Prologue

I was wondering, she said, if you might expand a little on the bones you found in the Gobi.

She flushed slightly as he focused his attention on her but persevered.

Do you think that they were truly from a creature that existed thousands of years before? Could they not, do you think, have been a clever fake? After all, she said hesitantly, some might say that a flying lizard, a reptile with feathers and teeth, is a monstrosity that could not possibly have existed.

As he looked down at this woman, staring up at him with wide, hazel eyes, biting her lip and clasping her hands as she waited for his reply, he realized that this was the moment he had longed for all those years ago. He had been desperate to be revered, to be recognized in scientific circles, to have the upper echelons of society crave his company and his opinion. And now that this moment was here, he found that it was not quite what he had expected or wanted. How to answer this woman with her strange, almost preposterous question, which was not what she really wished to say to him

but only a means to be near him? How to answer her when her words conjured up images of scraping through sand until his hands bled under a sun so vicious it had cracked his skin and killed his camels? And she thought that what he had unearthed in the middle of the Gobi where no living soul had previously ventured might have been a counterfeit?

What he truly wanted to do was to sip a glass of champagne with Lena by his side and raise a toast to his dear friends. He'd just finished his talk at the Royal Society on *The Fauna and Flora of Outer Mongolia* and had been about to join the others in the library where a small party was being held in his honour. But he had only managed to reach the connecting hallway between the two rooms when he had been besieged. There was a queue of people waiting to speak to him, including this woman. He smiled to himself. In the past that would have thrown him. Now he realized that for a certain sort of woman being the kind of man he was presented a challenge. Then, of course, there was the fact that he was well known in some circles. And, perhaps, he could finally admit to himself at the age of thirty-five, he was not unhandsome. Mongolia had taken its toll, of course, and he now had wrinkles round his eyes and lines etched more deeply across his forehead, but there were also laughter lines. Lena had taught him to laugh.

He caught sight of her. She was looking up at Patrick, her grey eyes glowing like the sea where the sun sends its surface silver. Her wild, dark blonde hair was pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck but stray curls had escaped. She was wearing a dress the same deep green shade as a hart's tongue fern, which Mrs Craven had picked for her. But, in spite of the fashionable attire, there was no mistaking the

roundness of her face, the slant of her eyes, the high cheekbones. Framed by the library door, glazed sunlight pouring through the tall, thin windows on to the great glass goblets of flowers that stood around the room, she appeared as if she were surrounded by lilies.

How he had imagined them on that interminable journey through the barren, arid desert with its suffocating heat, these lilies he had risked his life for. And here they were, just as he had fantasized – five feet tall with golden stamens and perfect, marble-white blooms. Once he had thought only of the lilies in terms of the fame they would bring him. Now Lena turned to smell one of them and in that moment, half twisted away from him, bent towards the waxen petals, she looked just like her mother. His heart quailed within him. Was this to be his punishment – the great and unexpected joy of a child – and yet, for the rest of his life, seeing the woman he had once loved reflected in the features of her daughter?

PART I

A small flock of purple doves was clustered in an apricot tree, the first peach and cream blossoms beginning to unfurl along its crooked branches. Against the molten butter of the rising sun it was like a delicate Chinese painting. Joseph did not look behind him: he knew dogs with sharpened ribcages would be licking the stones; nor to his right, in case he saw the silent mill and the putrid river; nor down at the streets save he caught sight of an opium addict, half frozen and silently delirious. He wanted to leave this godforsaken town with this final and beautiful image intact, a sign that God was everywhere and that none, not even here, had been deserted.

Beyond the town, hanging over and caging them in, were battlements and turrets, the ruins of the last Great Wall of China. Past that barrier was freedom; the wide open steppes he longed for, the pure fresh air he had dreamt of. There were soldiers, border guards, by the wall, but they were sleeping. Joseph nervously angled his mule as far away from them as possible. As he passed by, his mule slipped on the rough cobbles, its hoof scraping loudly against the stone.

