THREE

The Horseman's Tale

KUTLUG, 790–792

A green-eyed Uygur goshawk treads his brocaded gauntlet.
With piebald horse and white ermine furs
He comes and goes in the three markets, but knows no one;
Throwing down his gold-handled whip, he ascends the tower of wine.

XUE FENG, "Xia shao nian," ninth century AD[1]

IT WAS 790 and the beginning of the short steppe summer when the land is all too briefly green and the sky a constant, unrelenting blue, a respite from the grey and white of winter's snow-laden clouds and frost-bitten earth. The camels and horses of the caravan crossing the steppe numbered in their thousands, but to the horseman approaching from afar, at the head of a herd of ponies, they were barely a speck in the rolling landscape.

The horseman Kutlug was a Uygur Turk, with a characteristically broad face, thick eyelashes, and deep-set green eyes.[2] His language, Uygur, was related to modern-day Turkish.[3] He was dressed in a short blue tunic with narrow sleeves, and trousers tucked into soft leather boots. A dagger hung from his belt.[4] His ponies had the blood of tarpans (*Equus przewalskii*), age-old travelers of the Eurasian steppe (see figure 11). They had lived in this land since the Pleistocene era and were well adapted to its rigors.[5] The tarpan pony had a large head and a distinctive mane that stood up in summer, though in the winter both its mane and hair grew long and shaggy to ward off the bitter cold of the steppes. Kutlug's herd of ponies comprised several hundred head, and with it he was joining the larger caravan that he could see in the distance. The caravan was an embassy headed for the Chinese capital by way of a trading post on the Uygur-Chinese border. There the horses would be sold to representatives of the Chinese government.

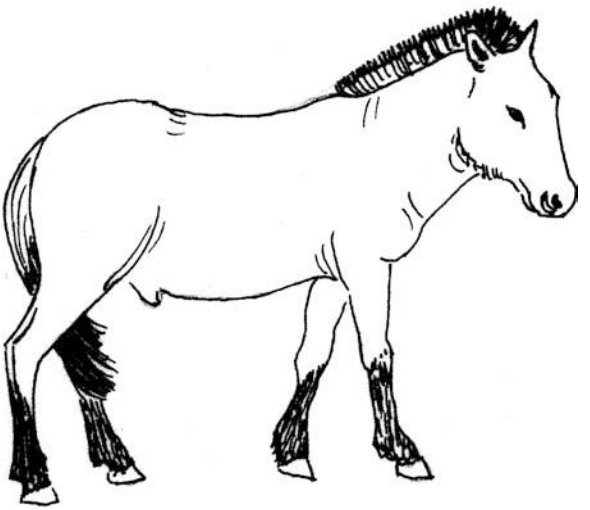

FIGURE 11. The tarpan, *Equus przewalskii*, with its erect mane but no forelock. (Drawing by author.)

The Uygurs were a confederation of Turkic tribes, peoples of the steppe, some of whom had migrated farther west to form the Khazar and Bulgar powers; others would later settle in Anatolia.[6] They had controlled the eastern steppe a century previously in alliance with the Chinese, but a revolt by other Turkic tribes had driven them out, and many had fled to the borders of China.[7] Since then, the eastern Turkic empire had disintegrated, and, following a brief period of control by another Turkic group and a decade of war, the Uygurs had regained control.[8]

The Chinese Tang dynasty believed the Turks to be descendants of the Xiongnu, and a Turkic origin legend tells of a young boy injured by the enemy and subsequently thrown into a marsh to die. He survives, however, and has intercourse with a she-wolf, after which they take refuge in a cave and the wolf gives birth to ten sons. Several generations later, their descendants—the Turks—emerge from the cave and defeat the resident tribes, interpreted as a reference to the rise of the Turks in 552. The Turkic standard bore a golden wolf's head, and every year the Turkic khagan offered a sacrifice at the ancestral cavern.[9]

