ancient riverway. It is also a dried-up river bed but narrower, more desolate and concealed. The towering mountain ridges around here block out the morning sun rays so that cobblestones on the riverbed are coated with a layer of moss. Scattered in the centre of the riverbed are outcrops of

projecting stones and precipitous rocks. The terrain here is just right, Violet thinks, right for dealing with your foes and right for easy getaway. More importantly the funnel-shaped valley will keep out any noise made by Big White Dog, even if Big White Dog's master manages to follow her trail to the vicinity, there is no way he can overhear the bellow and noises of the brawl and rush over to reinforce his dog.

As Violet continues her run along the dark and gloomy ancient riverway, she takes a squint at the Big White Dog hot at her heels, whose foreclaws are at times just a few inches away from her buttock. Suddenly she spits out the fawn in her jaws and takes a big leap side-way up a cobblestone half a metre tall. Big White Dog is taken by surprise and the riverbed made slippery as oil by the moss does not help matters. He tries to rein in his steps but it is too late as the momentum of his forward movement carries him in a sliding motion past Violet.

Now Violet occupies a coign of vantage from where she could see Big White Dog caught momentarily in a most vulnerable position as he twists his waist in an attempt to turn round. It is a split-second opportunity Violet must not miss. At once she lunges at the back of Big White Dog. It is fair to say that before the contest, her bosom is filled with a stirring feeling of solemnity and a strong sense of tragedy and forboding. From the way Big White Dog bears down on her so menacingly and from the tenacity with which he keeps up the pursuit, she surmises that he is a ferocious army dog. She is all set up to perish together with her adversary.

But after the first round of fight, she quickly sees through Big White Dog for all he is worth: this is in truth a good-for-nothing common mongrel. Big White Dog's claws aren't sufficiently sharp even to tear off some wolf hair. His teeth aren't exactly razor-edged too, capable of causing only skin-deep wounds but not enough to break bones. Having thus cast to the winds her fears and sorrows, Violet regains the self-confidence characteristic of a wolf.

She is determined to kill Big White Dog who has rushed her off her feet all day. She could then drag his body back to the stone cave for supper. Dog meat may not taste as succulent as deer meat, but it's still quite palatable.

Coming back to Big White Dog. He never imagines the fugitive wolf would turn round and surprise him with a counter-attack. Before he could dodge, the razor-sharp wolf claws have left several gashes on his shoulder. From his back a piece of dog flesh and the dog hair on it is also lost to wolf teeth, causing excruciating pain, as though his back is ablaze. Fortunately he still possesses rather quick reflexes which enable him to roll vehemently on the spot, throwing the savage wolf off his back.

It is a bitter blow for Big White Dog who now comes to the sudden realisation that he is in fact in a most precarious position. All said and done, a wolf is a wolf, even in late pregnancy it is many times tougher than a mongrel. Only, he sees the light too late. Turn and run, Big White Dog thinks, but the home trail has been blocked by the wolf. Besides he is dead beat after the long-distance pursuit and he doesn't fancy his chances of eluding the treacherous claws of the wolf. For want of a better solution, he puts on a swashbuckling posture and begins to snarl and growl in the hope that his barking will bring his master and together they will deal with the wolf. But the master is too far away from him and man has a pathetically dull sense of smell and hearing. It is next to impossible for him to track them down on the strength of a scent, like the wolves and dogs do all the time. His frenzied yaps are only answered with empty echoes from the mountain valley. He has another card up his sleeve, and that is to wag his tail and raise the white flag. But though this master-stroke may have some appeal to his canine pals and humans, in the case of big bad blood-thirsty wolves, it can only be a waste of effort. Since he can neither escape nor capitulate Big White Dog has no other option than to fight to the death.

Having had the upper hand in round one of the contest, Violet becomes even more aggressive and ferocious. With a mind to bring this fight at close quarters to a quick conclusion, she throws all caution to the wind and pounces on Big White Dog, knocking him down. Then pinning down the dog who is now flat on his back, the wolf's sharp muzzle forces itself on the soft dewlap of Big White Dog, intending to rip his windpipe off in one bite. This is a wolf's signature tactic, its signature expertise. Big White Dog fully understands that once his windpipe is slit open, blood squirts out and then life comes to an end. Thus he lifts both his forepaws to resist Violet's chin with all the desperation of one who knows it is a do-or-die moment. But the physical strength of a wolf is far beyond his imagination. Violet's muzzle presses inch by inch closer to his windpipe. The coarse, pink-coloured tongue is now licking his dewlap. The nauseating stink and fishy smell that emits from the wolf's mouth dazzles him and makes him dizzy. He feels like throwing up. His last ounce of strength is expended and he realises that he cannot hold on any longer.

The sun is a tangerine red, rising slowly but surely behind the rolling mountains in the east, its warm rays bathing the dark and gloomy ancient riverway, shining over trees which are green, and the red earth and the greyish white riverbed. Morning is indeed a spectacular sight to behold. Big White Dog refuses to die a sudden and ignominious death such as this

in the wilderness. More than any other time he has a nostalgic yearning for life. He really regrets having let vainglory get the better of him and drive him to pursue this evil wolf single-handedly. But it is too late for sorry now. In a few seconds the razor-sharp wolf teeth will unavoidably touch his crisp and tender windpipe and then he and this beautiful world will part.

Just as Violet's wolf teeth touch Big White Dog's throat, the dog strikes back at his assailant's belly with a violent kick from his two hind feet. It is driven entirely by a primal survival instinct, a struggling act executed absolutely unwittingly.

If Violet isn't pregnant and if labour isn't imminent, being kicked even twenty times would not have troubled her much, let alone twice. To a wolf, biting and kicking in a scuffle is all part and parcel of life. But Violet is expecting and delivery is due. Those two kicks also happen to land on her lower belly that is bulging big. Violet feels a searing pain as though electrocuted by high-voltage electricity. A violent spasm runs through her body and with a wailing howl she falls off the body of Big White Dog. Perhaps hurt, the Little Darlings in the womb begin to punch and kick as if in protest, causing Violet to roll about writhing in pain on the riverway gravel.

Big White Dog is still in a muddle, wondering what has happened. Seeing Violet roll around, he takes it to be the guile of Big Bad Wolf on show, a deception tactic, aiming to lure him to a trap. Still, watching by the side he is perplexed by what he sees. The anguish seems genuine, look at that face of the wolf, muzzle and chin twisted, contorted doubtlessly by an unbearable, torturous pain. Look again at that pair of wolf's eyes, the radiance of the soul of the wild is completely extinguished, its lustre dimmed. One look will tell you that she is totally prostrated by sheer exhaustion.

Big White Dog feels smug and very pleased that he is about to turn the table on the wolf. Quick, seize the moment when the Big Bad Wolf is in a state of semi-consciousness and shock, when she has temporarily lost her ability to resist, throw yourself at her, take a page from the cruel wolf's book, tear open her windpipe with one bite. The master will reward your valour and dote on you again like before.

Big White Dog feels an impetuosity to act right away. But his overly clever mind suddenly has a second thought: the cunning of a wolf is well known and there is no lack of precedents where a wolf feigns death under critical circumstances, only to emerge the eventual winner. Who can indeed guarantee that this wolf rolling around on the ground isn't playing dead?

As a matter of fact he was clearly fighting a losing battle in the scuffle some moments ago and there is no way he could have imparted a killer blow to the wolf. How could Big Bad Wolf become paralysed all of a sudden? An abnormal phenomenon could well be deception's smoke screen, Big White Dog so analyses, better not rashly lunge to attack.

Violet rolls about on the ground and it takes the edge off her acute pain but every bone and sinew in her entire body feels soft as willow catkins. This is followed by a sensation that an object is descending in her belly. She realises that she is about to give birth. Daredevil that a wolf is, she is terrified by the thought that she will go into labour right under the nose of his bellicose foe Big White Dog. That is as fraught with danger as dancing on the sharp edge of a knife. Violet needs only to show the slightest hint of vulnerability, that would be enough for Big White Dog to smell a rat. Then mother and whelps will inevitably be torn to shreds by Big White Dog. When in labour pain and suffering the accompanying fits of giddiness, she won't be able to fend off even a cat, let alone the ferocious Big White Dog. Alas, my darlings, you have arrived at an inopportune moment. She is thinking of escaping to a safe and concealed spot to deliver her babies but that is impossible for at the moment she doesn't even have the energy to move one step. She really wants the whelps to stay a while longer in her womb, wait till she dispatches Big White Dog and rids herself of the threat to survival. Then we'll usher in our darlings. But no can do, the whelps inside cannot wait to squeeze themselves out of their mother's womb.

She feels the discomfort of fullness, bursting with the urge to urinate and yet unable to do so. The only thing to do now is to gain time by throwing up a smoke screen to confuse Big White Dog. Thus thinking Violet tries to forget the searing pain in her belly and stops rolling about. She crouches on the gravel and does her level best to push her chest out, assuming an expression as though disgruntled by the failure of her tactic to deceive Big White Dog by feigning death.

Indeed as expected Big White Dog is duped. Pleased as punch, he smiles and watches Violet even more closely.

Violet raises her buttocks slightly and squinting her wolf eyes, makes a posture as if she is secretly gathering strength, hankering for the opportunity to jump on her opponent to deal him a mortal blow any time now.

It works marvellously! Big White Dog is on tenterhooks. He stops going round and positions himself in front of the wolf. His whole body tense and stiff and his muscles tighten, his tail rears erect like a flagpole, Big White Dog is so nervous his eye balls are about to pop out from their sockets.



Owooooo, Violets makes an awe-inspiring howl with all her might.

Scared stiff, Big White Dog puts his tail between his lower thighs, lets off a blood-curdling whine and turns to scramble away. When he is several tens of metres away, he sees that there is no action on the part of his adversary. Still badly shaken, he leaps on a stone ridge and watches from afar.

