

APARTMENT 1A

LUCKY

Monday, 3:24 PM

It's said all of Shanghai wept when she died.

It's said over three hundred thousand marched in a funeral procession four miles long that blustery March day in 1935. It's also said that somewhere in the sobbing through several women committed suicide. Their silent screen Goddess, Ruan Lingyu, ending her life with a fistful of sleeping pills at the too-young age of twenty-four spawning a grief only death could calm.

Whether or not myth wrestled with fact to become legend, and some claimed it did, everyone agreed this was a sad full stop to the short sentence of what might have been a glorious career.

A week later, in one of the many squalid shacks that still hug the outskirts of Shanghai, an early birth followed this now iconic end, the young mother's overwrought anguish shocking her into the delivery of a small, sickly daughter. A dangerous unlucky beginning for a dangerously lucky life.

Or at least that's what little Ruan Liu's family said.

Decades had passed since her calamitous arrival on the wild wind of a wet night. Decades since she'd slipped from the unending horror of Shanghai and into the gentle cruelty of Toronto, and Paris, and East Berlin. Lifetimes, really, each with their own name, history, tale to tell, since the eve of her twenty-fourth birthday when seven small sips of steaming tea sealed her fate and brought her end.

Now, safe in elusive anonymity, her life behind her, her ledger running with red, Ruan sat and waited.

Having already said how-dee-doo to the big 8-0, any sane person would think the ire she felt over her cursed beginning would've been tossed on the ash heap of memory long ago. But no. Her cool palms quieted the flush staining her cheeks only to feel the stinging heat of the past return. And with all she'd lost, the one thing that remained, the one touchstone, the still beating heart thump-thump-thumping in her chest, was anger.

And Ground Zero, as it were, happened the day she was born.

Against Chinese custom, her parents had named her after a celebrity. It didn't matter that it was a famously dead one or the emotional wounds of the girl's suicide still bled. They'd branded their babe with the bedeviled woman's memory, tying her forever to the endless anguish of a wandering ghost.

Then they'd watched, certain little Ruan, who'd christened herself Lucky –
the Killer, Lucky the Devil –

at the not-so-tender age of ten, would meet the same fate as the infamous Goddess: a life of struggle and sadness followed by an early exit at twenty-four.

But why think about that now? she wondered as she ignored the ghost *whispering* from the shadows, another cigarette shoved between her lips, the phosphorous flame jumping as she struck the match.

Lucky the Shadow, said the thing snarling from the corner.

Though the words cut like so many knives, she never paid attention to the voice. Her eyes watched the storm fill the cracks on Eidolon Avenue below. She took a breath, steadying the thumping of her heart. Her hands trembled, the flesh withered and drawn, the skin pale. Like moonlight, she thought as thunder rolled. She took another drag, drawing deep, and then deeper still, the smoke swallowed and held until, her lungs screaming, she relinquished it in a reluctant brume of blue.

Her past revisiting her was no surprise. In those spaces tucked along the edge of clarity marched an army of memories. And with time running short, daybreak to dusk a quickening parade of regret and guilt, there was little else for an old recluse to do than tug emotional threads from a century's worth of unraveling quilts.

"Just go away," she said to the ghosts.

They stood near, melding with the matted carpet and cluttered coffee table. Their sightless eyes watching her slow decline, the failing memory and faltering eyesight, they waited. Or sat opposite, legs spread, imbrued arms splayed. Or crouched in the corner hurling half-truths, each accusation showering her like beads of blood to splatter and scar the perfect white of selective memory.

"Drink," Madame Xuo urged from the past. The wealthy woman with the painted face leaning close, smelling of expensive silk and dangerous secrets, the red slash of her lips curling in a macabre grin. "Drink, little –"

Lucky.

Why? she thought. Why didn't I stop at three? She wiped away the tears, the movement impatient and quick.

Like the ghosts sitting opposite, or leaning against the wall, or standing at the window watching their hungry brethren on the avenue below, that day refused to die. "That was the end," she said to the memory blackening the corner. "At twenty-four, that was the end. But who cares?"

You do.

Those ghosts who refused the grave drew closer. The Silent in expensive gold. The Favored with the heavy eyes. The heat, the red. The low table with the brew –

"It can fell armies," she said, her voice small.

as old as China itself –

"And raise kings."

waiting in a large cup, a dragon whipping around the delicate porcelain.

"Just stop."

These random pieces of memory were exhausting. Memories she didn't want to remember. That she couldn't remember. It was useless. Nothing but confusion and dread.

She stopped.

What have you done? it said from the corner.

She remembered.

Secret doors opening onto narrow halls the color of fire. A hidden world of servants crawling, or shuffling, or waddling. Their legs weeping stumps thumping the floor as they whimpered, the tears heavy and wet. Their reaching arms ending at the rounded shoulder with five knotted fingers and five scratching nails. Their greasy heads turning to look, to see, to find, the rounded, smooth skulls too large for their twisted, turned necks. The rancid smell of sick and sweat and blood and fear.

The nightmare steaming in painted porcelain her final bow and the birth of –

The Killer, the mysterious Chinese woman with no name and a numbered Swiss bank account.

The Devil, who would step, soft and quiet, from the darkest of corners to strike without hesitation or regret.

The Shadow, her cold eyes the last thing the innocent, the powerful, the unlucky would see.

How many did you kill? came the snarl.

Her stomach turned, the fetid burn of remorse in her throat.

Do they stand below, three hundred thousand deep?

The cigarette clenched between her teeth, she dragged long and hard, the acrid bite of the smoke little comfort.

March in a procession four miles long?

The Echo annihilated, she stubbed it out on the blackened windowsill, her trembling fingers balling into a fist.

It wasn't arthritis, though her joints ached. And it wasn't Parkinson's. Of that she was sure. She would have given the little she had left to slap either label, any label, really, on the tremor in her hands. Anything other than the one thing she knew it was. The one thing she feared the most.

Which is?

She laughed, the sound more a snort than a guffaw. "Well, it's not fear, you son of a bitch," she said.

No? said the voice from the corner.

"No."

It's time.

For a moment, the room spun. For a moment, she closed her eyes, the horror of the life she'd lived and the death she'd wrought rolling in like a thick, living cloud of unwilling memory. For a moment, just a moment, the army approached and the ghosts won.