After the Uygurs' success on the battlefield, they moved south from their base on the Selenga river, seizing control of the land as far east as the borders of China and south to the Tianshan mountains. Contrary to nomad tradition, the Uygurs then built a walled capital called Ordu-Balik on the Orkhon

river in the north of their new empire, established in 744.[10] The Uygur khagan kept a traditional felt tent erected on the roof of his palace, perhaps to remind him of his nomadic origins. The tent, covered in gold, was a permanent structure.[11] From it, the khagan could see his domain stretching away beyond the city walls. For miles around, the land was cultivated by Uygur farmers. Sogdian and Chinese architects had already been at work designing fine buildings for his city and had been directed to build another town, named "Rich Town," on the Selenga river to the west.[12] Kutlug's grandfather had been skeptical about these changes, and Kutlug remembered his constant boast: "When we Uygurs fight our neighbours, we generally destroy several thousand of their cavalry with but five hundred of our men. It is as if we were simply sweeping up leaves."[13]

At first, the new Uygur khaganate looked to be a better neighbor to the Chinese, both states being united against the Tibetan threat to their respective borders. During the late 740s and the early 750s, Chinese forces under the leadership of Generals Ko and Geshu Han seemed to be gaining the upper hand over the Tibetans. A third foreign general, a Turkic-Sogdian named Rokshan,[14] had been less successful in his northern campaigns against the Kitans but remained a favorite of the Chinese emperor Xuanzong and most especially of the emperor's consort, the Lady Yang. In 751, following one of Rokshan's defeats, she adopted him as her son, and scandalous stories were soon circulating in Chang'an's teahouses about her more than maternal affections.[15] Matters were not helped when they both took private lessons in the Sogdian whirling dance, considered by conservative Chinese officials to be highly immoral.[16] Rumors also circulated that Lady Yang sent Rokshan presents given to her by her husband, such as the ten pieces of the best camphor from Borneo, presented as tribute by a delegation from that country.[17] She demanded use of the Bright Camel Envoy to carry the camphor, even though this was normally reserved for military emergencies.[18]

But she retained the favor of the emperor, who was, by this time, no longer young. When the emperor first became infatuated with Lady Yang, Rokshan had given him a hundred tiny red pills made from passion flower aromatic and advised him to place one in his mouth every evening before entering her bedroom so as "to help his passions develop into excitement and the strength of his sinews not to flag."[19] Lady Yang knew all the ways to keep the emperor happy, not just the sexual ones. She performed Central Asian dances in a multicolored gauze blouse and feathered skirt in the style of the legendary immortal ladies of the west.[20] She was also an adept musician:

The copper tongues in the mouth organ resound in the cool
bamboo tubes,
As slowly she plays new tunes with her jade-like fingers.
Her eyes look at me invitingly—as autumn waves, swiftly changing.
We knew the "rain" and "clouds" in the intimacy of the curtained
chamber,
Where our passions united us. Now, after the feats, how empty is
the room!
There is nothing left but to lose myself in dreams of spring.[21]

When the emperor was losing at the game of double-sixes, she would release one of her pets, her Samarkand lapdog or her white cockatoo, and drive them in the direction of the gaming board, so distracting his opponent.[22] Every year, they would go to hot springs just outside the city that the emperor had developed specially so that he could enjoy watching her bathe; she was reported to have had skin of snowy whiteness and was plump, as demanded by the fashion of the day. The emperor was totally infatuated.

Later that year, Rokshan lost most of his army in yet another battle against the Kitans, but he retained his position and, in 754, was even promoted, much to the consternation of Geshu Han, one of his many critics. But feeling against Rokshan was mounting in Chang'an, fostered by the chief minister, Lady Yang's cousin. Having refused orders to attend the emperor at the capital and knowing that in the chief minister he had a bitter enemy, Rokshan decided to take matters into his own hands. In December 755, he rebelled.[23]

Initially, he met with success. Within little more than a month, he had taken the secondary capital of China, Luoyang, two hundred miles east of Chang'an. To stem the tide of rebellion, the emperor recalled all the military garrisons on China's northwest borders. This withdrawal of troops was to signal the beginning of the end of China's influence in the Tarim basin.

Rokshan spent the winter of 755–56 consolidating his gains and driving farther south, but then he began to suffer setbacks as local prefects returned to the loyalist cause and his armies endured defeats. The rebels were weakening, and when the emperor ordered Geshu Han to attack them, he refused, arguing that his troops held an impregnable position defending the capital that would be foolhardy to surrender. Unwisely, the emperor insisted, and Geshu Han had no choice but to comply. In the sixth month of 756, the general's fears were borne out: his advancing army was ambushed and destroyed, and Geshu Han was forced to surrender to Rokshan by his own men.