If only Big White Dog is kept in the dark forever.

The sunrays gradually turn from tangerine to a incandescent white and from both banks of the ancient riverway could be heard intermittently the gibber and chatter of apes and monkeys as well as the chirp and twitter of birds.

At long last, Violet begins to feel bouts of sharp tearing pain in the belly. In a while a whelp wriggles its way out of her body, then another one. At once the unbearable feeling of an object descending in her belly dissipates quickly. Her awareness of all these is enabled by her sheer sense of touch. She daren't turn her head to catch a first glimpse of her darling whelps' what's their fur colour, what do they look like? She fears her slightest movement or distraction will spill the beans. Big White Dog crouching on the stone ridge will see through her ploy and leap down to attack her and her newborn darling whelps.

Oops, the third whelp reports to the world without a hitch. Three darling whelps wriggle between the icy cold earth and their mother's warm body, looking for her breasts – the fountain of life. She wants badly to hold them tenderly in the mouth and put them under the sun, to let them have a ball of a time enjoying the bright and beautiful sunshine and the moist air. She finds it hard to suppress a motherly impulse to move her three darling whelps out from beneath her body, so that she can have a good look at their faces, they must be beautiful and lovely, delicate and gorgeous, like the morning sun rising from the water surface, the more one looks at it the more one feels captivated, never can one have enough doses of it. She yearns to stick out her tongue and with deep affection lick clean the residues of womb and blood stains on their bodies, lick their fur till they glitter like some holy and pure little angels. Then she would lick their eyelids till they open, till the little eyes brighter than black onyxes also open and begin to turn round and round to cast first sight on this crimson sun, these green hills and forests and this blue sky. Let them register and forever etch upon their minds the looks of their mother.

She feels that her breasts have miraculously swollen like a reservoir in a flood wherein a tempestuous springtide is churning. She feels like pushing her nipples into the darling whelps' babyish and tender mouths so that they can feed to their hearts' content on the sweet and fragrant mother's milk.

Violet yearns to follow every instinct of a mother but she daren't. Big White Dog is close by, she has no choice but to hide her three whelps deep under her belly. Once the whelps first see the world, their true mischievous nature shows. Not content to be docilely asleep under their mother's belly, they begin to crawl about clumsily but her belly provides very limited space for shelter. The furry little head of a whelp squeezes itself out from the gap in her right flank. She quickly moves her hip to conceal the little whelp's furry head again under her belly. But just then on her left flank the little buttocks of another whelp exposes itself under the sun.

At this Big White Dog leaps down the stone ridge. Suspicions clouding his mind, he moves rather hesitantly towards where Violet is lying. Dammit, those penetrating eyes of Big White Dog must have spotted my weak spot. Violet's belly quivers, two more whelps are still in the womb. Come on out darlings, dawdle not any longer, hurry, get out of mommy's body before Big White Dog wakes up fully to the situation. That way mommy will be relieved of the double mental and physical pressures on her shoulders. Mommy can then turn to handle that wretched Big White Dog!

But either the two whelps are by nature indolent or they are infatuated with the pleasant sweet and cosy womb because for a long while they couldn't tear themselves away from the womb. Violet desperately rubs her lower belly against the ground hoping to force the two naughty darlings out but it's all in vain.

Big White Dog is only two three paces away. Violet has no choice but to revert to her old trick of putting on all sorts of menacing postures. But this time around they fall flat for Big White Dog simply ignores them.

When Big White Dog is crouched on the stone ridge, he could only make out blurry images of certain objects wriggling about Big Bad Wolf's flank. It is Violet's look of fear and embarrassment, something that she is trying desperately to hide, that actually gives her away. Don't tell me ... as if to confirm his suspicion, just when he is pressing nearer Big Bad Wolf, in fact only two paces away, the little furry head of a whelp squeezes its way out from between the wolf's two forearms. Despite the wolf's double-quick action in pawing back the little head of her whelp to conceal under her belly, Big White Dog manages to catch a glimpse of everything thanks to the proximity. Oh, little wonder that Big Bad Wolf has all the patience to lie still like a stone here, she is in labour!

In that instant a feeling of strong resentment at being fooled wells up the heart of Big White Dog. If only he smells something fishy just now, he could well have finished off mother-wolf and whelps most easily. Blame it on the cunning of Big Bad Wolf, blame it on my simple-mindedness and honest nature. He is



deeply chagrined and full of regrets. But after he has swept the wolf's body with his keen eyes, his vexation turns to glee, haha, her belly is still bulging big, which is to say that the difficult process of labour is still not completed. He thanks his lucky star for catching her now, it is still not too late. Damnable evil wolf, just you wait and see, you will have to pay the price for your deceit!

Big White Dog lunges at Violet like a gust of whirlwind.

Violet is in labour and defenceless. Concealed under her belly are three totally vulnerable whelps and for that reason she cannot dodge about. She can only crouch where she is and passively await the rapidly repeated onslaught of the Big White Dog. The only thing she could do is to constantly adjust her position so as to face her assailant's teeth and claws head on with the hard, rock-like head of a wolf, at the same time to ensure that Big White Dog does not have half a chance of attacking her from her flank or back. This way, even though dog claws have lacerated her ears and foreface to leave blood-stained scratch marks all over and even though dog teeth have torn off several mouthfuls of wolf fur, none are mortal wounds. On two occasions when Big White Dog slows down his attack somewhat, Violet even manages to open her jaws to bite in retaliation while staying in position. She may not have bitten off so much as a strand of dog hair with that, but at least it forces Big White Dog to reduce the frequency of his attacks.

Soon Big White Dog seems to realise that a frontal assault however persistent is no way to settle the issue. So switching his tactics, he quietly begins to make circles round Violet seeking the chance to leap on the wolf's back to launch a lethal bite.

Violet promptly sees through his ploy. Thereon she begins to adjust her posture constantly so as to maintain a frontal stance wherever the dog moves.

If not for an unseen turn of events, this stalemate would have continued and it is quite unlikely that Big White Dog will gain any advantage.

Alas, the two whelps in her belly, some minutes ago they are still dawdling in the womb refusing to emerge, then at this critical moment of life and death, they are trying to squeeze out of their mother's body. Is this not evil retribution for misdeeds done in my previous existence? Why add to my trouble now!

At this Violet feels a violent bout of spasm in her womb and then a whelp slips out through the birth canal, ever so slowly, to see the world. Violet is overcome by a sudden dizziness the instant the new life is born, vision seems to be obscured by a layer of white gauze and all in front of her appears illusory. Her sense of awareness is highly dispersed, she even forgets the presence of Big White Dog. It is only when a hefty hunk lands on her back that her awareness and combative spirit awake with a start.

Damn! Big White Dog stole his way to her back while she was in a daze and now he is on the wolf's back. Under normal circumstances all she needs to do is to roll about a couple of times on the ground to throw the pest off her back. But not now. She fears smothering the baby still in the birth canal should she change her posture. Her only option is to freeze and lie prone where she is come what may from the Big White Dog. She tries her very best to stretch and lie spread-eagled to protect the three whelps under her belly from harm, all the while pulling in her chin and throat to protect her windpipe from the lethal bite of the Big White Dog.

Big White Dog tears off a piece of wolf flesh from the back of Violet's neck, fur and meat in one vicious bite.

Violet lets out a howl of anguish, scalding hot wolf blood drips along her ear lobe to fall on the white gravel of the ancient riverway. Stimulated by the pain and agitation the fourth whelp comes into the world with a cry.

There is left one more, one last whelp in Violet's womb.

Wolf flesh in between his teeth, Big White Dog jumps off Violet's back. Perhaps driven by hunger, perhaps to flaunt his feral ferocity or perhaps done with an intent to humiliate and intimidate Violet, Big White Dog crouches down on his haunches and starts to nibble on the piece of wolf flesh that is still oozing blood.

Big White Dog lets a precious opportunity to strike slip through his grasp.

Before Big White Dog could devour whole his piece of wolf meat, the last whelp in Violet's womb has had a smooth passage out of its mother's womb. With the first shriek from the fifth whelp at the moment of its birth, the strong sense of something descending in Violet's belly disappears all at once. Her body feels unusually relaxed and even as the wound on the back of her neck continues to bleed she feels a certain pleasurable sensation, a certain light-headedness. A feeling of pride and joyousness for finally seeing through that difficult process of the birth of life wells up in her bosom. It is this spiritual uplift that energises her once again and at last, she rises from the blood-soaked gravel.

Just then, a heavy dark cloud obscures the sun. In the forest a hint of rising anxiety and impending pandemonium as birds begin to wail and scream and animals and wild beasts begin to scamper and stomp about. Bleak and desolate, the ancient riverway is bathed in an awfully cold and deathly atmosphere. Violet glares at Big White Dog, her feral stare sending an unmistakable message to warn her adversary: look here, my labour is done! Here I stand, for my precious darlings, I am ready to fight to the very end with you!

Big White Dog is shrewd enough to discern that he is facing a reversal of fortune and things are going against him. I couldn't finish off the devilish wolf when she was in labour, weak and limp, now it certainly looks even more improbable. A mother-wolf protecting her whelps may turn more ferocious than a leopard. Alas, I can only blame myself for awakening too late, striking too late! No use crying over spilt milk now. Mountain torrents are about to pour, better hurry back to the deer farm and the comfort of my cosy kennel. At the thought of this Big White Dog turns and leaves the ancient riverway in a huff, disappearing quickly among the blackish green thick growth of devil sugarcane.

V

ALL of a sudden as sand flies in clouds and pebbles are swept along the ground on the ancient riverway, a howling gale begins to rage. At a great distance a ball of flashing lightning falls from a mountain peak, then an earth-shattering thunderbolt and a big tree is devoured by a blazing flame.