Joseph held his breath and looked round. One of the soldiers opened his eyes. He sprang to his feet with a cry, waking his companion. The second soldier snapped his head back and stared unfocusedly about him and then staggered upright, twisting his rifle round towards them. The three of them came to a ragged halt. The first soldier was still shouting. The second advanced upon them, blocking their path and aiming the bayonet at the end of his rifle at Tsem. They were both Chinese, dressed in dark blue uniforms that were fraying and unravelling at the hems with tears at the elbows. Their rifles were dark with rust. It was impossible to tell how old they were, their faces were so smooth, their eyes hidden in shadow beneath their caps. They could be but boys, thought Joseph, boys with lethal weapons. Mendo and Tsem now slid from their mules and Joseph did likewise. The first soldier seemed to be gesturing towards something, barking orders at them in a harsh, guttural language. Mendo started tying up the mules to the broken remnants of the gate.

What's happening? whispered Joseph.

He wants to see what we're carrying.

Surely they can see we're not the type to transport opium.

Tsem said something and Mendo translated.

He says, how much we have to bribe them will depend on how valuable our luggage is.

Have you explained to them who we are? asked Joseph, raising his voice a little.

The first soldier now swung his rifle around and dug the butt into Joseph's shoulder, while shouting something at him. He felt his heartbeat rise and a cold sweat break out across his palms and chest. The soldier pointed and shouted again and

Joseph stepped back, away from the mules and his companions. Mendo and Tsem finished tying up all the mules and started unloading their packs and lining them up in the gateway. Joseph wiped his clammy hands on his cassock. He tried to take deep breaths to still his racing heart. His shoulder throbbed. What frightened him was the unpredictability and arbitrary nature of their encounter. These men, no, boys, could do anything with impunity and, at this time of the morning, there was not a single person who would witness their actions.

Mendo and Tsem now started to undo the oiled canvas holdalls and peel back the hessian layers wrapped round Joseph's precious equipment. The soldiers, who had been standing threateningly close to the two men, their bayonets at the level of Mendo's and Tsem's stomachs, now bent closer, curiously examining the herbarium paper, Joseph's collection of tools for prising fossils from rock, his taxidermy kit with razor-sharp scalpel blades and waxy thread for sewing skins, discs of beeswax, pots of ink and leather-bound notebooks. One of the soldiers kicked a pile of specimen jars with the toe of his boot and Joseph had to restrain himself from pulling the man away. The first soldier reached forward and pocketed one of the jars and a blade. He strolled over to Tsem who was unpacking their food. He slipped a bundle of dried meat in his jacket pocket and tossed a packet of *tsamba* to his companion. Then he barked something at Mendo.

Mendo turned to Joseph. He wants to see our paperwork.

Tsem snorted.

Mendo said, He says he wonders if they can even read.

Joseph pulled the bundle of papers from the inside pocket of his cassock and handed them to the soldier.

It was a horrible reminder of when he had first set foot in Pekin. He'd been weak from months at sea and still sick. The ground had felt unsteady beneath his feet. The harbour police had demanded to see his papers and had pored over them endlessly, while other officials had made him prise open his luggage, packed in wooden crates, and empty out his belongings. Wood shavings and hessian had littered the docks and a couple of dirty urchins had made off with some of his possessions. One of the customs officials had pocketed a fine bone-handled knife when he thought Joseph wasn't looking and then given him a nasty smile when he saw him watching.

The soldier now peeled off the first couple of sheets, which were in English, and held them up. The papers fluttered in the breeze and the man opened his hand and let them go. They drifted across the desert, reflecting the first rays of the early morning sun.

Joseph felt sick. He had worked for years building up contacts: men who would help him, men who would want him to work for them, men of means and men with the right connections. And once the expedition had been agreed, he had laboured for months to amass the right equipment, to plot his journey, to secure the necessary permits and permissions, to book his crossing and hire the two men who now stood helplessly in front of him while his precious possessions were scattered across a filthy cobbled street in the shadow of a decaying wall.

The soldier gave a grim smile and let another sheaf of paper blow free, this time the Chinese translation of the English papers he had already released. The sheet below, he crumpled and started to stuff in his mouth, watching their

reaction as he slowly ate the document. The second soldier stood alongside him and released the safety catch on his gun. The weapon was so rusty, the catch snapped off suddenly, making them all jump.