When news of the defeat reached the emperor, he promptly fled the capital with Lady Yang and headed for the safety of the mountainous southwest. But the troops in his escort blamed the Lady Yang for Rokshan's rise and threatened to mutiny. The emperor could only appease them by ordering Lady Yang's strangulation. She was buried at the site of her execution, and the imperial party continued their flight. Meanwhile, the heir apparent had fled north to the border regions, and there he usurped the throne, declaring himself emperor in the summer of 756. The Chinese empire, at the height of its power only a few years before, was now in disarray.

The new emperor lost no time in sending embassies to the Uygur court at Ordu-Balik to plead for their help against the rebels.[24] The main Uygur contingent of 4,000 men arrived in mid-757 under the leadership of the khagan's eldest son. By this time, Rokshan had been assassinated by a fellow rebel who had then assumed command. The Uygur army prepared for battle, and Chang'an was retaken by the end of the year. In return for their aid, the Uygurs had demanded the right to plunder the city if they were successful, but the Chinese chief minister persuaded them to wait until Luoyang too was retaken. The Uygur army did so in the same month, and many of the rebels surrendered. Then the Uygurs exercised their right to plunder Luoyang, and for the next three days the city was the scene of carnage.[25]

The rebellion continued to simmer for several more years, in the course of which two more of its leaders were assassinated and its armies took Luoyang a second time. On that occasion, the rebels themselves tried to enlist the support of the Uygurs. When, in desperation, the new emperor sent his heir apparent and three top officials to plead his cause, the Uygur khagan demanded that they perform the ceremonial dance expected of all subordinates attending the khagan. The heir apparent refused, and both he and the three officials were beaten, two of them so badly that they died the same day.[26] Nevertheless, the Uygurs decided to support the Chinese and, in late 762, again drove the rebels out of Luoyang and again plundered the city. Kutlug's grandfather was among the veterans of this campaign, and he often boasted of how frightened the Chinese had been of the Uygur forces. Other veterans spoke of the tremendous riches of Luoyang and of the young women there, many of whom were raped and killed by the victorious soldiers. Some residents took refuge in Buddhist buildings, but these were burned to the ground with the people still inside. Much was destroyed but even more was loaded onto camels and taken out of the city and across the steppe to Ordu-Balik.

The Uygur army camped around the city in tents, seizing supplies from local farmers and granaries until nothing was left for the local populace. People fled into the surrounding hills, where they survived as best they could. The veterans did not tell of the terrible famine that forced people to eat soil and the bark of trees while the soldiers grew fat on their plunder. The city, once a rival to Chang'an for its broad tree-lined avenues, fine buildings, and bustling lanes, lay in charred ruins.

As a further reward for their services, the Uygurs demanded that border markets be established for the trade of horses and silk.[27] From this time on, the Uygurs and the Chinese had an uneasy alliance. The Uygurs regularly brought herds of thousands of ponies for sale to the Chinese government at a fixed price of forty bolts of silk for each, though a pony could be bought for as little as one bolt elsewhere.[28] The ponies were euphemistically called "Uygur tribute to the court" by the Chinese imperial annalists but were really Chinese payment for Uygur military assistance and security against future Uygur attack. The Uygurs benefited most from these transactions, though the Chinese limited their financial losses by regularly defaulting on payment.

While in Luoyang, the Uygur khagan met a group of Manichaean priests from Samarkand and was himself converted. On his return to Ordu-Balik, he ordered the propagation of the new religion throughout his kingdom, though many of his subjects, among them Kutlug's family, retained their traditional beliefs. Manichaean teachers were dispatched throughout the land, and the khagan decreed that one in ten of his subjects would be responsible for the spiritual education of the other nine. Monasteries were established, even as far south as Dzungaria, and the white-robed Manichaean monks became a common sight.[29] At first, they were full of missionary zeal, burning all the statues they found of the local gods and spirits. Kutlug's own tribal leader flirted with Manichaeism for a time: groups of priests would hold day-long prayer sessions in his tent. But Kutlug's family would have nothing to do with the new religion, and his grandmother did not lose her profound belief in Umay, the mother goddess.[30] Even their neighbors, who professed a belief in the new religion, would attend traditional religious ceremonies and make their offerings and requests along with everyone else. It was not long before many of the new converts were lapsing, reverting back to agricultural labor in defiance of monastic rules, returning to their traditional meat diet, and making offerings to local gods and spirits. There was also considerable antipathy toward the Manichaean Sogdians among some of the khagan's courtiers.