The life force of newly born is fragile and as the wind rages the whelps shake like a leaf and thunder and lightning makes them squeak. Violet shelters her five whelps under her belly and gazes up at the sky as anxiety weighs down her heart. Ominous clouds grow thicker and the sky turns darker by the moment, a torrential downpour more terrifying than the devil itself seems inevitable. The ancient riverway is too dangerous a place to linger long, it is low terrain here and in the event of a mountain torrent, the consequences would be horrendous. She must leave on the double and a perfect destination is her lair in the stone cave which is well-concealed and safe, where there is no fear of thunder and lightning or wind and rain.

At the thought of this she resolutely springs into action. With her wolf muzzle and claws she shoves and drives all five whelps to a leeward spot behind a rock. Then gently she picks up one of the whelps by the back of its neck. Cast out of the sanctuary of their mother's body, the remainder of the whelps huddle up panic-stricken and shriek in despair. The whelps' pathetic cries almost break Violet's heart as a mother. But wolves are highly sagacious animals, Violet knows mere compassion and show of pity does not help, not one iota! Only action can save her and her precious darlings. Her heart hardens, she braves the storm and like an arrow flies straight for her lair in the stone cave.

She can only take one whelp at a time between her teeth.

From the ancient riverway to her lair in the stone cave measures about two Chinese li. She almost covers the whole distance in one dash without a

break. She has no time for a breather after delivering the first whelp to the stone cave. Now like a relay runner she hurtles towards the ancient riverway to pick up the second whelp.

At long last as Violet leaps out of the stone cave for the third time, mountain torrents begin to pour. This is the first fall of spring rain at the foothill of Mount Riquka and it bears down in full fury. Like so many whips, squalls of driving rain lash at the ground with beads of rain big as peas. The rain pelts down mercilessly, boughs and branches are bent crooked, devil sugarcane broken into pieces and even the shape of mountain peaks appears contorted. The wound at the back of her neck has scabbed over without her knowledge but now begins to bleed again on the impact of the heavy downpour, causing an excruciating pain as if scalded.

She moves through the thick curtain of rain and it is only with much difficulty that she makes it to the ancient riverway where puddles of rain water have collected on the dried-up riverbed. The two whelps left are half-immersed in the water, their whole bodies covered with a coat of dark red watery mud. Wasting no time, she wades through the puddles and picks up a whelp which she drops under the root of a white birch tree on the bank of the ancient riverbed. It is on a higher terrain, protected from flood water of mountain torrents. Then she takes the fourth whelp home to the stone cave.

On the ancient riverway is left the last of the whelps.

Violet may be a valiant and tough wild wolf but on account of postnatal debility, coupled with a fierce brawl and a torturous exertion that lasted a day and a night she is now teetering on the brink of collapse. Her four limbs feel soft as cotton and she staggers, tottering like a drunkard. Just then from the gullies and ravines in the mountains on both riverbanks come the rumbling roar of a pouring mountain torrent, followed awhile later by the appearance of an onrush of turbid mud water that churns up flowers of white foams and spindrift and turbulent whirlpools on the dried-up riverbed.

Violet gazes at the terrifying sight of a mountain torrent bursting forth. She secretly congratulates herself for moving the fifth whelp just in time to higher ground, otherwise ... she is still deep in thought when she suddenly steps on a loose boulder. Caught off-balance she loses her footing and slides from the precipitous riverbank all the way down to the murky seething waves on the ancient riverway, choking on gulps of mud water in the process.

Wolves are land-based animals that swim. She desperately paddles with her four limbs for dear life, hoping to crawl up the riverbank that is only

two feet away but the torrent brings with it copious amount of mud and sand which drastically reduces water buoyancy. She finds herself sinking and cannot hit the bank despite earnest effort. A wave splashes her way but hits the rocky bank and bounces back to heave her to the middle of the river. Before she could figure out the situation, her body has begun to whirl around and the mountains begin to spin and the river bank too. The whole earthly world is spinning. Damn! I am trapped in the whirlpool. She feels herself sinking like a lump of lead, as though a pair of gigantic hands are heartlessly dragging her to the netherworld. She simply does not have the strength to resist, allowing gulp after gulp of mud to find their way to her stomach. The water level is now above her head and only the two angular tips of her ears are above the water. Finished! Doomsday not only for me, my five newly born babies will also turn to five dead bodies of the starved in no time.

Just as she is about to resign herself to a ghastly fate, suddenly her forearm that is struggling frantically caught a bough. Driven entirely by a survival instinct, she takes a firm grip of the bough, determined not to let go. It is a dracaena tree washed down by the mountain torrent, its trunk the thickness of two men's waist and even the whirlpool fails to devour it. Violet crawls along the bough to the tree trunk and finally emerges from the water. Swept along by the waves the dracaena then hits the riverbank.

Violet is safe. When she lands on the hard rocky riverbank she couldn't even find the energy to feel elated for saving herself from a certain doom. She is ready to drop. She needs sleep. That gale-force mountain wind, that rain that comes down in buckets, that thunderous burst of mountain torrents – it is as if all have turned into a soothing lullaby. Exhausted and drowsy, she lies on an ice cold boulder that is water-logged and no sooner has she done that than her heavy eyelids fall. No more terrifying torrential rain in the world, no more enigmatic ancient riverway, no more foul and loathsome Big White Dog. Suddenly she is lying under the tender and gorgeous sunshine, sleeping on the thick growth of grass that is soft as silk, her breasts are round and full and four frolicsome whelps are suckling ... no, shouldn't be four whelps she did give birth to five whelps in all didn't she, how come one short? The hazy vision awakens the raw nerves of a mother. She wakes with a start. Yes, one last whelp is left high and dry out there in the wilderness, desolate and braving the gale and the torrential rain alone. At the thought of this, her drowsiness vanishes and she springs to her feet to resume her rescue mission.

Despite the vast expanse of whiteness formed by the curtain of pouring rain that obscures one's vision, a wolf's keen eyesight enables Violet to spot her darling whelp under the white birch tree a great distance away. She feels a sense of relief.

When she goes near, Violet finds the whelp in a peculiar posture; rain water has washed the yellowish brown fur of the whelp clean as a pin. It clings spread-eagled onto a tree trunk, gripping in its babyish little mouth a nipple-like burr that grows on the bark. It is indeed a heart-rending sight to behold, away from the sanctuary of mother's body darling baby mistakes a tree trunk for the warm bosom of its mother and a burr for mother's nipple. Darling baby, you have had a rough time, mommy is here. Filled with remorse and a feeling of penitence, she sticks out her tongue to lick her whelp. But as the tip of her tongue touches the whelp's forehead, she is startled. Its forehead is boiling hot, she feels like licking a piece of burning charcoal. The whelp's eyes are shut tight and there is only faint breathing, it has passed out. Violet quickly picks up the whelp and makes a dash for the stone cave.

The torrential rain shows no sign of abating at all and the furious mountain wind, like multiple sharp knives are mercilessly cutting up and sapping the whelp's dwindling life energy while heavy beads of rain keep pelting the whelp's baby body like so many hammers.

It is no mean task but finally Violet's run brings her and the last whelp home to the stone cave. As Violet releases the whelp from her mouth, like a log it hits the ground with a thud, there to lie supine with all four limbs facing skyward. Violet's heart cringes. She tries to test for the whelp's reaction, raising her forefoot to touch its body but the whelp is ice cold and gone is the suppleness that hints of life. It is like touching a piece of stone.

No, darling baby isn't dead. Surely it is only frozen stiff. Violet cannot bring herself to believe that Death has so easily snatched the life of her darling whelp. She holds the whelp tight to her bosom, her tongue incessantly licking its eyelids, nose and lips. Awake, darling, open your bright and mischievous eyes. Look, mommy is watching by your side, we are home in the stone cave. Here there is no rain, no storm, and no fear of thunder and lightning, awake dear!

But Violet's efforts are all in vain. Comes the dead of night and number five still has its eyes closed. It is a male whelp.

If it were not for the plaintive and resentful whine of the whelps emitting from a corner of the stone cave, battered out of her senses, Violet may have spent the long night by the side of the dead whelp. It is the call of the four whelps' alive and kicking, that jolts her out of her grief. Straining her dark blue eyes she glares through the darkness to see the four little whelps grappling with one another on the stone surface. They find warmth from one another's bodies yet they also pick at one another with their little mouths. One of the

whelps gets bitten and starts squeaking in despair. Another huddles by itself with the strength to do nothing more than puffing and blowing.

In truth the darlings are all famished, not having taken so much as a drop of milk since birth. What an imbecile I am, wallowing in sorrows and unable to extricate myself from misery. The dead is dead and gone, what is important is to enable the living to survive. At last she comes to her senses and leaving the fifth whelp goes near her babies. As soon as the four whelps catch her scent, they start to howl. Violet tries her breasts but squeeze all she can, there is not a single drop of milk. She has been on an empty-stomach one whole day and night, with no food in the stomach it is quite impossible for her breasts to produce milk.

But where can she find food now? The fawn that she risks life and limbs to steal from the deer farm is lost during the fight with Big White Dog. Only Heaven knows in which nook or corner in the mountain it is lying now, or perhaps it has long been swept away by the torrents. The rain has shown no sign of abating. In this damnable weather, in the dead of the night where all animals have found a place to hide, even if I should brave the storm and rain and try the four corners of the forest, my chances of getting food are bleak. Alas, even two mice will do. Though she dislikes the peculiar taste of a mouse, beggars can't be choosers, hopefully with that she can manage a few drops of milk to tide over till things improve.

Regrettably even the mice are so intimidated by the storm and rain that they have chosen to stay put in their burrows.

Wait till dawn then, she thinks, let's hope at dawn the sky will clear up. Then she can go chase blue sheep on the Gamar grassland. But look at those four whelps' famished and all on the verge of collapse. They may even lose their lives to cold and hunger, perish like the fifth whelp before day break.