Can you do nothing? said Joseph, through gritted teeth.

Mendo's back, which was towards him, was implacable. Tsem started to walk nonchalantly towards the wall. The second soldier swung his rifle round and trained it on him. Tsem held his hands in the air, walking backwards, and said something to the soldier. The man lowered the gun. Tsem leaned against the wall and started to roll a cigarette. The first soldier swallowed and then spat a wad of chewed-up paper against the stones. Tsem handed him a cigarette and lit it for him. He rolled another. There was almost complete silence apart from the men's breathing and the chink of the mules' bridles as they shook their heads and nuzzled against each other. Somewhere behind them, back in the town, a dog barked. Tsem handed the cigarette to the other soldier and then rolled one for himself. After a couple of puffs, he spoke to the soldier who appeared to be in command.

Joseph slowly took a few steps forwards so that he was standing alongside Mendo. The soldier's dead eyes never left him even as Tsem talked.

He's explaining who you are, said Mendo quietly, and that you're not a threat to them.

Once Tsem had finished talking the soldier dropped the cigarette and ground it beneath his boot. He barked a couple of orders at Tsem.

And now he wants to know how much you will pay them to let you pass.

I should not have to pay anything, said Joseph angrily.

It's the lesser of two evils, my friend, said Mendo simply.

Finally, Tsem told them the figure. It was extortionate.

And he wants one of the mules, said Mendo glumly.

Joseph counted out the money and handed it to Tsem who gave it to the soldier. He passed it to his second-in-command who made a great show of counting it twice. The first soldier took another cigarette from Tsem and then walked over to the mules. He walked in front of the animals a couple of times and then chose one. He pulled the mule out in front of the three of them. But instead of leading the beast away, he half turned and lunged, burying the bayonet in its chest. The mule brayed, an inhumanely loud sound, its lips curled back exposing its pink and black gums. The soldier pulled the bayonet out and then slashed the animal's throat open. Its eyes rolled back until only the whites showed and it fell to its knees, its head lolling at an unnatural angle. The soldier dropped his cigarette in the mule's blood where it sizzled. The two sauntered off, dividing the money unequally between them. The mule, now stretched out at Joseph's feet, struggled to breathe, its breath rasping in its broken windpipe. They stood and listened for what seemed like a long time before the mule stopped breathing. Joseph stepped past the prostrate animal and started to repack his equipment, hastily moving some of it away from the widening pool of blood. His hands, though, were trembling and he found it difficult to rewrap his specimen jars. They rattled and clinked and slipped between his fingers. Mendo leaned over him and put both his hands on Joseph's shoulders.

Joseph, he said, and Joseph felt himself being firmly but gently pulled to his feet.

Joseph, said Mendo again, leave it. Tsem and I will repack. Take a walk. We'll be with you shortly.

And he steered Joseph towards the wide open expanse of the desert.

On 4 March 1865 Father Joseph Jacob had left Pekin with ten mules heavily laden with all his equipment and a Mongolian whose name was Tsembel. His horseman was short and stocky with black hair and smooth skin, the colour of a peeled hazelnut, stretched taut over round, high cheekbones. His eyes were small and green and he wore black leather riding boots and a dirty, blue *del*, a calf-length, felt coat fastened at the throat with silver baubles. His hands were lined and there was dirt worked into the wrinkles and calluses. He knew no English, and Joseph knew only a little Mongolian. But in the short time that they had been travelling together Joseph had formed an impression of the horseman as a man whom he could trust: Tsem appeared light-hearted and uncomplicated yet honest.

It had taken the best part of two weeks to cross three mountains and the wide plain that led to the ancient capital of the Mongol emperors, Suanhwa. The city was surrounded by high walls and ornate gates, as was the custom, at each of the compass points. Joseph noted, using his own compass, that they were a few degrees out. To the south-west was the vast Yang Ho, the Yellow River, and encircling the city a smaller stream which flowed haphazardly through fields of rice planted in neat squares. Tsem had pointed out the west wall to him, but he had already noticed: sand blown up by the ever present wind had reached the top, and men were scaling its slope and jumping over the ramparts rather than walking

round to one of the gates. This was where he was to meet his translator.

