

SECOND TUESDAY (nightfall)

**CHAPTER 23:      *WILD DOGS!***

"How readily we delude ourselves when the Angel of Death approaches." Herschel Shosteck, *Journal*.

Into the late 20th century, wolf packs roamed the El Tih Plateau of the Central Sinai, terrorizing the *Bedu*. The Southern Negev is an extension of that plateau. Here, however, the wolves are few in number. They hunt alone and avoid humans.

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As twilight changed to darkness, we emerged from the warren of dry channels that sliced the mouth of the *wadi*. We passed over the rise that marked the tip of the fan. Small hills still rose to our sides. The full Arava opened before us. Pausing to drink, I had fallen behind Shai and Louis.

Two short barks cut faintly through the dusk, startling me. Wolves howl. I had never heard of them barking. A half-minute passed. Two barks came again, louder. How strange, I thought, that someone would be walking a dog in the desert. Twenty seconds more passed. Again came two barks, yet louder. I looked behind me. Three dogs—each as large as a Rottweiler, albeit leaner, more suited for the hunt—bolted over the rise we had crossed two minutes before. Two were nondescript brown. One was black. I wondered why their owner didn't call them. Then I saw that they had no collars. My body convulsed in shivers as I recognized my self-delusion.

I spun around. "Shai, wild dogs!" Shai paused, only then seeming to realize what was happening. Already, the goats were huddling against him, one on each side, flank-to-flank and shoulder-to-shoulder. I yanked at Samech's lead and ran forward. Although appearing

indifferent to the onrushing dogs, he needed little urging to close the gap between himself and Louis.

Reaching Louis, I pivoted. A fourth and fifth dog appeared. One hung back, gave two short barks, and then continued forward.

The pack ran straight toward us—wagging tails held stiffly upright, ears bent forward, hackles raised, teeth bared. My pulse leaped. My chest constricted. Two more dogs rushed over the rise. My body flushed hot.

Childhood images flashed through my mind—a picture story of ravenous black wolves attacking a troika on the Russian steppes—tearing at the horses' throats and lunging into the sled to rip apart the human riders.

"Keep moving," Shai shouted, pulling Louis.

*My God, I thought. That's the worst thing!*

A mantra of my youth returned: "Never run from an attacking predator. It can always outrun you. Instinctively it takes fleeing prey. Freeze until it loses interest. Slowly back away. Avoid direct eye contact. But don't lose sight of it."

The dogs slowed to a trot, fanning into a wide semicircle 50 feet to our rear. Cautiously, they closed on our flanks. Two lead dogs moved up, one on each side, drawing parallel to Louis. As we moved forward, the leads edged nearer, holding to 30 feet of the camels. They barked little. No ribs bulged against their sides. They had practiced their maneuvers many times before.

My heart pounded. My hands shook. My strength drained.

As long as I can remember, I have overcome crises by assuming the worst and responding to that. If all seven attacked at once, I could shield my back against a camel's flank. With that, I could take at least one with me. I reached down and grasped a rock. It weighed 5 or 6 pounds. Easily, I could crush the skull of the first dog on me. With that thought, I regained self-control. Fear still consumed me. But the crippling terror abated.

The two leads had now moved parallel to Shai, but still keeping 25 to 30 feet from the camels. To our rear and sides, the other dogs retained the semicircle. Following the leads, they slowly closed to the same 25 to 30 feet. None snarled. The leads looked almost benign. Their upright tails still wagged, as do those of domestic dogs anticipating a treat. The leads focused on the goats, only occasionally glancing at Shai, myself, or the camels.

Of course, I realized. They're going after the easy prey. Other memories of youth

returned: Predators target the young, the old, the injured, and the stragglers. Only one-in-10 to one-in-20 attacks succeed.

These were not crazed picture-story predators. As I recognized the rationality of their hunt, my fear shifted. It was a game of wits between the hunters and the hunted. With little of their ribs showing, they were not driven by desperation. We could successfully defend ourselves.

Shai pulled Louis to a halt. The two leads circled ahead and turned toward us—eyeing the goats, Shai, myself, and the camels. Two others moved forward parallel to me, one on each side. They turned inward. However, for the moment, they—and the others—kept their distance.

Shai moved to Louis' side, yanking the slipknot that held the saddlebag closed. Reaching in, he grabbed the 3-foot stick we used as our center tent pole.

"Shai," I shouted. "I'll flash the camera. The light will startle them. You take that side. I'll take this!"

An affirmative nod. Our battle plan was fixed.

I dropped the rock. Shai lunged at the lead dog closer to me. Instantly, it retreated into the shadows. Shai spun toward the second lead. Blocked by the hills at our sides, it backed toward the pack. As Shai rushed toward it, it wheeled away.