What now? Violet is distressed and fretful. She paces up and down in the stone cave. Suddenly she sets eyes on the dead body of the fifth whelp. This is at the moment the only object in the stone cave that may stave off hunger. She cannot help but salivate. Among the wolf packs there is no dearth of precedents where cannibalism is concerned. At times in severe winter, as luck runs low there may be days on end when hunting fails to bring any food, and wolves become so ravenous that their shrivelled stomachs become glued to their spine, so to speak. If an old wolf succumbs to disease, the rest of the pack would throw themselves at him, roaring and howling as they do and vie with one another to tear the poor old fellow to shreds. That is how wolves perceive the issue of life and death: alive that's a wolf, dead it's just a pile of meat. The dead is recycled to save the lives of the many still living, perhaps this is even an act of benevolence.

As she mulls over it, Violet comes near the dead whelp, but when she feels the stiff and insensate body of the whelp, her heart begins to palpitate helplessly and she loses the courage to take a bite. The whelp may be dead, but it was her very own flesh and blood after all. As the saying goes, a child is the apple of its mommy's eye. This is true to wolves as it is true to humans. How could she bring herself to devour her own baby wolf? But then is there another way to save the four whelps still surviving? Sentiments matter much but survival is everything.

Violet stands in front of the dead whelp dithering for a long while. Finally she closes her eyes cold-hearted, and begins gnawing at the body of her deceased baby. Every bite brings with it a fresh pang of grief. She stuffs down the dead whelp as fast as she possibly can. She is loath to prolong the time of this painful dinner. She seems to have lost her sense of taste and right till she finishes her last morsel the entire meal has been absolutely bland and tasteless. To her, from her mouth to deep in the heart. It is all bitter and astringent.

The food is finally ingested. After some time she can feel a dull ache in her breasts. She manages to squeeze out some milk. Even though when fed to the mouths of the whelps' each receives only a paltry few drops, it is enough to revive the whelps who are almost at the last gasp. It is miraculous.

At dawn the mountain torrent that has wreaked havoc stops at long last. A morning glow the colour of rose reaches the stone cave, shining through the dense growth of Chinese Wisteria at the mouth of the cave. A sigh of relief, then feeling groggy Violet dozes off.

Survival is never easy at all under the harsh law of the jungle. Violet and her whelps finally make it after enduring calamitous trials.

5

HOPE AND THE NEXT GENERATION

I

VIOLET is in total despair. She has been mother to four wolf whelps. She has put in tremendous effort and time in the fervent hope that one of them will rise to be a celebrated king of the wolves. But all prove in vain, like the saying goes, drawing water with a wicker basket – all efforts come to nought.

Broken-hearted she passes the endless winter in extreme solitude.

The snow thaws. The Gamar grassland is a vast expanse of pale yellowish-green. Spring is in the air. The wolf pack is again dispersed. Violet and Adorable are back to the stone cave on the foothill of Mount Riquka. With the last male child Double Fur gone, the stone cave becomes desolate, even gruesome, much like a natural graveyard.

There are times when Violet would venture into the grassland all alone, limping on one lame foot. She would scramble and hop about like one possessed, till she is absolutely exhausted, hoping to numb her painful heart that has sunk deep into degradation. Sometimes she catches a badger or musk deer or something like that. But she won't be in a hurry to rip off its windpipe. Instead she would bite and break one of its legs, then let it loose to flee. Its wretched cries and panic-stricken manners might help her forget her own misery for a fleeting moment.

But eventually this cruel play also loses its appeal.

Really, when the ideal, the dream for which you have put in all your heart and soul goes bust, what meaning can life still offer?

Maybe the taste of death will be more bearable than carrying the heavy yoke of failure and dragging out an ignoble existence like this.

But the messenger of Death has not come a-calling, so she must live on.

That day, she is taking a stroll on the grassland when quite suddenly she sniffs a very familiar scent of a wolf. Then, from behind some rocks of grotesque shape covered with moss a form flashes before her eyes. Well, if it isn't that Carl Lulu!

Carl Lulu also sees her and howls gently and amicably.

Violet takes a careful peek at what's behind Carl Lulu, not a soul behind him. Which is to say Carl is still single, no lady escort by his side.

The inadvertent discovery sends a shudder of excitement to her entire body. Right away she makes an audacious but logical guess: Carl Lulu has yet to find a she-wolf partner, indicating that he has not forgotten his old flame, that he still cherishes her. Two years ago Carl had so enthusiastically courted her. Then her whole mind had been preoccupied with the thought of nurturing her whelps and she had declined to accept his sincere love. Thinking back she cannot help but think herself really foolish. Now that Blue Soul Kid and Double Fur are both dead and gone, the stumbling block to love is no more. Today's chance meeting with Carl on the grass adorned by gorgeous and bright-coloured wild flowers can be said to be a fortuitous meeting blessed by heaven, a favour bestowed upon Violet by the God of Destiny. Life has not sunk into a hopeless pit. Dark clouds break to show a bright sky, allowing a radiant and enchanting ray to shine through.

Acting on her thought Violet crouches on the grass. She looks at Carl Lulu, her eyes tender and full of expectation. She holds up her warm breast and belly that is the pride of a she-wolf, at times lifting a foreclaw to stroke the spot where nose and lip meet, trying her very best to act coquettishly.

Come on, Carl, I've waited for you long enough.

Oh, I see, the rough treatment I gave you two years ago must have caused you to lose courage. I must confess, on that occasion I had gone overboard. But please understand my predicament then. Now nothing can prevent us from becoming a close and loving couple anymore! Come on, Carl, you need only to take one step forward and you will receive reward ten folds. You need only to show a little ardour and you will be rewarded with passion aplenty, Violet calls out fervently in her heart.

But Carl Lulu stays still like a stone. On his face there isn't even the slightest hint of excitement and the joy of reunion after a long separation.

Her heart starts thumping. But she quickly consoles herself, Carl's face draws a blank for a good reason: surely it is because he fears being rejected again like two years ago. It was such an unbearable embarrassment for him, wasn't it? His heart must still flutter with fear at the thought of it. Once bitten twice shy. Put herself in Carl Lulu's place, she won't act too rashly

too. Well, she needs to show patience, let Carl Lulu recover the courage and boldness that is so special to a male wolf when appearing before a she-wolf.

Violet lies indolent in the undergrowth where the grass is soft as silk, showing off the amorous demeanour that is an integral part of a female wolf's appeal. Dandelions wet with the morning dew are carried by the spring breeze, gently wafting in the air like so many flower parasols. Golden flower buds looking like silk and cocoon form strange faculae in the reflection of the sun rays. Spring is the season of vigour and vitality. Carl Lulu, don't you also yearn to savour the niceties of life under the sun, multiply the seeds that will prolong your bloodline.

Violet wilfully titillates him, to her that is the most effective way to arouse Carl Lulu.

Regrettably Carl Lulu's wooden expression doesn't show any dramatic change.

Is it because I haven't put up a convincing performance? The exquisite feelings and red-hot passions of a feminine animal haven't been brought to bear fully? Or is it because Carl Lulu....

Violet doesn't dare to delve further in the direction that doesn't portend well. At this point of time, she direly needs rain and dew to moisten her withered soul. Her broken heart yearns so much for the comfort of love from male wolf Carl Lulu. If Carl Lulu will accept and embrace her, it will be as good as saying that her tragedy has become a thing of the past. Period. Life will begin anew. She will produce a litter of wolf whelps. More, she will nurture one of the whelps into a wolf king par excellence. Her long cherished dream, the dream of a wolf that she has pursued for years will see the daylight again, bathed in the glorious radiance of love. Her extremely fatigued body and soul will be revitalised with renewed vigour.

She longs to live life anew. Even though a wolf's life is never smooth sailing and the way is inevitably filled with submerged reefs, dangerous shoals, and lethal dangers lurk around every corner, she is willing to fight another bout with Fate.

Carl Lulu's indifference hurts. She cannot make out his real intention, it could be that the hurt he suffered two years ago had left such an indelible mark on his heart and soul that the wound is still bleeding. In that case, Violet thinks she needs to show repentance for her heartlessness through concrete actions.

If so happens that just then, a pangolin crawls out from some nearby bushes. Violet loses no time in leaping over to it. A pangolin is an ant-eater, a slow and clumsy creature on account of its two short and stubby legs as

well as an obese and cumbersome body. Violet quickly stamps a foot on the pangolin's back at which the pangolin's whole body of plate-like scales instinctively contract tightly and its sharp forehead tucks under a chest cavity below its neck; this is the pangolin's only, but effective manner of defence against a predatory animal, its stock-in trade. The hard and solid keratin scales cover every square inch of the entire body, even its tail and belly are no exception. It is as though it wears a suit of heavy armour. The oval-shaped scales all fit together perfectly, there is literally no chink in its armour. In terms of hardness the scales are comparable to granite, unbreakable even to the teeth of a tiger. Oftentimes predators who have landed a pangolin are forced to give up on their food simply because they can't eat it!

This is indeed a marvel of mother nature.

But the pangolin's rather peculiar survival skills which can save it from the jaws of old bears and leopards prove useless when confronted with the sharp fangs of a wolf.

Violet forcefully makes the pangolin turn turtle to point its four feet toward the sky. Then she runs her razor-sharp wolf claw into the excretory duct under the pangolin's belly. This is the only soft spot in the pangolin's entire body, its Achilles' heel. Tiny as a pin hole and moreover, concealed in a congruent point where four pieces of scales meet, it is absolutely a blind spot for careless carnivorous predators. Only wolves whose intelligence is on a higher level are capable of spotting it.