When they finally arrived at the mission and he was shown to his room, it was full of sand. A light dusting coated the furniture and there were heaps of sand, as if from an hourglass, in the corners. One of the brothers brought him a basin of hot water, a luxury he had already become unused to. He sank his hands into the water, resting them on the bottom of the basin, revelling in the warmth. He cupped his hands and splashed his face, feeling grit from the desert in a thin film across his skin.

He found the brothers taking tea in the narrow study, which ran alongside an internal courtyard. They were seated round a long dark table in near silence, small earthenware bowls cradled in their hands. M. Lefèvre rose as Joseph entered the room. He was a tall, thin man with narrow lips, sunken eyes and high cheekbones. A faint layer of stubble combined with the deep eye sockets lent his face an ashen cast.

Father, allow me to introduce you to your translator.

He held out one hand.

A man rose from where he had been seated cross-legged in the shadows and walked towards Joseph. He touched his palms together and half bowed. He was the same size and build as Joseph – medium height, lean and wiry. He was wearing a floor-length orange robe, and his exceedingly short hair was covered with a dark red velvet skull cap.

But he is, he is a . . . stuttered Joseph.

A *bonze*? said the translator, in perfect English, his mouth twisted in a slightly sardonic smile.

A Buddhist, said Joseph. My apologies, he said quickly,

turning to the monk. It was not my intention to offend you. I was merely a little . . . surprised. Joseph had hoped his translator would be one of the brothers, a Lazarist, a man with whom he could converse about God and who would be company for him across the Mongol wastelands, a man who might share his enthusiasm for the natural world, who might aid him with his plant collections.

My name is Mendo, said the monk. I am a lama of the Yellow Hat Order of Buddhism. I believe I know enough English to be of some service to you.

I think you will find that he is more than suitable, said M. Lefèvre, drawing himself up to his full height and looking at Joseph imperiously. We simply cannot spare one of our brothers for what is essentially not a missionary's job. Moreover you will find his English, Mongolian, Chinese, Tibetan and Russian to be of a high standard. I trust, Father Jacob, that you require no religious tuition at your stage in life, hence it matters little what spiritual tendencies your translator possesses.

The monk's eyes were dark and inscrutable but he held out his hand and Joseph shook it. He realized that what M. Lefèvre was aching to say, but did not, was that Joseph was lucky to have anyone at all.

Joseph, in spite of his impatience, had agreed to spend an extra day at the Lazarist Mission to express his gratitude to M. Lefèvre. It was exceptionally cold at night; Suanhwa was 2,700 feet above Pekin, and the summers, he had been told, were short. He had to get up in the night to put more clothes on and add extra blankets to his bed. The incessant crowing of the rooks conspired to keep him awake. But the following day they rose early. Mendo and Tsembel

repacked and replenished their provisions. Joseph, after prayers and breakfast with the brothers, left the mission by himself. The city appeared deserted in the thin light of morning. In any case, it was only half populated, the walls crumbling and decaying, dogs and emaciated cats trailing through the narrow alleys. The trading city of Kalgan, nestled under the Great Wall, was only a few miles north of Suanhwa, and he supposed that the fluid transaction of money had leached the life-blood from the older Mongol citadel. The few Chinese that he did see were noticeably different from those he'd come across in Tientsin and Pekin. Their skins were pale, their hair was lighter and they had more prominent noses; only their eyes gave away their race.

The banks of the Yang Ho were frozen. In the middle, where the current was strongest, blocks of ice flowed jaggedly downriver. Reeds along the edges were stiff with frost; a heron flew out of one clump as if rising from an iron crown. On the far side a long-legged plover stalked through the sedge, displaced from its natural element. He crossed a thin rope and wood bridge and spent the remainder of the morning poking through the fine yellow soil and digging beneath purple-red rocks that he suspected were porphyry. He unearthed several small yellow bones, scratched and gouged, as if by teeth, along their length. He thought they were the frail bones of marmots, and the leavings of jackals. Still, each time he heard the hollow tap of metal on bone, he felt a rush of excitement. It could be a skeleton from an animal that no longer existed, a creature that walked the earth unimaginable aeons of time ago, a beast whose life had been witnessed by God alone. The last skull

he dug up did not look old – a small antelope with spiral horns. He let the sand drain from the eye sockets.