However, Sogdian influence extended beyond the spiritual: they were the merchants of the Silk Road and also fine builders, craftsmen, and agriculturists. Sogdian architects and artisans helped transform the capital into a thriving commercial center with metallurgists, potters, engravers, blacksmiths, sculptors, stonemasons, and weavers. Many Uygurs now abandoned their nomadic lifestyle altogether, whereas others farmed in the summer but still traveled with their livestock to the winter pastures. In addition to their Kökturk script, the Uygurs also adopted the Sogdian script, an alphabet of seventeen letters with two special characters. Sogdian is an Iranian language, and therefore its alphabet was not perfectly adapted to Uygur, a Turkic language, but it sufficed. The Uygurs in turn passed the script on to later inhabitants of the steppes, the Mongols.[31]

Sogdians also played a political role. In 779, they urged the khagan to mount an invasion of China while its court was in mourning for its emperor Daizong. The khagan's nephew disagreed with the policy and, failing to win his argument by persuasion, arranged for his uncle's murder along with that of his Sogdian advisers.[32] For several years thereafter, the Sogdians were less welcome at court.[33]

Sogdians traveled with the Uygurs on their frequent embassies to the Chinese capital, and many stayed and settled there and in other Chinese cities. Some married Chinese women or took Chinese concubines.[34] During the last part of the eighth century, they had an excuse to stay because the Tarim routes to the east of Sogdia were not passable, being held by the Tibetans, and during their residence in Chang'an they received Chinese government aid that amounted to half a million strings of copper coins annually. One Chinese minister suggested that the merchants be granted status as Chinese subjects and given jobs; although his proposal was not implemented, the aid was ended.[35] In 780, a Uygur embassy was ordered to take both Uygur and Sogdian merchants back with them to Ordu-Balik. From there, the Sogdians could travel through Uygur-held territory almost to the borders of Sogdia. Fearing that their Chinese wives and concubines would not be granted permission to leave, the merchants smuggled them out in sacks loaded on camels. The caravan stayed three months on the border, just north of the Yellow river, waiting for the traveling season. Since they were still in Chinese territory, their rations were supplied by the Chinese government. The unusually large bill soon came to official notice, the caravan was searched, and the stowaways discovered.[36]

The story did not have a happy ending. The Sogdian merchants were reluctant to go to Ordu-Balik because of the recent murder of the pro-Sogdian

khagan and his advisers. They therefore sought a secret agreement with the Chinese general accompanying them whereby they would assist in massacring the Uygurs in the embassy in exchange for being allowed to stay in China. The Chinese general thought that, on the whole, it would be less troublesome to massacre both the Uygurs and the Sogdians, and he duly sought permission from the emperor, arguing that this would be a means of diminishing the influence of both. When his request was refused for the third time, he engineered a breach of protocol to provide him with the necessary excuse. He then arranged a great banquet, wined and dined his guests into a helpless state, and had them killed. Two Uygurs were spared and sent to Ordu-Balik to report the event, and the Chinese wives and concubines were returned to Chang'an. The Uygur khagan took revenge in characteristic fashion: instead of murdering the Chinese envoys sent to accompany the coffins of the merchants back to Ordu-Balik, he kept them waiting in the capital for two months before granting them an audience. We must presume that they were by now in a state of some anxiety. The khagan then demanded payment in full of all outstanding debts on the purchase of horses, amounting to two million strings of copper coins, suggesting that the Chinese were inveterate defaulters. The Chinese emperor realized he had escaped lightly and paid the debt, using state reserves of gold, silver, and silk.[37]

A Chinese imperial decree of 779 had ordered non-Chinese to wear their ethnic dress in China so as to be distinctive, but the Uygurs stood out anyway.[38] Groups of young men would ride into Chang'an's Western Market in search of a tea shop, the latest fashion, or simply some excitement. Market officials complained about the Uygurs' loutish behavior and their harassment of traders, many of whom were in debt to Uygur moneylenders. It had been illegal for Chinese subjects to borrow money from Uygurs ever since a famous general's son had defaulted on a loan.[39] The Uygur moneylender had taken the case to law and a scandal had ensued, with the general dismissed from his post. The law had little effect, however, and Uygur moneylenders continued to thrive for at least another century.