Like a steel needle, Violet's sharp wolf claw plunges deep into the pangolin's excretory duct. The pangolin's whole body convulses and the shell of scales protecting its belly involuntarily unfold to show a slit. This is exactly what Violet wants. A pangolin may appear ugly, nonetheless it does not lack survival skills. In the split second that its silver-coloured scales on the belly unfold, it senses danger and quickly tries to shrink back. Only it is too late for even as Violet runs his claw into its excretory duct, her other claw is already placed on the pangolin's belly, waiting. The moment the scales unfold, Violet digs her claw into the slit and tearing back forcefully, breaks a plate of scale. Next, Violet pries off several more scales in the same manner. On the pangolin's belly now is exposed pinkish flesh the size of the mouth of a bowl. Thereupon Violet begins biting and gnawing at the flesh and in no time she has disembowelled the pangolin.

When Violet is busy dealing with the pangolin, Carl Lulu does not come forward to offer help. Neither does he turn to go. Instead he stays put and looks on closely with the calm and sober eyes of a bystander whose attitude is ambiguous and rather hard to fathom.

Violet feels a little hungry. The pangolin's meat is fat, tender and fine, wolf's favourite food. If only she can eat her fill! But she holds back the urge to have a go at it. She will not take even one bite. Instead she drags the pangolin dripping with blood to present it to Carl Lulu.

Violet does that with much mixed feelings. Generally speaking, in the process of forming a loose sort of union called family between a male wolf and a she-wolf, the female plays a passive role, the one being pursued and courted, hence expected to observe decorum and a certain feminine reserve in her mien.

Even if deep inside her heart a she-wolf yearns for the love of a male, she ought to hold her cards very close to her chest. Put it in other words, she ought to play the subtle temptress and not do more than pandering to him. A line is drawn that should not be crossed. Only a male wolf would be so blunt in courtship, exposing naked his intent in pursuit and in conquest. To offer food on your own accord and present it to your suitor on a platter, like Violet does; to proclaim your intention so frankly, without mincing words – this is rarely seen in wolf packs.

As she tows along the pangolin, she cannot help but feel that her she-wolf self-respect has been hurt somewhat. If only Carl Lulu has come over to lend a hand when she is busy dealing with the pangolin, even if it is only a token of help, it would have changed the very nature of this incident. The hunt could then be perceived as a joint venture, there would be sharing of the spoils. Let nature take its course, there would be affection and even passion. But now....

She detests Carl Lulu for his arrogance. She feels Carl Lulu should show more magnanimity, shouldn't hold grudge like this. She feels she shouldn't have stooped so low to ingratiate herself with Carl Lulu. She feels it is a sort of humiliation. But still, the longing to start a new life burns like a flame and makes her act against her own wishes. She drags the delectable pangolin and inches towards Carl Lulu.

Carl Lulu shows no emotion on his face. He stretches himself. He really knows how to put on an act. Then Carl Lulu pushes his mouth into the pangolin's abdominal cavity where there is a thick layer of fat and begins to chew on it with great relish.

Go ahead and eat, Carl Lulu, two years ago I hurt you when you attempted to seduce me with food. Today I use the pangolin to redeem myself, to repay a debt incurred because of my heartlessness. I have repaid all my debts to you. You already have your revenge. Should be satisfied now? Now that the grudge is no more and the knot in our hearts have been unraveled, nothing can stop

us from building a brand new family together. As Violet licks on the bloody water overflowing from the pangolin's abdomen, those are her thoughts. She believes Carl Lulu will reward her with sizzling, passionate love as soon as he has eaten his fill. She waits, brimming with self-confidence.

Apparently the pangolin tastes really good because Carl Lulu tucks into his food all the time without raising his head. Then as he finishes eating, an expression of total contentment appears on his face and he can't seem to stop lapping on the blood stains on the edge of his mouth.

Come on, Carl, I shall give you a litter of vivacious and strong little whelps. Together we shall nurture from among our young, Wolf King of the next generation.

Carl Lulu is still fiddling with the pangolin of which only a shell of scales is left, turning it this way and that to look greedily for any remnants of flesh and blood.

Overcome by anxiety at the slow turn of event, Violet nudges towards the burly and sturdy body of Carl Lulu. At this Carl Lulu's expression changes abruptly. He gapes as if astonished at seeing something he shouldn't see. Then the silvery moustache above his lips and the hair on both his cheeks hang down as he doesn't attempt to hide his feeling of disgust.

Carl Lulu, what's with you? I am Violet, the same Violet that you courted, drooling with desire and a spittle three feet long as the expression goes. Tilting her head, Violet tries to recline on Carl Lulu's back; to her Carl Lulu's back that is arrow-straight is full of masculine appeal, is a sanctuary and a snug little nest, a miracle that will herald a new life.

The instant Violet's head touches Carl Lulu's back, his face contorts grotesquely and he leaps aside suddenly as if to avoid touching some ominous filth that could cast a bad spell. When Violet makes another attempt to go close, Carl Lulu lets out a howl and makes a beeline for the boundless grassland.

There is a buzz in Violet's head, then her mind goes blank, thinking stops and desire goes limp. She feels as though her whole body and soul have been soaked in ice and snow and chilled till freezing point. In a daze she watched Carl Lulu flee, till finally he becomes a blurry tiny black dot before vanishing under the dazzling sun.

After a long while, Violet gradually collects her thoughts. She suspects the heart-rending event some minutes ago is nothing more than a nightmare. But the green grass has broken through the spring soil, birds are soaring on wings high in the sky and there on the ground is the pangolin's hard, scaly shell. Everything is so real. She has no choice but to accept that it is not a

dream. That is the reality, bitter and grim. She really cannot understand why Carl Lulu has suddenly forsaken her and fled. Don't tell me it is revenge for my heartlessness two years ago. As a joke it would be rather too cruel, wouldn't it? Violet feels like giving chase and catch up with Carl Lulu to tear him to shreds, if only to give vent to the resentment welling up in her heart. Never does it occur to her that her heart of tender love might be so rudely trampled upon by the other party, that her beautiful dream to live a new life could be so mercilessly devastated.

Could it be that Carl Lulu is now a wolf who has turned lunatic?

Looking dejected Violet loiters aimlessly on the grassland with leaden feet and before she knows it she has come to the filthy pond. As the water contains alkali, the pond water is so clear one can see the bottom. Situated on a depression out of the wind, the surface of the placid water is an even plane like a mirror and there is no ripples whatsoever. Sunrays line the water surface making it dazzling shiny. The green moss collected at the bottom of the pond provides a backdrop of deep dense pigment so that the water surface appears decorated like a piece of glass. She needs a drink of clean water, if anything to sooth the agitation in her heart. She comes to the edge of the pond. Her whole body and countenance are clearly reflected on the water surface. Suddenly the mystery of Carl Lulu's desertion is unravelled.

The image in the water is one of a she-wolf looking despondent, between whose eyebrows and eyes dark clouds gather; wrinkles criss-cross at the edge of her mouth, some of her front teeth had been broken by the clamp when she went to Blue Soul Kid's rescue and now through the crack in the broken palate droops a string of saliva. A crippled forelimb dangles before her breast and her left shoulder is askew to form an irregular arris, looking so ugly – all in all an appalling sight to behold. So this is her? In the past, her body had been so well-proportioned, so gorgeous, slim and graceful. The soft and beautiful curves that her very resilient muscles made had all along been her pride. Now gone are those curves that had once attracted the passionate eyes of many a male-wolf and made them swoon and go crazy. Instead her back is now curved like the shape of a new moon. Her muscles have lost their elasticity, sticks of ribs seem to be protruding from both flanks of her chest and like several bottle gourds that have been dried in the sun and then trampled flat, her breasts hang lifelessly from her belly. In all she is the pathetic picture of a decrepit old dame.

But the truth is she isn't old, she is only ten years old and by the reckoning of wolves whose life expectancy is 15 years, Violet is at midlife when both intelligence and physical strength are at their prime. Nevertheless she has

become an old wolf in her twilight years. It is the overdose of grief; the deep distress and tribulation; the unjust fate, a combination of these that make her age before her time, that wears off her allure of youth prematurely.

Little wonder that Carl Lulu would turn his back on her. All big male wolves are fond of young beautiful things, none would cast his eyes on a middle-aged, shrivelled and ugly old she-wolf who has long lost the lustre of youth. Rather than saying Violet has been rejected by Carl Lulu, it may be more appropriate to say that she has been rejected by life.

Life is merciless.

Violet nudges a stone into the pond. Plop, the peace and calm of the water is shattered, causing concentric circles of ripples. She hates that old and ugly she-wolf whose image is reflected at the bottom of the water. She doesn't want to see her again. But after a little while, the water surface returns to its quiet and tranquil state like before. There it is again, that hideous-looking countenance of the old she-wolf.

Awoooo ... she looks up at the heavens and howls a long howl, it is a shrill and sorrowful howl.

II

VIOLET finds Adorable gradually growing detached from her emotionally. In the past wherever she went Adorable would stick to her like glue, there were times when she was in an irritable mood but still, she wouldn't leave her alone. No more. Now Adorable would vanish to the grassland all by herself to hunt without even letting her know, leaving her behind, deserted and lonesome in the stone cave. She is both depressed and indignant, but that doesn't help an iota. Adorable has grown up and going by the ways of the wolves, it is time for her to leave and live an independent life. The most sensible thing for Violet is to do is chase Adorable away from the stone cave even now, mother and daughter live apart to avoid creating any problems in future. But Violet cannot bear to let Adorable leave. She fears being left alone in the stone cave. Somehow the deserted and quiet stone cave always feels to her like a natural graveyard, and he needs Adorable to be by her side, to assuage her feeling of solitude.