Ssu-pu-hsiang, in Chinese, said Mendo when he saw the skull. It's a deer. Its name means the four characters that do not match: it has the tail of an elephant, the nose of a horse, the ears of a rabbit and the feet of a pig.

Very early the next morning he prayed with the brothers and then took leave of them, the mules stepping over the raggedly cobbled streets with soft footfalls, slipping a little where ice had pooled in the cracks between stones, their breath drifting in crystalline clouds. The darkness had the grey quality of morning without moonlight before the sun has risen above the rim of the earth. They travelled west along the bank of the Yang Ho, the flow of the river muted beneath its layer of ice, the middle section black and glassy. Gradually the sun rose, the stony ground turned orange and the sky deepened to blue. Joseph was cold; the chill from the night still had not left him and he held himself stiffly on the mule until the sun began to thaw his bones. The saddle and the mule's gait felt even more uncomfortable than before, if that were possible. The days away from his mount had only served to tenderize and not heal his aching muscles.

By midday they had left the river behind and reached a vast crater surrounded by a ring of shale-grey hills. The land itself was flat and desert-like, covered with row upon row of pebbles, almost as if they had been raked by a cultivator of stones. Blades of grass were rare. In the distance the air seemed to shimmer: sheet ice grown across the sky. The hills surrounding the crater were probably volcanic, he thought, and the crater itself could have been formed by a flood, or might even have been the bed of some ancient sea. When

they stopped to brew tea for lunch, Joseph poked through the diluvial sand and found a couple of shells, smooth, white and coiled. They were probably fossils. He thought of his father, who'd dreamt of being a sailor, and wondered what he might say – shells from a land without a sea. He imagined himself as a child holding out his tiny fist and opening it slowly to reveal them. He smiled and put them in his pocket. Tsem and Mendo were crouched by a small fire, watching him. It was a period of waiting, all three trying to assess the others, held back by barriers of language, religion, race, culture and simple lack of acquaintance. Mendo and Tsem could be equally distant from one another, he thought, separated by class – such as it might exist out here – and education.

Do you think we have sufficient food with us? asked Joseph.

Tsem held out a bowl of tea and one of *tsamba*, a kind of gruel made of barley flour. It was barely edible and he only managed by washing it down with the tea.

Mendo nodded. It is not so far to Ta-t'ung-Fu – and the border. He looked up quickly and then added, But I think we should not delay.

There might be fossils.

There are fossils everywhere. Believe me, Father Jacob, there are better places to find old bones.

You can call me Joseph, he muttered and looked at the two of them. Even Tsem's normally cheerful countenance was muted. He felt like a child who had been reprimanded. Tsem swiftly stamped out the fire and clattered their bowls and saucepan roughly as he cleaned and repacked them. There was something disquieting about this, Joseph

thought. Here he was, in what had been the bottom of the sea in the country he had always dreamt of, with his expedition in place, his translator, his transport and his horseman, and yet he had done no work, had hardly started to explore, collect, preserve, dissect. His old impatience was welling up; he burned with excitement.

It will become easier once we cross the border, said Mendo quietly. Now we have little time, but there will be time. And he smiled as he repeated, There will be time.

Am I so easy to read? wondered Joseph.

As if in answer Mendo said, There is a man – and here he hesitated – many call him the White Warlord. He has an army and spies everywhere. The further away we are from people the more easily we can travel. Without feeling that we are being watched.

And are we being watched? asked Joseph as he stiffly climbed aboard his mule.

Mendo shrugged. We will be safer when we are over the border, he repeated.

Joseph was still thinking of himself. He believed that he had perfected the ability to be expressionless. A closed book, he had been called, and that had been one of the politer phrases. If growing more open was a virtue, showing one's flaws and weaknesses was not, he thought.