Although Chinese horse breeding was sophisticated, there was always a demand for more horses for the military and elite.[40] By the fifth century, the steppe people had already interbred the tarpan pony to create larger, faster horses, similar to those found around Nisa and Merv, sometimes called the Turkmen horse. They had been praised by Alexander the Great when his armies met them in battle and had the characteristics of the Ferghanan horse described by the second-century Chinese envoy Zhang Qian.[41]

As China expanded its territory to include the steppe pasturelands to the northwest, traditional home of many of the horses, it acquired more suitable pastureland for breeding. The Chinese preferred horses with Turkmen ancestry to the tarpan pony, but the herds always contained a mixture. Turkmen blood gave the tarpan a smaller head and flowing mane and a ridge of muscle on either side of the backbone, which made bareback riding more comfortable.[42] By that time, however, Chinese soldiers and horsemen rode on high saddles with stirrups.[43]

The herds were always vulnerable to disease as well as looting by the Turks and Tibetans who made frequent raids across the borders. In one particularly bad epidemic, the Chinese lost 180,000 horses, causing a minister to proclaim: "Horses are the military preparedness of the country; if Heaven takes this preparedness away, the state will totter to a fall."[44] When the Chinese Tang dynasty came to power in 618, only 5,000 horses were left in the imperial pastures. By mid-century, their numbers had increased to over 700,000, divided among eight pasturelands.[45] After Rokshan's rebellion, however, Tibetan raids on the pastures increased, and the Chinese came to rely on the Uygurs for replacement mounts—though they did not need all that were sent, especially as many of them were old nags, but it was an indication of Chinese fear of Uygur military strength that they continued to buy them.[46]

The Uygurs were consummate horsemen, and, despite the more sedentary lifestyle of some of the population after the founding of their empire, their equine skills were not neglected. Kutlug was a typical horseman. He knew how to pick the best pony for each season and job, skills he had been taught as a child. For summertime, it was essential to choose a mount with a thin hide that had not been worked too hard in the previous months, since even the toughest ponies found the unrelenting heat difficult, and a good-natured mount was a great asset. The best pony for winter, by contrast, had a thick hide, long hair, and a round stomach with legs that rose straight from the ground, showing no hint of splaying. For lassoing, a short-bodied mount was required, stout but swift. Kutlug and his peers had been riding since before they could walk and were more at home on horseback than on foot.

In the summer of 790, Kutlug was riding one of his favorite mounts as he approached the large caravan across the steppe. The horses already in the caravan had been taken from the summer grazing grounds near the Uygur capital. Kutlug was bringing several hundred head more from the southern grazing grounds in Dzungaria to join them. There were many old nags among them, and others that would barely make the journey, so Kutlug carried

various horse medicines with him, including a recipe that helped relieve colic caused by cold water from desert wells. The mixture contained white turmeric or zedoary from India.[47] Kutlug knew that the Chinese overseer would complain about the state of the horses but also that he could do nothing about it. The overseer would pay for them all, and the Uygurs would return with bolts of fine silks for trade with their western neighbors. The horse trade was a good opportunity for the Uygurs to get rid of poor stock, and if horses died en route, then they could always be eaten.

Kutlug's family lived in the south of the Uygur khaganate, beyond the Altai mountains in the great steppe basin now known as Dzungaria. They belonged to one of the many tribes that were united under the khagan, but each of which owed allegiance to its own leader, the totok.[48] The khagan was drawn from one of the tribes. Several other non-Uygur Turkic tribes also offered allegiance to the khagan, and frontline troops were usually chosen from among these. Dzungaria had excellent pasturage and shelter for vast herds of camels, horses, yaks, and sheep, and when one area of pasture was cropped, Kutlug and his family would pack up their tents and belongings, load them onto camels and horse-driven carts, and move on. The richer members of the tribe had at least two tents or yurts, substantial round dwellings made of thick felt supported by a collapsible wooden frame, with a smoke hole in the center of the domed roof.