For a few days now Adorable has been moody and acting especially abnormal. Now staring blank at the blue sky and white clouds, her eyes hardly blinking at all, now skipping and jumping about absolutely exhilarated. One moment she seems deeply troubled, her head hung low. The next moment she is grinning from ear to ear for no apparent reason. It is as if her body fur has

been lined with a layer of coloured glaze, suddenly it appears varnished and glistening. Her limbs also turn soft, dainty and springy. Whether running or leaping, it sings a powerful rhapsody of youth. No one knows the daughter better than the mother. The changes happening to Adorable certainly do not escape the eyes of Violet. Based on her long years of experience in life, she concludes that Adorable has fallen in love.

Adorable is in her teens and in a young girl's first dawning of love. It is no surprise that she is engaged in a secret love affair with a certain male wolf. At Adorable's age Violet was already in a passionate, intimate relationship with Black Mulberry. When Adorable returns to the stone cave drowsy but exuding bliss, her whole body covered with morning dew and flower petals, Violet is struck by the glow in her eyes that are set ablaze by love. Suddenly a new ray of hope arises out of her dashed dream. It is as if a withered leaf has suddenly fallen on a pile of ashes to start a new flame of fire. True, Adorable is a female wolf and not qualified to contend for the throne of Wolf King, but still, she belongs to Black Mulberry's bloodline, she is Violet's breed. Through procreation it is possible to pass on Black Mulberry's deathbed behest and Violet's ideals to the next generation, complete with the excellent bloodline and pure pedigree. It wouldn't take long for Adorable to give Violet a litter of wolf grandchildren. Two or three years after that her grandchildren will be ready to make a grab for the Wolf King's throne. At the thought of this, living again becomes meaningful for Violet. She has established for herself an emotional and spiritual support on which depends her very survival. Growing decrepit and ugly is the last thing on her mind now.

To Violet's mind, the significance of Adorable's choice of a mating partner has transcended the narrow connotation of love, transcended the mundane matter of procreation, for it is now about a historical mission, about the fortune, the rise and fall of the Black Mulberry-Violet Haze clan, about the struggle that spans two generations and finally about the eventual outcome of that struggle.

Seen in that context, Adorable's choice of mate becomes top priority matter for Violet. If her choice is a doughty big male wolf, the fusion of two excellent seeds will produce wolf grandchildren that inherit the strengths of both families, possibly a "super Wolf". This genetic predisposition is like the sum of two positive values. But if Adorable's choice of mate is a hopeless common wolf, the lineage and extraction will degenerate. The wolf grandchildren produced may turn out to be a bunch of worthless wretches. This genetic predisposition is much like subtracting a subtrahend from a minuend. Violet has no peace of mind. She just can't guess what sort of adult male wolf Adorable has found

herself, what appearance? What disposition? She feels she has every right and the responsibility to interfere in Adorable's personal life.

It is not difficult to find out which big male wolf has been making Adorable so ill at ease and fidgety. That afternoon, when Adorable surreptitiously makes her way out of the stone cave, Violet quietly stalks her.

Adorable passes a valley and a deserted beach, then coming upon a meadow covered with purple alfalfa she makes an excited dash for it, howling light and gay as she does that. Once treading on the canopy of light purplish blooms of alfalfa, Adorable's waist becomes even more nimble and graceful. She halts her paces every now and then and lifts up her foreclaw to sort out the wolf hair on her forehead.

The peculiar intuition of a mother-wolf tells Violet that on the meadow before her lies the clandestine wedding bed of Adorable and that mysterious big male wolf.

True to expectation, from the valley ahead comes the earnest howling of a big male wolf on heat. A while later the form of a wolf leaps out of an undergrowth and dashes for Adorable. Acting coquettishly, Adorable dodges him in a tantalizing manner. The two wolves begin to play a chasing game, frolicking on the grass.

From a distance Violet squints her eyes to have a good look at the lucky Casanova. A chill runs down her spine, the blood in her entire system stops flowing. How could it be him? How could it be him? Violet almost can't believe her eyes.

Adorable's find turns out to be the most worthless among all the wolf pack – none other than the one-eyed male wolf Diao Diao!

Diao Diao is not only emaciated and ugly, what's worse, he is also by nature faint-hearted and spineless, that is to say an absolutely useless common, pariah wolf. None among the she-wolves in the pack would ever dream of settling for such a soul mate.

How did Adorable get so muddled-headed as to fall for this good-for-nothing fellow? It almost breaks Violet's heart to think of it. It must be Diao Diao's deceitful sweet talk that has bewitched Adorable, blinded the eyes of Adorable. A young she-wolf waiting for her first love is easy meat for a seductor. Too simple-minded and raw, inexperienced in the ways of the world, Adorable has fallen prey to Diao Diao's chicanery. If indeed Adorable bears the seed of Diao Diao, then the outstanding bloodline and pedigree assembled through the union between Black Mulberry and Violet will suffer a dire degeneration. The dream of letting her grandchildren contend for the throne of Wolf King would be utterly dashed.

No, Violet must not let Adorable go on messing things up like this. Diao Diao's evil scheme will not be allowed to see the daylight, absolutely. If she acts a passive bystander, she will not only be betraying the deceased Black Mulberry, she will also be betraying Black Kid, Blue Soul Kid and Double Fur who have all paid for the family's grand dream with their lives.

At the thought of this, Violet suddenly charges out of the clump of chaste trees where she has been hiding and rushes at the grass where purple alfalfa grows. When she has positioned herself in between Diao Diao and Adorable who are still chasing each other, she lets out an indignant howl.

Still exuberant and aglow with euphoria only a moment ago, Diao Diao instantly feels as if he has fallen into a cold storage. He steals a timid look at Violet then turns on his heel and flees.

Scared stiff, Adorable is befuddled and she crouches on the grass staring blankly.

Let's go, Adorable, Diao Diao isn't your class. You are a fresh flower and a pile of manure is no place for fresh flowers. Don't be upset. No regrets. You have noble blood, you have beauty, all you need to do is to parade your gorgeous, dimpled smile in the Gamar grassland and before you know it, many mature, chic and doughty big male wolves will line up to spoil you rotten! Your beauty will make the whole wolf pack fall at your feet. Why act foolish, sacrifice your good, precious years of youth for a Diao Diao who absolutely doesn't deserve your love. Let's go, Adorable.

Now as Adorable awakens from a daze, she throws Violet a glare filled with intense disgust and rancour. Then it is a howl as if to pour out her grievances before she turns to the direction Diao Diao has escaped.

That's one contemptible wretch!

Violet is ready for that. She jumps on Adorable to hold her ear between her teeth. It takes her a great deal of effort to tow Adorable back to the stone cave. Once there she makes Adorable stay deep in the cave while she takes her place at the mouth of the cave. She will not let Adorable leave the cave at will. When out hunting she sticks to Adorable like a leech. She is using her authority as a mother to put a very tight rein on Adorable's movements in order to sever the ties between her daughter and Diao Diao. She thinks Adorable's love will wane with the progression of time and eventually die a natural death.

But Violet finds out very quickly that her calculations aren't exactly right on spot. Adorable proves to be a tougher nut to crack than she has thought. She has thought that after a period of separation Adorable will put Diao Diao behind her, will reflect on her own naivete and her absurd behaviour so put

an end to this romance that has no practical value whatsoever. She thinks wrong. She may have stopped Adorable from seeing Diao Diao but there is no way she can set asunder two hearts. If this is not sheer nonsense!

All day Adorable broods and remains ill at ease. In a hunt she is lackadaisical and dispirited. Diao Diao hasn't given up either. He may not have the pluck and spunk to charge into the stone cave to snatch Adorable away, but he is always lurking about the vicinity of the stone cave like a phantom, prying and snooping around. A few times when out hunting with Adorable, Violet suddenly spots Diao Diao stalking them at a distance behind. It only takes the mere sight of Diao Diao or even his body scent to cause Adorable to act as though she has lost her soul. When the quarry is only one pace before her, she chooses to lunge in the opposite direction.

The other day at mid-night, from the hillslope diagonally across the stone cave wafted the sounds of Diao Diao's howling. The unremitting howling of the wolf could be likened to many snares that hooked in Adorable's soul. Adorable did not have a moment of peace and quiet the whole night, hurtling helter-skelter in the stone cave like a lunatic. A few times she even tried to scramble out the cave and Violet, guarding the entrance could barely stop the attempted elope in its track, even with the help of wolf claws, wolf fangs and a mother's authority.

But if Violet can stop her now, can she stop her forever?

For all she knows, it may happen one night when tiredness causes her to doze off, a negligence that makes it possible for Adorable to elope and subsequently give birth to a litter of wolf whelps as hopeless as Diao Diao. For Violet, it will be a regret too late.

It looks as though destroying Diao Diao physically is the one and only way to break asunder the love between Diao Diao and Adorable.

Only then will the issue be settled once and for all, Violet thinks.

III

EARLY in the morning a few days later while Adorable is still asleep in the cave, Violet goes quietly to the meadow where purplish alfalfa blossoms run riot. The wolf's exceptionally keen sense of smell leads her to the residual scent of Diao Diao that he has left on the blades of leaves and petals of flowers. Following this trail of scent she makes straight for the cave where Diao Diao has been living.

As the morning sunrays paint the peak of snow mountain Riquka red, Violet comes atop a turtle-shaped hillock. The fishy smell of Diao Diao's body

odour grows stronger, it appears that Diao Diao's lair is very near now. Warily Violet skirts round the hillock. Indeed there is a large stone shaped like an eagle's beak on the slope hidden from the sun that forms a natural stone nest. Going a little closer and a wolf's snoring can be heard coming from the stone nest. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, here then is Diao Diao's lair.

Violet lies low beside a narrow track frequented by Diao Diao that runs just outside his stone nest, her own body scent masked by the morning mist and the dew.

It is only when the sun has lit up the good earth to a brilliant shine that Diao Diao leaves the cave looking listless and lethargic. Apparently here is another lovelorn fellow suffering the dire consequences of passionate love. Looking sickly, it makes the already emaciated wolf appear even more wretched and pathetic. What's more the eye blinded by a goat's horn is dead as a door nail making his face awfully ugly.