Further into the crater the land was threaded with streams as if by fine blue veins and in the centre was a swamp. The edges were lime green with moss. Lapwings and plovers rose in a cloud above it as they approached. Joseph took out his gun and fired twice. One of the lapwings came spiralling to the ground, wings outstretched. He urged his mule into a rickety trot and retrieved the bird from the

outskirts of the swamp. The water was vaguely warm as if heated by an underwater spring. He laid the lapwing across his saddle. Mendo and Tsem were waiting for him.

Tsem looked distressed and Mendo's face was blank.

He said, In Mongolia we believe it is bad luck to kill birds. If it is essential, please refrain from shooting them in front of monasteries. We believe that the cycle of life is never-ending. When I die I might return as a bird. Or you may.

Birds have souls?

That is one way of expressing it.

Joseph stroked the soft feathers and felt the damp warmth of the bird's blood stain his fingers.

All animals are God's creatures. We have been given stewardship over living creatures. I am afraid, he sighed, it is a necessary death. It is part of my work. In the future it will help naturalists identify these birds and even learn a little about them. But wanton death, that I disapprove of.

In his heart, he knew that the joy he felt at firing the gun and hitting his target accurately was short-lived, displaced by sadness at killing the creature, and then that emotion was overwhelmed by his fascination: now he was able to see in detail each intricate pattern on its feathers, the fine scaled skin around its eyes. Did the lapwing have a soul?

At least we shall not go hungry, said Mendo, interrupting his reverie, but his smooth face creased with worry. We should make haste.

Joseph looked up at the sky. It was a peculiar colour of white, hard and brittle. A thin wind, sharp as a knife, picked up, gradually growing in strength. The sand started to shift ominously, skating across the ground, rustling round the

mules' hooves. As the wind grew stronger, the sand whipped their faces, grating their skin, boring into their eyes and ears. Joseph's eyes began to water, clogging up his eyelashes with dust and tears. The sandstorm, fast as a river swirling around them, was so thick he could barely see his mule's head. He had to trust completely in the animal and hope that it, somehow, was aware of where the others were and was continuing to follow them. The mule stumbled disconsolately on, head lowered. The cold was incredible. His hands became numb, metal claws welded to the bridle, and he thought the skin on his face might split; his nose began to bleed a little. He hunched himself into his coat as much as was possible and resolved to make sure his scarf and gloves were in easy reach. It was one of the worst moments in the entire journey, including the sea crossing; he felt like cursing the very idea of travelling through such an inhospitable country. The thought that niggled depressingly at the back of his mind was that there might be many more situations like this. God will keep me strong, he hissed through gritted teeth.

The terrain changed: out of the storm loomed giant stacks of stone, rounded columns as if lava had oozed upwards and solidified. Joseph's normal interest in these odd formations was rather more muted than usual. It was only when they left the stone forest and the crater through a pass in the mountains that they were able to escape the worst of the sandstorm. They travelled for another two or three hours before they came to a village and an inn. Sand had blown into every crease in their clothes. Joseph left Mendo and Tsem haggling over the price of eggs and rice and where they might leave the mules and crouched in a

small plot of land behind the inn where he prepared the lapwing's skin. He found that its stomach was full of tiny black beetles.

On the road to the border town of Ta-t'ung-Fu they were overtaken by a small band of men walking alongside a cart. Neither Tsem nor Mendo looked at the Chinese, though they stared viciously at the small party of travellers. They all carried guns and were chewing ferociously, their teeth ground down and rotted to blackened stumps. The man sitting on the back of the cart facing them watched them through narrowed eyes until he and his cargo finally disappeared from view.

Opium, said Mendo, when the men were gone. If you ever doubted your God, this is the place where doubt can grow.

Not only grow, but flourish like some anaemic weed sprouting from dung, taking root and becoming fat as it sucked the nourishment from its filthy origins. Or so Joseph thought as they entered the mire of dirty, tangled alleyways of Ta-t'ung-Fu. Every inn they called at reeked of opium, the air thick with its heavy stench, the inhabitants emaciated, comatose. A woman, whose face was powdered white and lips painted in a perfect ruby bow, attempted to fondle him; he recoiled as much from her touch as her sweetish smell, her thick floral perfume barely masking her unwashed body. The streets stank of human excrement and at every corner lingered the same faint odour – the milky sap of poppies which made him feel nauseous and gave him a headache. Beggars didn't even attempt to pluck at his clothes, they simply crouched in misery, holding out wasted

and dirty hands. The men who strode through the town instead of lying limply in doorways all carried guns and thick curved swords.