With the lead dogs drawing Shai away, the dog opposite me turned toward the goats, now huddled beneath the bulk of Louis' body, trembling violently. I ripped open my camera case. The dog's ears perked at the sound of the tearing Velcro. Its head turned toward me. I aimed and pressed the shutter release. The focus light fired. The dog's eyes, red from the light, shot back through the lens. It reared, lifting a paw in confusion. Its ears turned back, flattened against its head—shifting from the attack to the defense posture. I held the shutter release waiting for the full flash and its impact. Nothing. My batteries had failed!

Expletives spewed from my mouth. Grabbing at any rocks I could reach, I flung them at the dog, missing wildly. Whether driven by the light, the crashing rocks, or my expletives, it drew back, tail down. I screamed and thrust forward, picking up more rocks and flinging them. Two barks sounded. The dog retreated. From the shadows beyond, the remaining lead dog followed. The pack turned tail and disappeared over the rise. From the moment the first dogs bolted into view, no more than two minutes had passed.

The exhilaration of victory surged through my body. Shai and I walked toward each

other. Breathing heavily, we embraced, smiles of mastery on our faces.

"*Ha chol besadar*," I said. "But if there had been more dogs, it might not have been so simple. It would have been better if we had carried side arms." Only after I spoke did I realize the anger behind my words.

"We don't need them for wolves," Shai replied. "And, in seven years, I've never seen dogs. Besides, now we are safe. *Ensha'Allah*. It is the way of the desert. If we search what has happened, there is something for us to learn."

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As we continued into the Arava, I thought of how calculated the attack had been: Probe carefully. Select the easiest quarry. If it proves too much trouble, don't waste energy. Easier preys are around. I contemplated the possible outcome, had the dogs been hungrier or more in number. Nausea churned my stomach.

The first stars were appearing. There was little likelihood that the pack would return. Nonetheless, I had no taste for camping. A half moon hung in the sky. It would give enough light for travel, notwithstanding the gullies and rubble we would cross.

We threaded through the darkness, using the North Star as our guide. We traveled in a great arc—north, then northwest, and then west. As we angled toward the west, the Negev Plateau loomed before us, silhouetted against the backdrop of stars. The camels had been under load for more than 12 hours. Yet, they lumbered on without complaint. The goats, heads hanging in fatigue, plodded with us. Absent was the romping that had marked their morning hours.

As we trekked through the night, I experienced the mixture of fatigue and exhilaration at mastery over the attack. I felt the tautness of my body—the sensation that possesses the victorious warrior and the successful hunter. Though cloaked in weariness, I felt I could move throughout the night, taking a sensual pleasure in that effort.

Darkness relieved the oppressive heat. Even though my adrenaline subsided, my energy held. Although exhausted in body, my thoughts expanded. I again reflected on the attack. In

context, it was no more than another brush with Death. At that moment, I comprehended Death as personal. Here in the wilderness, He was always present. In less than two weeks, He had toyed with me three times—as I lay with fever at Be'er Milhan, on the face of the cliff at Wadi Eteq, and just now by wild dogs. The last was the most frightening, yet the former two had been just as real.

Were my experiences that different from those of the *Bedu* when they lived here—or of the tribes of Israel more than three millennia before? Judging from the bitterness of the coffee, the *Bedu* metaphor of life, likely not. Death could come at any moment, in any guise.

How different this was from the lives of the classical philosophers. They lived in verdant environments. Aqueducts delivered clean spring water in copious amounts. They bathed in pristine pools or tubs. A slip on an urban pavement meant a bruise, not a hundred-foot plunge over a precipice.

"We will stop here for the night." Shai's words broke my thoughts.

We stood at the mouth of a small *wadi*, enclosed on three sides and opening to the Arava. We had traveled for more than two hours. The rise at the tip of the fan lay more than 4 miles behind.

We unpacked the camels in silence, brushed them perfunctorily, and tethered them for the night. We completed making camp as the moon dropped behind the *wadi*'s western wall. The goats lay down in classical form, buttock to buttock, facing away from each other, thus alert to danger from opposite directions.

We set a small fire and fell exhausted to the mat. Both Shai and I were enervated by dehydration, a danger in traveling at night. Without the sun, one can easily forget the discipline of drinking on the hour. By unspoken consent, we had but two pots of tea and a few small pieces of *halvah*. We were literally too tired to eat more. We would have been physically spent and dehydrated in any case. Tonight, our exhaustion was yet greater.

Shai fell asleep almost instantly. I slept fitfully, my hunting knife by my hand.