At the thought of this, Violet again finds it bewildering that Adorable should be so entranced by Diao Diao, what on earth has she seen in him? Youth, image, personality – he has none of these. Diao Diao is younger than Violet by two years and well past the prime of his youth and vigour. Undoubtedly Diao Diao has resorted to a mature male-wolf's cunning and deceit to cajole and dupe young she-wolf Adorable who is bubbling with enthusiasm for affection.

Again Violet flies into a fury and she can feel her head pounding uncontrollably. She decides to launch a sneak attack. She will wait till Diao Diao has come within effective striking distance when she will throw herself on him with a mighty leap to rip open his windpipe in one powerful bite. In the event that she fails, she will have at least mutilated Diao Diao, caused a badly disfigured face or body so that he will never again summon enough courage to come face to face with Adorable.

She only has her hopeless, lame leg to blame for her leap falls short and she misses Diao Diao by half a metre. What a pity! Violet heaves a sad sigh in her heart. Can't help it, sneak attack will have to be replaced with a frontal assault on a fortified position.

Diao Diao may only have one eye, but still he can see through Violet's intention. As it is he already has tons of pent-up anger against Violet for breaking up his tryst with Adorable most rude and unreasonably and he is looking for a way to vent his outrage. He promptly engages Violet in a ferocious scuffle.

Age has indeed caught up with Violet. Just a few rounds into the fight and she is already struggling to hold her own. She backs away several paces and

lands a foot on a loose pebble. She staggers, then the crippled foreleg gives way and she tumbles over. The next instant Diao Diao is all over her, his razor-sharp teeth homing in on the soft spot under her neck.

Violet lies supine on the ground. She squeezes her eyes shut. She isn't fearful, only curious, that Diao Diao who is normally known to all as a worthless wretch should suddenly explode and manifest all the blood-thirsty nature of a wolf. Perhaps she has had a jaundiced view of Diao Diao in the past. Perhaps beneath Diao Diao's frail and delicate exterior there is no dearth of a wolf's true qualities. Whereas in the past there had been no opportunity for him to show off these qualities, today's critical moments of life and death finally provides just such a stage. If that is indeed the case, this old she-wolf will have died a worthy death. Her old and worthless life has caused the awakening of Diao Diao's true soul of a wolf that has been very deeply concealed. She does not need to worry any more over the issue of a genetic degeneration of Adorable's offsprings.

She stops struggling and awaits the final death blow from Diao Diao.

But the anticipated sensation of pain at the neck never materialises even after a long wait. She opens her eyes in astonishment. Only a few seconds have passed, but the fire of vengeance in Diao Diao's eyes have since extinguished. He has returned to his previous timid and cravenly self. The strong and sturdy claws planted on her body also loosen their grip.

Violet straightens up and with much ease frees herself from Diao Diao's claws. She stands face to face with Diao Diao. They eyeball each other, engaged in a mental confrontation.

The Diao Diao softens completely. His hitherto erect tail droops limp to the ground. He cuts a pathetic figure, squatting on the ground and a feeling of being maligned fills his eyes, from his throat emits a deep muffled whine.

Violet understands that Diao Diao is begging for pity, hoping for her to show mercy, bestow a favour. But this piteous show of a weakling is exactly what Violet loathes. If Diao Diao has persisted to be resolute and unyielding as before, giving it his all to make a grab for the prize, perhaps she would relent and change her mind about breaking asunder the love birds, show them a little mercy so that they can also enjoy the right and the freedom to love. Diao Diao's nauseating cowardice will only make Violet despise and abhor him more.

If a male wolf cannot prove his virility – that is to say his hunger for conquest and his stout-heartedness – even when fighting for a mating partner, then logically speaking he completely forfeits the right to live the life of a wolf.

It is a pity Violet cannot pounce on Diao Diao right away and rip off his windpipe for she is old and weak, and even lame in one leg. One-to-one in a fierce contest, Violet is no match for Diao Diao. She can only hope to prevail by outwitting him.

Thus a certain expression appears on Violet's face that seems to suggest that she is forlorn and utterly helpless. Head drooping, she nods submissively as she crouches docile on the ground, her muzzle buried under her armpit. It is an act to tell Diao Diao, I relent, I'll compromise, I'll submit to your earnest appeal for compassion, I'm granting you your wish.

Diao Diao takes it for real and comes up to Violet to toady to her, sticking out his tongue to lick her paw. It is a weakling's way to convey his heartfelt gratefulness to the strong.

Violet turns over her body to lie supine.

After licking Violet's hind paws, Diao Diao turns to her forepaws.

Violet pretends to be gratified. Her eyes half-closed, she quietly curls her foreclaws before her chest in a posture most favourable for imparting a vicious kick. The moment Diao Diao's tongue touches her forepaw, she aims her heel at his chin and executes a powerful kick. Diao Diao doesn't see it coming. His upper torso with his forelegs are flung in the air exposing bare his throat. Violet doesn't wait for Diao Diao to land. Like a flash of lightning she leaps up and snaps at Diao Diao's windpipe and gives it a vicious bite.

A loud crack, then from Diao Diao's soft jugular veins blood spurts out, his body softens and with a plop he collapses. His four limbs twitch in a spate of spasm before his body gradually turns cold and stiff. But that one eye stares on, the eyeball perfectly round as a full moon and a gleam of eternal regret momentarily glazes over it.

Violet has wanted to dispose of Diao Diao's body in a bamboo grove in the mountain valley or bury it in a secluded and well-concealed spot, but on second thought, it is impossible to keep the truth from Adorable. No matter where she hides the body of Diao Diao, Adorable is bound to find it through her keen sense of smell. She might as well let Diao Diao lie on a conspicuous spot on a hillside. That way it will also serve as a stark warning to Adorable.

IV

VIOLET did not expect that Adorable would resort to a hunger strike to show defiance.

Two days and two nights had passed since Adorable saw the body of Diao Diao. All that time she had huddled up in a corner of the cave,

refusing food and water. Violet had tried dragging a freshly killed animal into the cave and brought it right under the nose of Adorable. The strong stench of blood that was such a powerful stimulant to a wolf's nerves seemed to lose its potency. Adorable didn't even twitch her nose, neither did she spare a glance at the food sitting by her mouth. Violet flew into a rage and subjected her to the most brutal form of chastisement, biting and tearing at her, at the same time trying to coerce her to eat. But Adorable proved a hard nut and Violet's savagery made no difference. Heaps of food piled up like little hills and attracted clouds of green bottle flies. Freshly hunted meat very quickly went bad emitting a horrible stench. Crawling maggots the colour of milk covered the bad meat. Air in the cave turned terribly foul. Violet had no choice but to assume the role of sanitation worker. The food that took so much trouble to acquire had to be dragged out of the cave and discarded.

All that was two days ago. Now Adorable can't even find the strength to whine softly. Staring fixedly in a daze, her voice is hoarse and her appearance gaunt and wasted. Around her shoulders and on both sides of her breasts, the bones seem about to jut out. Violet is worried sick for she knows very well that Adorable will die of prostration if she continues to refuse food for another two days. Should Adorable die, it will be absolute demise for her dream and her aspiration for which she has strived tooth and nail all her life. No, she must make her live on, no matter what. She must salvage a soul that has sunk into degradation because of a silly, frivolous love.

She cudgels her brains the whole night and finally comes up with a rather unique stratagem.

Early the next day, Violet goes to the foul water pond to lay an ambush. She was in luck and soon lands a yellow muntjac fawn who has come to have a drink. Unlike before, she doesn't rip off its windpipe with one bite, neither does she tear into the tender body of the little fawn with her sharp claws, as is the customary practice of wolves.

Instead she pins down the little muntjac fawn's back gently with her wolf claws, at the same time scaring off the distressed muntjac mother doe with a shrill and raucous howl. Then with an ear of the fawn nipped between her teeth and her tail beating on its buttocks like a whip, Violet drives the little fawn along and makes a beeline for the cave.

The little yellow muntjac fawn is terrified and half-paralysed, but still alive.

Violet pushes the muntjac fawn into the cave, then she squats at the opening of the cave to seal off the exit.

It is gloomy and dark in the cave and a stinking smell peculiar to wolves permeates the air. The pitiful muntjac fawn peers frightfully at Adorable who is huddled up in a corner, then it reels back to a nook at the other end of the stone cave where it begins to bleat sadly.

Squatting by the cave mouth and with some help from the oblique rays of sunlight that shine into the cave, a nervous Violet gazes at Adorable to see how she will respond.

At first Adorable seems unconcerned with the appearance of the little yellow muntjac fawn. Her muzzle continues to lie buried under her coiled forelegs and all she does is to open her eyes which are hitherto tightly shut, to shoot a glance at the petrified little muntjac fawn. Then her eyelids droop and she dozes off again.

For a long while, Adorable lies on this side of the stone cave while the little muntjac fawn hides at the opposite end of the cave. Separated several feet apart, each is content to leave the other alone, as though there is a peaceful co-existence between carnivores and herbivores.

But gradually a subtle change begins to happen to Adorable who has been lying transfixed. The ears that have been half-drooping slowly stiffen, their tips twitching as if in neurotic anxiety. The eyes that have been tightly shut now open again and again to peer at the muntjac fawn that is shivering like a leaf. Even though Adorable is still lying curled up in a corner motionless, Violet discerns that she doesn't look so dismal and gloomy as before. A certain lustre returns to her eyes and they begin to glow, becoming bright and brimming with a vigorous brilliance. Eyes are windows to the soul, for wolves that is the case too. From the change in Adorable's gaze, Violet surmises that her heart is wavering.

A wolf may actually resist the pangs of hunger and refuse food, may suppress his yearning for food out of deep melancholy even to the extent of going against his natural instinct for survival. But Violet doesn't believe a wolf with so much life and vigour in her would remain indifferent over an extended period of time, faced with a gambolling little creature.

