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FOUL HEART HUNTSMAN

*THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS
OUR VIOLENT ENDS*

LAST VIOLENT CALL

IMMORTAL LONGINGS

F O U L
L A D Y
F O R T U N E

C H L O E
G O N G



HODDERSCAPE

Time travels in diverse paces with diverse persons.

*I'll tell you who Time ambles withal,
who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal,
and who he stands still withal.*

—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

PROLOGUE

1928

Out in the countryside, it doesn't matter how loud you scream.

The sound travels through the warehouse, echoing once over in the tall ceiling slats, booming through the space and into the dark night. When it escapes, it merges into the howling wind until it is only another part of the storm that rages outside. The soldiers shuffle nervously toward the warehouse entrance, pulling at the heavy door until it slides closed, though the rain falls heavily enough that it has already soaked onto the flooring and stained the concrete in a dark semicircle. The faintest whistle of a train comes from the distance. Despite the infinitesimal chance they will be caught by any soul passing by, their instructions were clear: Guard the perimeter. No one can know what is happening here.

"What is the final verdict?"

"Successful. I think it is successful."

The soldiers are spread out across the warehouse, but two scientists stand around a table at the center. They stare impassively at the scene before them, at the test subject strapped down by thick buckles, forehead beaded with sweat. Another convulsion tears through the subject from head to toe, but their voice has grown hoarse from shrieking, and so their mouth merely pulls wide and soundless this time.

"Then it works."

"It works. We have the first part complete now."

One of the scientists, putting a pen behind their ear, signals to a soldier, who approaches the table to release the buckles in turn: all those on the left, then all those on the right.

The buckles drop, metal clanking to the floor. The subject tries to roll over, but they panic, jerking too hard and tipping off the table instead. It is a terrible sight. The subject lands in a sprawl at the scientists' feet and heaves for breath—heaves and heaves like they cannot fill their lungs properly, and perhaps they never will again.

A hand comes down upon the subject's head. The touch is gentle, almost tender. When the scientist peruses their work, smoothing at the subject's hair, their expression is set with a smile.

"It's all right. You mustn't struggle."

A syringe appears. Under the tall lights, the needle glints once as the plunger goes down and again as the red substance inside disappears right into soft skin.

The pain is immediate: a liquid blaze, overwhelming every nerve nestled in its path. Soon it will reach where it needs, and then it will feel like being unmade.

Outside, the rain pours on. It drips through cracks into the warehouse, puddles growing larger and larger.

The first scientist gives the subject one more affectionate pat. "You are my greatest achievement, and greater still is yet to come. But until then . . ."

The subject cannot keep their eyes open anymore. Weakness turns every limb heavy, each thought in their mind fleeting like ships sighted in fog. The subject wants to say something, scream something, but nothing will form. Then the scientist leans in to whisper into their ear, landing the final strike and piercing the fog as cleanly as a blade:

"Oubliez."

1

SEPTEMBER 1931

The train corridor was quiet except for the rumbling underfoot. Dusk had already fallen, but the windows flashed every three seconds—a pulse of illumination from the lights installed along the tracks and then gone, swallowed by the speed of the train. Elsewhere, the narrow compartments were crowded with light and noise: the soft golden chandeliers and the rattling of silverware against the food trolleys, the clink of a spoon tapping against a teacup and the glowing crystal lamps.

But here in the passageway into first class, there was only the sudden whoosh of the door as Rosalind Lang pushed it open, stepping into the semi-darkness with her heels clicking.

The paintings on the walls stared as she walked by, their beady eyes aglow in the dark. Rosalind clutched the box in her arms, careful to keep her leather gloves delicate around its edges, her elbows held out to either side of her. When she came to a stop outside the third door, she knocked with her shoe, tapping delicately at its base.

A beat passed. For a moment, only the chugging of the train could be heard. Then the softest shuffling came from the other side, and the door swung back, flooding the hallway with new light.

"Good evening," Rosalind said politely. "Is this a good time?"

Mr. Kuznetsov stared at her, his brow furrowing as he made sense of the scene before him. Rosalind had been trying to secure an audience with the Russian merchant for days. She had bunkered

down in Harbin and suffered the frigid temperatures without success, then followed him to Changchun, a city farther south. There, his people had failed to respond to her requests too, and it had almost seemed like a lost cause—that she would have to go about everything the rough way—until she caught wind of his plans to travel by train with a booking in first class, where the compartment rooms were large and the ceilings were low, where hardly anyone was around and sound was muffled by the thick, thick walls.

“I will call my guard—”

“Oh, don’t be foolish.”

Rosalind entered without invitation. The private first-class rooms were wide enough that she could have easily forgotten she was aboard a train . . . if it weren’t for the quivering walls, its papered floral pattern trembling each time the tracks grew rough. She looked around a while longer, eyeing the hatch that went up to the top of the train and the window to the far side of the room, its blinds drawn to block out the rapidly moving night. To the left of the four-poster bed, there was another set of doors that either gave way to a closet or a toilet.

A firm thud summoned Rosalind’s attention back to the merchant as he closed the main compartment door. When he turned around, his eyes darted along her person and then to the box in her hands, but he was not examining her qipao, nor the red flowers clipped onto the fur throw around her shoulders. Though Mr. Kuznetsov tried to be subtle about it, he was concerned about the box in her hands and whether she had brought in a weapon.

Rosalind was already gingerly lifting the lid from the box, presenting the contents inside with a flourish.

