

The Priest and the Lily

Sanjida O'Connell

Joseph wasn't sure what to make of what she had said but he was starting to believe that he had been wrong to be suspicious of her.

The three of them rode in a line again, Lena in the middle, talking to herself and making up stories. The wolf ran in front of them all, casting about at the maze of strange scents. They rode over a long ridge, like the spine of some curved sea creature, with a breathtaking view on either side of them – hills, mountains and woods as far as the eye could see – and, in the very distance, at the end of vision where land and sky melded, a shimmering mirage of bone white and deep ochre, the Bad Lands: the edge of the Gobi Desert. They descended the east side of the ridge into trees again – tall pines that were spaced far apart so that muted green light filtered between the branches as if through a stained-glass window. Joseph, staring up at the vaulted sky, felt as if he were in a cathedral. Namuunaa picked a path that wove through the trees and now, as Joseph glimpsed pure white light flashing through the trunks on the far side, he began to smell what could only be the lilies – a tide of scent: white musk and vanilla, a hint of jasmine, gardenias at nightfall, the purity of snow after the first frost, an after odour of salt-rich sea water.

Lena cantered on ahead and Joseph followed, bursting through the trees. In front of them was a narrow, steep-sided gully and it was the light from this place that they had seen glowing through the trees, for every square inch of soil was covered with lilies. It was like a new snow-

fall, heavy and thick and blindingly bright. They were perfect: each one was no less than five feet tall with several blossoms on every elegant stem. The outer edge of the petals was the colour of rich cream, the inner, crisp, clean white. The stamens were wine black with golden pollen and the base of the petals was suffused with a glow like the pink flush of hawthorn blossom. The smell was overpowering. The wolf sneezed and remained at the edge of the wood. He thought of Keats:

*For there the lily, and the musk-rose, sighing,
Are emblems true of hapless lovers dying.*

And he thought of how his name would be assured in all the best salons and in the Royal Society when this flower, his crowning glory, would blossom on English soil.

Joseph turned to Namuunaa in astonishment, but she said, It is our secret, and held her finger up to her lips in case he had not understood.

Who is she? Joseph asked later. She is so different. Where has she come from?

She is not so different. Mendo laughed. You have not looked at anyone else. They are all pale-skinned and some of them have blonde hair. She and Lena are not unique.

And yet, and yet...was she married to a chief? The head of the tribe?

She *is* the head of the tribe, said Mendo. She is descended from a long line of shamans. Her mother lives

here too; she still exercises her powers and heals people. Namuunaa has inherited her skill with animals and herbs.

Yet she has a Buddhist altar in her *ger*.

Welcome to Mongolia, said Mendo impatiently. Everyone believes in both.

How do you know all this? asked Joseph suspiciously. About Namuunaa and her mother?

I do not spend all day looking at flowers, said Mendo with a smile.

It's unique.

Oh, yes, it is special, but then there are many peoples here. Further north, on the border with Siberia, are the Tsaatan who hunt with reindeer. They ride them, Mendo said with admiration.

I meant the lily, said Joseph, holding out one perfect specimen. Now that I have my heart's desire, do you think I will lose my soul?

No, but you are in danger of losing your head.

What nonsense, said Joseph, still staring at the lily.