Felt played an important role in Uygur life. It was used not just for tents but also for saddle pads, boot linings, clothes, and furnishings, and new batches were made every autumn. A piece of old felt, called "the mother," was laid on the ground and soaked with water.[49] Three layers of sheep wool and a layer of grass were placed on top, each soaked in turn, and then the bundle was rolled up tightly inside hides that had also been soaked and fastened with leather straps. More water was poured in at either end, and ropes were tied to the bundle and to two horsemen on opposite sides. They both stood their horses next to the bundle so that the rope was slack, and then one walked his horse away until his rope was taut and then dragged the bundle along the ground until the other horseman's rope was taut. This continued, first one way and then the other, perhaps thirty or forty times. The whole soggy bundle was then unwrapped, unrolled, and the grass removed. The resulting piece of rough felt, formed from the amalgam of the layers of sheep wool, was called "the daughter." But the process was not yet complete. Next, the daughter felt was rolled up with another three layers of wool and the process repeated. The resulting felt was soaked again and laid against the side of a

yurt to dry. Different types and grades of wool were used to make different qualities of felt. The best was made from the downy fleece of the unshorn sheep collected by hand.

Kutlug had spent most of his life with his family in Dzungaria. He considered the tribal head, the totok, as his leader; the khagan was a distant figure. The totok was responsible for raising an army, and all males between the ages of fifteen and fifty could be called up. To hone their military skills, Kutlug and his fellows played many games and sports, among them archery competitions in which they would ride at full speed with the reins between their teeth and then let off a volley of arrows at various targets. They also went on hunting expeditions into the mountains in search of wolves and deer. But Kutlug's greatest joy was his goshawk. He and his fellow tribesmen would catch young hawks using decoys and nets dyed with *toghruga,* a yellow-brown dye from the bark of the black poplar, which meant the nets could not been seen against the earth.[50] Or they might raid nests for chicks, fitting them with jesses, leashes, and leather hoods and training them to catch small mammals and birds (see figure 12). A group of men often hunted their hawks together, riding with their birds and hounds into the Altai mountains and taking watch on a circle of peaks that afforded a clear view of the valley below. As soon as prey was sighted, their birds were released.[51] A group of eagles, which were also used for falconry, could take a wolf this way.[52]

Kutlug was excited when he learned that he had been chosen to join the embassy bound for Chang'an, for even members of the leading families in Ordu-Balik vied with each other for the opportunity to travel to China. Kutlug had visited neither the Uygur nor the Chinese capitals, but stories told by veterans of the wealth of Chang'an, and more recent accounts from fellow tribesmen who had been on earlier embassies, had aroused his curiosity. They spoke of all the goods in Chang'an's Western Market and of how they had ridden in on horseback and "persuaded" cowering merchants to make presents of their wares. In the wineshops and teahouses, they were entertained by beautiful Kuchean girls, and afterward they had visited the famous courtesan quarter by the Eastern Market.[53] This abutted a rich residential area, and they laughed when they recalled how Chinese scholars had veered off down side streets when they saw the Uygur youths approaching. The Uygurs considered themselves masters of the city.[54]

Kutlug and his herd caught up with the large caravan and settled into its rhythm. Its progress was slow, its speed dictated by the plodding camels and the need to graze the enormous herds. As soon as suitable pasturage was

FIGURE 12. Man in *hufu* (foreigners' robe), with falcon and saluki dog, from a mural in an imperial Tang dynasty tomb near Chang'an. (Drawing by author.)

reached each day, the camels were unloaded, tents erected, and cooking fires prepared, while the horses and camels were left to graze on the thin grass that covered the rocky steppe. The Uygurs carried noodles and dried fruit with them, but their main food was meat. Mare's milk was also used extensively, to make butter and cheese or fermented to make a slightly alcoholic drink that could in turn be distilled into clear liquor. When there was no firewood, they cooked with camel or yak dung.[55]