Down by the river the air was a little cleaner. A group of women in jewel-like silks were working on the banks and there were tilled fields with the first green shoots sprouting in neat rows. But even this scene proved a false promise of beauty, as if he had witnessed a cloud of iridescent butterflies only to discover that they were feeding on human waste. As they approached the river he saw that it was dark brown and sluggish, swarms of flies hovered above it and he could smell the thin, almost high-pitched odour of sewage; its surface was slick with fetid bubbles that would not burst; breaking through the yellowish scum were the remains of animals and decaying tree branches. The fields were full of opium poppies; the women were filthy, their clothes torn. They were turning heavy stones by themselves – there was not a man to be seen.

What are they doing? asked Joseph.

Grinding bark.

Bark?

Yes, to make flour.

With a sudden guilty pang he thought of how he had abandoned his adopted father Patrick – and for what? To witness the kind of human degradation that was rife in English slums? Patrick, now alone and lonely and old in Bristol, would be measuring the days of his absence by the slow metronomic tick of the clock in the hall.

When Joseph was three years old his father had met a sailor who, for the price of a bottle of stout with a drop of gin on the side, told him a tale of a man who had conquered

Asia, from the Yellow Sea to the Caspian. His name was Genghis Khan. At twenty he became a leader; by the time he was twenty-seven he was called the Universal King. His empire was the greatest known to man. He came from Outer Mongolia, a land where you could walk until you died and you'd never see the shore, where the sky was always blue and the steppes rolled on for ever. The sailor had spread his hands in astonishment.

His father had told this story to Joseph over and over again before he left him. And after he had found the abandoned child, the old priest had nourished his obsession with the land of Genghis Khan; it was Patrick who bought him a book full of dragons and bloodthirsty armies, Genghis wielding a silver sword that spat his enemies' heads to the far corners of the globe; Patrick who taught him to how to read it.

In a land beyond time, in a country far, far away, it began, *a baby was born with a blood clot as big as a knuckle clasped in his tiny fist.*

He could not have expected that land to spirit him away so soon and for so long.

On the outskirts of Ta-t'ung-Fu they found an inn that was not as bad as the others. They tied up the mules in the inner courtyard, and brewed tea and *tsamba* rather than risk the inn's food, such as it might be. For the first time Joseph was able to find out more about Tsem from his translator. Tsem, through Mendo, said that he lived on the steppes north of Pekin where Inner Mongolia began. He led a traditional nomadic existence – he had sheep, cows, horses, a beautiful wife and three children. But his wife was a capable woman and she and his oldest son could manage without him and, as he often came into contact with the Chinese

trade routes, he had earned himself a reputation as a trustworthy hand when extra help was needed. Much of his income now came from working as a horseman, providing horses and caring for the cargoes of salt and stone, furs and spices that passed between Inner Mongolia and China. He talked long into the night, describing his family and became quite maudlin. The three of them were sleeping in one room on straw mattresses, their belongings at their feet and in their beds. When they finally lay down to rest, Joseph realized that the place was crawling with lice; all through the long night, he felt their small bodies creeping intimately across his skin.

Now in the ashen light of early morning the plains stretched ahead: an alien wasteland, sparse, volcanic, hostile, littered with a crop of stones. The ruined wall with its ragged battlements cast dark shadows that crept towards them with spindly claws. He itched all over from the lice and his spine ached dully from the constant jolting. But at least they were free. That morning they had crossed the Chinese border and escaped from the soldiers with their lives, although when he thought of the poor mule they had so callously slaughtered he shuddered. He still felt fear like a hard, crystalline rock inside his chest.