Just take a look at the little muntjac fawn hiding in a corner. Driven by a strong urge to survive it has begun to hop and skip, scuttling along the wall of the cave to look for a way out of here. But Violet is blocking the exit. Helpless, the muntjac fawn starts to scurry hither and thither. There are times when dashing past Adorable, its short tiny tail of a fawn even brushes against Adorable's forehead.

Violet is secretly thrilled for that is the most effective form of enticement.

True enough, Adorable's head begins to waver gently and his gaze follows the fawn that is scampering about. Her hackles raise and her wolf hair quivers rhythmically. It is a sure sign of an inward tumult.

The little yellow muntjac fawn is still impetuously running in circles in the stone cave.

At last Adorable suddenly rises, spreads out her four paws and lets her back sink low. Then she raises her head and her buttocks high and stretches her body, making a loud and lusty long howl as she concludes the exercise. This is a signal of the awakening of a wolf's consciousness.

Adorable's abrupt actions causes the terror-stricken muntjac fawn to roll on the ground. Wailing in despair it bounces and scuttles wildly in the cave.

The mournful cries of the muntjac fawn is without doubt a potent stimulant.

For Adorable, it is possible to take your own life lightly, even hold it in contempt. It is also possible to scoff at heaps of food being offered. But the instinct to pounce on the feeble and useless herbivores, that is quite impossible to rein in. It is a natural attribute of wolves, the end product of a long history of genetic evolution.

A wolf symbolises strength and savagery, epitomises destruction and death. He is born to be the strong, born to subjugate the weak. Under the dictates of the brutal law of the jungle, in every cell of a wolf, in every drop of blood in his blood vessels, is imprinted an inborn trait, that is to attack the weak herbivores. Misfortune in love or contempt for one's own life – none of these can destroy this instinct. Especially when the muntjac fawn cries in despair, to a wolf's ears it sounds like sweet celestial music, like heavenly hymns to rouse a certain uncontrollable urge and desire to seize lives, to kill.

Adorable's facial expression betrays a feverish excitement that comes with hunting for food and her eyes seems to sparkle with light and colours. She files her claws gently on a stone, her eyes following closely every movement of the little muntjac fawn in the confined space of the stone cave. The panic-stricken fawn keeps slipping and stumbling, stupidly going in circles on the same spot.

What a splendid Dance of Death!

When Adorable has enough of the display, she leaps up like a flash of lightning and lands right on the little muntjac fawn's body. The muntjac fawn has scarcely time to make its last cry when Adorable makes a quick and neat strike to tear open its windpipe. As blood squirts out Adorable's mouth zeroes in on the laceration in its windpipe and proceeds to suck heartily.

Squatting at the mouth of the cave, Violet witnesses the whole spectacle. At long last she has got rid of the load that has been pressing down on her heart. She leaves the stone cave to have a stroll on the grassland. Behind her is the snow mountain, ever so delicate and handsome. Before her is a vast, rolling field of emerald green. The sky is boundless and the earth stretches as far as the eyes can take us. Hmmm, beautiful! She is immersed in the joy of having defused a crisis at home. She feels she is an outstanding director who has just put together an outstanding comedy.

V

ADORABLE is feeding now. She is going to live after all. But other than hunting for food and feeding, she has lost interest in everything. Like the time when she was on a hunger strike, she is still cold and detached from Violet, all the time giving her the cold shoulder. She is bitterly disappointed. She tries ways and means to dispel the pent up feeling of agitation in Adorable's heart. She takes Adorable to the White Dragon spring to take a drink of its limpid and sweet spring water. She takes Adorable on a daring charge into a flock of sheep and then contending with the shepherds, prevails over them through her cunning, and for good measure snatches away a plump and tender lamb. They even make a sneak attack on a ferocious snow leopard, making a foray into his lair to set upon the cub right under the nose of its mother. That is playing the world's most daring hunting sport! Violet has tried all she can, she has tried all sorts of tricks and tactics in an attempt to rekindle Adorable's zeal for life that has been repressed thus far but nothing changes. She remains frigid as ice.

Violet realises that Adorable's is a case of melancholia. It is an affliction of the heart, and an affliction of the heart can only be cured with a medicine of the heart. However, by the standard of Violet, there are pitifully few candidates among the wolf pack who can completely measure up to her stringent requirements of a son-in-law. Moreover it is the time of the year when the pack is dispersed and the wolves are now roaming the vast Gamar grassland. It is next to impossible to find a perfect match for Adorable.

Search high and low till you wear out your iron shoes, but then out of the blue, it appears without any effort. Alas, how true this ancient idiom!

It is evening. Violet is silently watching the sunset at the mouth of the stone cave. The fading light is playing with an array of colour tint: bright red, bright pink, rose red. But in the next instant they dissolve

into the edge of the distant horizon. The grassland is devoured by the lead grey evening mist, becoming a placid and immense, boundless space. Suddenly she catches a glimpse of two specks of dull blue that sparkle in the thicket a considerable distance away. She promptly concludes that they are gazes from a member of her own species. True enough, with the gentle breeze comes a waft of wolf's fishy stink. Oh oh, this is Carl Lulu coming! She can't help but shudder from head to feet.

Carl Lulu saunters towards the stone cave at a leisurely pace. Violet can feel her heart go pitter – patter, throbbing with tender affection. Don't tell me the heartless Carl Lulu has a change of heart, has returned for me? Don't tell me Carl Lulu also finds himself helpless in the face of solitude and loneliness, so has come to seek the company of this old she-wolf? Dear Carl, even though my face is withered by age I shall be ten folds as tender, and a hundred folds as patient and understanding as before. What I lack in good looks I make up with unwavering love. Please believe me, Violet keeps repeating in her heart. I am weather-beaten, have seen it all in life. Compared to those young she-wolves hungry for their first love, who only know how to flirt, I know better how to live life and to cherish love. Come, Carl, dither no more. Once you bare your sturdy chest to welcome me, I shall promptly chase Adorable out and my stone cave will be your stone cave, my territory and hunting ground will be your territory and your hunting ground. I shall follow you loyally like your shadow, shall hunt for food with you. We shall face the harsh challenges of life together....

However, Violet discovers that Carl Lulu is looking over her head even though he is walking towards her. He is peering hard into the stone cave behind her with his prying eyes. When the sound of Adorable's sigh is heard drifting out from inside the cave, his pupils beam with sudden, blazing radiance.

Violet can't help shuddering with cold fear. She gets it now. Carl Lulu hasn't come for her. It is Adorable in the cave that he has come for. This hurts but it is also reality.

A deep, low guttural howl emits from her throat. She feels she has been wronged. She is indignant. She is grief-stricken. Ungrateful and heartless Carl Lulu – to have the impudence to treat my love like it is a pile of manure! Disgusting Adorable, even prepared to grapple with your mother for the affection of a male wolf – mother who has to bear all sorts of hardships to bring you up.

Violet feels like pouncing on Carl Lulu now to rip open his windpipe and exact a rightful price for spurning her love. She is certain to be rewarded with a

soul-stirring, pleasurable sensation that comes with revenge. She would rather have everything destroyed – total destruction – no wolf must lay hand (paw?) on what she can't get. That is wolf's maxim of life. It conforms with wolf's morality. True, she is lame in one foot and there is a very strong likelihood that before she can even bare her fangs towards Carl Lulu, her own windpipe will have been torn open by him. But at least, her righteous ardour will have dampened his mood, pulled a wet blanket over Carl Lulu's dream of nuptial bliss and make his future family forever live shrouded in an ominous shadow of death.

But when Violet's eyes fall on the thick and sturdy chest of Carl Lulu, a fresh idea suddenly displaces her venomous thought of revenge. Carl Lulu is mature, courageous and an outstanding male wolf. If Adorable and Carl Lulu become a pair, it may become a win-win game. Adorable's melancholia will be cured. Violet on her part will have quality grandchildren who will contend for the throne of the Wolf King and bring to fruition the yet unrealised life-long dream of the Black Mulberry-Violet clan.

But. But Violet isn't just any wolf. How can she bear to see her big male-wolf, pupil of her eye, in the bosom of another she-wolf? What's more when the opposite number in this tussle of love is none other than her very own daughter. There is hate and jealousy. There is also infinite grievances, a sad feeling of being wronged.

No, no can do. She must not act foolishly.

Carl Lulu is now in front of her. He casts a side-long glance at her scornfully as he very impatiently scrapes the earth under his paws with his foreclaws. He howls meaning to say: be sensible, know your place and move over this very moment!

Violet stubbornly stands before the mouth of the cave and blocks Carl Lulu's way. Shameless brute, come step on my dead body and enter!

Suddenly Adorable howls from inside the cave. It sounds like weeping or someone recounting a sad story, who is begging, yearning for something.

Violet heaves a long sigh. Her hitherto erect spine droops and she keels over. She abruptly slips past Carl Lulu and dashes down the hillslope.

The entrance to the stone cave is now wide open.

Down the hill slope Violet is pricking up her ears in rapt attention to eavesdrop. She can make out the roar by Adorable intermingled with threatening howls by Carl Lulu. It sounds as if there is a vicious battle between conquistador and the resistance. But Violet knows at heart that this is only a superficial show, give it an hour and Adorable's symbolic act of resistance will end involuntarily. A docile and tender howling that emanates from the bottom of the heart will replace her ferocious roars.

After all, measuring by courage or physical build, Carl Lulu is every inch an excellent big male wolf and to a she-wolf, that is incredibly seductive.

Violet stays only a few seconds by the hill slope, then she plunges into the vast grassland. She doesn't have the courage to go on listening. She may have strong nerves but even for her this is a hurt too grievous to bear. Her heart is in tatters.

Jiang Boyan LLC