The caravan was in high spirits as it approached the Chinese border and trading post, though also vigilant: there were often Tibetan raids in this area. Kutlug learned that not everyone would be allowed to continue to Chang'an. The main party of high officials and members of the khagan's family, including two princesses, carried letters for the emperor and further "gifts." Kutlug hoped to accompany them, but the Chinese border guards always limited the number of Uygurs allowed into the capital. They had been particularly strict since an incident involving a previous embassy in which drunken Uygur youths, in a rage at some perceived slight, had tried to hack down the gate to the Court for Receiving Foreign Envoys in the Imperial City.[56] The Uygur men looked forward to a few encounters with their Chinese counterparts:

they considered the Chinese scholar-official, with his feminine demeanor and refusal to carry arms, a contemptible sort of person, a victim to bully. Such encounters did not always stop at verbal abuse; drunken brawls were commonplace, and Chinese men were murdered by Uygurs in 774 and 775 in Chang'an.[57] The head of the Uygur community refused to allow the murderers to be punished, and the Chinese governor did not dare enforce the law.

In the event, to his disappointment, Kutlug was not among those allowed to proceed to Chang'an. But while still at the border, he heard disturbing news about Dzungaria, his homeland. Uygur and Chinese forces had been defeated at the Tianshan city of Beshbalik in southern Dzungaria by Tibetan-led forces. The Uygurs had retreated north across the Gobi desert to Ordu-Balik, and the Chinese had fled south over the Tianshan to Kocho.[58] A joint counterattack was planned for the autumn, and orders had been sent to all the totoks to call every adult man to arms. Kutlug started back for his homeland in northern Dzungaria immediately to prepare for the campaign.

The problems in Beshbalik had a long history, dating back to Rokshan's rebellion in China. Just as Uygur forces had gained dominance in China after helping to suppress the rebellion, so the Tibetans had profited from the Chinese empire's increasing weakness, though not immediately. In the same year as the start of the Chinese rebellion, in 755, the Tibetan emperor had been assassinated by two of his ministers. However, a new emperor was installed in 756, by which time China had recalled most of the troops stationed in its western garrisons, and the Tibetans lost no time in advancing north. By the late eighth century, they controlled most of the Tarim. Only a few unsupported Chinese garrisons remained. Beshbalik, called Beiting by the Chinese, was one of these. The direct route into China from Beshbalik led southeast through the Hexi corridor, but this area was also controlled by the Tibetans. Several envoys from Beshbalik had tried to find an alternative route, but it was a decade before the first arrived safely in China, having traveled north to Ordu-Balik and then southeast to the Uygur-Chinese border. This was in 781, and since then all supplies and messengers had used this very circuitous route, for which privilege the Uygurs exacted a large transit toll.[59]

Finding their resources drained by these constant raids and by combined reparations to the Uygurs for past assistance, the Chinese actively sought peace with the Tibetans. A treaty was negotiated and signed in 783, freeing Chinese troops to deal with another internal rebellion.[60] The settlement negotiated between the two powers promised Tibetan assistance against the

rebels and Chinese agreement to cede Beshbalik, but neither side stuck to its terms, and in retaliation the Tibetans arranged the assassination of two senior Chinese generals. A third, invited to a negotiating session that was no more than an excuse for an ambush, narrowly escaped. The Tibetan attack on Beshbalik was further revenge for the broken treaty.

The Tibetan attack marked the culmination of several years of covert operations in the area. Beshbalik was populated largely by non-Uygur Turks, and the plains surrounding the city by tens of thousands of Shatuo Turks.[61] The two peoples lived in peace with each other, but the Uygurs to the north made themselves very unpopular. Armed groups of young Uygurs made regular raids into the area, seizing clothes, food, and livestock. With few men and no recourse to reinforcements, the Chinese forces were powerless to retaliate. Moreover, the Uygurs were supposed to be their allies.

The Tibetans had spies in the town who reported the rising level of popular discontent among the Turkic residents, and the Tibetans fomented it, secretly offering Turkic leaders their full support should the townspeople decide to rebel. Finally, in 789, the Tibetans judged the mood to be favorable and invaded across the Tianshan, capturing Beshbalik in January 790. Uygur and Chinese forces reunited for the first time since their battles against the rebels in China in 763, and the city was briefly retaken, but in the summer the residents went over to the Tibetans, and the Uygur and Chinese armies were both forced to retreat.