In this lawless land he wondered how many more encounters of this kind they might have. He realized that he had, up until this moment, only thought of the success or failure of his expedition in terms of the number and magnificence of the specimens he returned with, not whether he lived or died. And yet, even as they rode away from the wall and the steppe stretched in front of him, wide open and

limitless as he had always imagined, he felt his flesh creep as if he were being watched. He tried to dismiss the feeling. It was only Mendo and his curious haste to distance himself from the Chinese and his mutterings about the White Warlord that were making him anxious. As the sun rose and the shadows shrank his thoughts became less morbid. Larks began to sing – he noted both the common and shoe-toed variety – the birds rising and falling on the threads of their songs. They passed a herd of *huang-yang*, Mongolian gazelles, which raised their heads on graceful necks, tendons locked tautly, but did not take flight. They had a yellowish tinge to their coats, and blended in beautifully with the sandy soil. It was, though, he thought, as he watched the gazelles, a triumph that he was here at all.

Three years ago, on a late afternoon in early autumn, he'd been dead-heading chocolate cosmos and miniature sunflowers, their petals blood-orange red. Gnats and spider silk glowed in the dying sun and cigar-blue tendrils of smoke drifted through a clump of Panama grass. Out of the corner of his eye he saw John Turndike walking towards him. He was a stoutish man with a large girth, and a penchant for wearing green baize waistcoats with yellow silk cravats. He considered himself a gentleman gardener, which, in reality, consisted of rarely dirtying his hands, an occupation suited to his position as part owner and manager of the Bristol Royal Botanical Gardens. An ambitious man but lacking in the necessary drive, Joseph had known he would find it useful to hire a young, ardent scientist who, moreover, would not leave to start a family. In addition, one need not pay a priest a large salary. He'd started working for Turndike as a

way of staying near Patrick while being close enough to the British Museum to maintain the links that he had forged with the scientists there. But, above all, he loved the work: the feel of the earth beneath his hands, the theoretical nature of planning the planting, the almost ecstatic pleasure he derived from knowing he was moulding God's better beauty.

Turndike looked like a man with something important to say who was reluctant to look as if he did.

How are the zinnias? he asked as he drew near.

They were Turndike's favourite flowers with their clusters of daisy-shaped stamens; the new ones he'd bought were green as envy and Mexican red.

They are faring well, said Joseph. They're about to flower.

And the plans for the Chinese garden?

It's progressing. I will show you, but we need more species. If we knew of someone who was planning an expedition, it would be of help.

Ah, said Turndike and nodded, turning away from him towards the fading embers of George's bonfire.

Joseph continued working, waiting. He moved round the bed and Turndike followed, his hands clasped behind his back, still out of breath.

I have news for you, he said, looking up at last and suppressing a smile. He drew a magnolia-coloured letter from his coat pocket, the red wax seal broken and crumbling.

Joseph's heart suddenly began to beat faster. Turndike slid his finger under the seal and started to unfold the thick, creamy paper. Joseph's obsession with Outer Mongolia, the land of Genghis Khan, his childhood vow that one day he would visit the Mongol king's country, everything he had

strived for now seemed focused on that letter. It would be a small tribute, no, more accurately, a way to show that he, Joseph, was not worthless, a cast-off to be abandoned; that instead he was someone, someone capable of travelling to such an alien country and making his mark upon the scientific world.

When he was thirteen he'd heard that the plant hunter Joseph Dalton Hooker had brought the first specimen over from China, and, even at so young an age, he'd thought that if Hooker could bring such a precious plant to Britain, then one day he too might travel to Outer Mongolia and return with a strange and wondrous cargo.

For years now, he'd plotted and planned, had cultivated extensive links with the British Museum, hoping against hope that one day his constancy would pay dividends. He had learned to decipher what the scientists most desired and sowed small seeds in their minds: how maybe this specimen, that species, could be found in a land without an ocean – maybe even an undiscovered type that might bear their name within its new Latin nomenclature. And as for him, well, there would be many ways in which a young scientist who had run such an unusual expedition might make his name. From China's Forbidden City came rumours of floating beds of orchids; any one of those precious blooms could not be worth more if it had been cast in silver. And any one of those twisted flowers would be recompense for another man. But from the floating city had also come whispers of another flower: a pure, white lily so rare no foreigner had laid eyes upon it. A lily plucked from the vast wastes of Mongolia. To find such a flower, that would indeed be a singular treasure.