The Uygurs and the Chinese had much to fear from the Tibetans. Tibetan raiding parties made regular incursions deep into both their territories, and in 763 Tibetan soldiers had even briefly captured the Chinese capital. The new, combined Uygur-China army that Kutlug was to join had been formed to face a common enemy, but it was not clear quite who was helping whom. The Uygurs had more to lose. Beshbalik was the only buffer between them and the Tibetan emperor. The Chinese regarded Beshbalik merely as an impotent outpost, a vestige of their former control of the Tarim. The relative size of the two forces reflected this disparity: the Uygurs called up every adult man, and their forces numbered over 10,000, whereas the Chinese contributed only 2,000 men.

Kutlug rode his string of horses back to Dzungaria without stopping. It was late summer by the time he arrived. The totok of his tribe had been summoned to Ordu-Balik, but the main forces of his army were training on the plains and preparing their horses and weapons for battle. The same scene was repeated throughout the Uygur empire as the tribal leaders called their men to arms.

Kutlug gathered his armor, weapons, and best horses and joined his fellows in their maneuvers. The northern and eastern tribes converged on the capital and marched south in early autumn. They were joined by other forces en route, Kutlug's being the last, and then they marched south as a combined force under the generalship of the Uygur chief minister, eager to avenge the earlier defeat at the hands of the Tibetans. Messengers were sent ahead to tell the Chinese soldiers of their approach, and, instead of entering Beshbalik from the north, the direct route, the general took his army in a wide sweep to the south, across the Tianshan to Kocho, where the Chinese forces joined them. By now, some of the Uygur forces had marched for almost a thousand miles.

The Uygurs considered themselves more than a match for the cumbersome Tibetan cavalry. Their bows were strengthened with horn and sinew, and their wooden arrows were flighted so as to produce a loud whistling sound to intimidate the enemy. The Chinese infantry were equipped with crossbows with leather-flighted arrows, and with longbows whose steel-headed arrows could pierce Tibetan armor. The Tibetan infantry were the main threat. Heavily armed and encased in armor, they were known for their bravery under attack. But the Tibetan army was also reinforced with Turkic soldiers, rebellious former subjects of the Uygurs, who were excellent cavalrymen.

The generals wore swords with hilts and scabbards mounted with silver, gold, and precious stones. Chinese alchemical theory held that the finest swords were a combination of female and male essences, yin and yang. To produce them, the bellows had to be worked by a virgin girl and boy. In ancient times, swords had been made in pairs—male and female. Legend spoke of such magical swords as dragon spirits and producers of lightning that would even cut through jade. Chinese artisans producing swords without imperial authorization were subject to severe punishment, and trade in weapons across China's borders was prohibited.[62]

From Kocho, after the Chinese contingent had joined them, Kutlug and his fellow soldiers marched north, back across the Tianshan. The Tibetan army was waiting for them on the plain below the walled city of Beshbalik, and both sides took up their positions. The next day, the standard bearers, trumpeters, and drummers led their respective armies into battle. Each day the scene was one of a tangled mass of men, horses, and weapons. Each evening, when the armies retreated behind their lines, those who had fallen were left behind. The Uygur and Chinese forces could make no headway against the Tibetan lines, and as the battle progressed they grew weak and dispirited. Then the Tibetan lines began to advance. Kutlug was caught up in

the tumult of horses and men trying to flee, their commanders behind the lines slashing at their own men in an attempt to frighten them back into battle as the gray mass of the iron-clad Tibetan infantry relentlessly rolled forward across the plain like a great tidal wave.

The Uygur and Chinese armies were routed. The Chinese commander escaped with only 160 men and fled back south across the mountains to Kocho. The Uygur general followed hard on his heels—his direct route north blocked by the Tibetans—and promised him temporary asylum in Ordu-Balik and then safe passage back to China. Since the Kocho garrison was isolated and vulnerable to attack, and there were no reinforcements to be had, the Chinese commander eventually agreed, and the two armies started their long journey north. But the Chinese commander had made an error of judgment: he was assassinated shortly after entering the Uygur capital.

Uygur troops were to return to Beshbalik the following year and retake the city, but Kutlug was not among them. His body had been left on the battlefield, and now his family wore the facial scars that were part of the Uygur rituals of mourning.[63]