“A gift, Mr. Kuznetsov,” she said pleasantly. “From the Scarlet Gang, who have sent me here to make your acquaintance. Might we chat?”

She pushed the box forward with a flourish. It was a small

Chinese vase, blue and white porcelain lying upon a bed of red silk. Adequately expensive. Not expensive enough to verge onto the point of outrage.

Rosalind held her breath until Mr. Kuznetsov reached in and picked it up. He examined the vase by the lights dangling from the ceiling, turning its neck this way and that, admiring the characters carved along the side. After a long while, he grunted what sounded like approval, walked over to a coffee table between two large seats, and set the vase down. There were already two teacups upon the table. An ashtray lay nearby, dusted with a smattering of black.

“The Scarlet Gang,” Mr. Kuznetsov muttered beneath his breath. He folded into one of the chairs, his back stiff against the upholstery. “I have not heard that name for some time now. Please, take a seat.”

Rosalind walked to the other chair, fixing the lid back onto her box and setting the box beside the chair. When she dropped into the seat, she only perched upon its edge, casting a glance once more at the closet doors to her left. The floor jolted.

“I assume you are the same girl who has been harassing my staff.” Mr. Kuznetsov switched from Russian to English. “Janie Mead, yes?”

It had been four years, but Rosalind was still unaccustomed to her alias. Sooner or later she was going to get in trouble for that split-second delay, that blank look in her eyes before she remembered her name was supposed to be Janie Mead, that pause before she lengthened out her French accent when she was speaking English, pretending to be American-raised and one among the many new returnees in the city registered in the Kuomintang’s ranks.

“That’s correct,” Rosalind said evenly. Perhaps she should have made a joke, kicked her feet back and declared that it would be wise to remember her name. The train rumbled over a bump in the tracks and the whole room rocked, but Rosalind said nothing more. She only folded her hands over each other, crinkling the cold press of leather.

Mr. Kuznetsov frowned. The wrinkles in his forehead deepened, as did the crow's feet marking his eyes.

"And you are here for . . . my properties?"

"Correct," Rosalind said again. That was always the easiest way to buy time. Letting them assume what she was there for and going with it rather than spitballing some strange lie and getting caught in it too soon. "I'm sure you have heard that the Scarlets don't deal much in land anymore since we merged with the Nationalists, but this is a special occasion. Manchuria holds vast opportunity."

"It seems rather far from Shanghai for the Scarlets to care." Mr. Kuznetsov leaned forward, peering into the teacups on the table. He noted that one was still half-filled, and so he brought it to his lips, clearing his throat for dryness. "And you seem a little young to be running Scarlet errands."

Rosalind watched him drink. His throat bobbed. Open for attack. Vulnerable. But she did not reach for a weapon. She was not carrying any.

"I am nineteen," Rosalind replied, peeling off her gloves.

"Tell the truth, Miss Mead. That's not your real name, is it?"

Rosalind smiled, setting the gloves down on the table. He was suspicious, of course. Mr. Kuznetsov was no simple Russian mogul with business in Manchuria, but one of the last White Flowers in the country. That fact alone was enough to land on Kuomintang lists, but he was also siphoning money to Communist cells, supporting their war effort in the south. And because the Nationalists needed to snuff out the Communists, needed to break their every source of funding as smoothly as possible, Rosalind had been sent here with orders to . . . put a stop to it.

"Of course it's not my real name," she said lightly. "My real name is Chinese."

"That's not what I mean." Mr. Kuznetsov had his hands resting at his sides now. She wondered if he would try to retrieve a concealed

weapon. "I looked into you after your previous requests to meet. And you look an awful lot like Rosalind Lang."

Rosalind did not flinch. "I shall take that as a compliment. I know you must be tuned out of Shanghai's happenings, but Rosalind Lang has not been seen in years."

If anyone claimed they sighted her, they were surely sighting phantoms—catching remnants of a faded dream, a memory of the vision that Shanghai used to be. Rosalind Lang: raised in Paris before returning to the city and rising in infamy among the best of the nightlife cabaret dancers. Rosalind Lang: a girl whose whereabouts were presently unknown, presumed dead.

"I did hear about that," Mr. Kuznetsov said, leaning in to examine his teacup again. She wondered why he didn't drink out of the second one if he was so thirsty. She wondered why there was a second cup poured to begin with.

Well, she knew.

Mr. Kuznetsov looked up suddenly. "Though"—he continued—"there were rumors from the White Flowers that Rosalind Lang disappeared because of Dimitri Voronin's death."

Rosalind froze. Surprise dropped a pit into her stomach, and a small whoosh of breath escaped her lungs. It was already too late to pretend like she had not been caught unaware, so she let the silence draw out, let the anger roil to life in her bones.

Smug, Mr. Kuznetsov picked up a miniature spoon and tapped it to the edge of the teacup. It sounded far too loud for the room, like a gunshot, like an explosion. Like the explosion that had rocked the city four years ago, which her own cousin Juliette had set, giving her life just to stop Dimitri's reign of terror.

If it weren't for Rosalind, Juliette Cai and Roma Montagov would still be alive. If it weren't for Rosalind's treachery against the Scarlet Gang, Dimitri never would have gained the power he did, and perhaps the White Flowers never would have fallen

apart. Perhaps the Scarlet Gang wouldn't have merged with the Kuomintang and become one with the Nationalists' political party. *Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps*—this was a game that haunted Rosalind late into her eternal nights, a useless exercise of cataloging everything she'd done wrong to end up where she was today.

"You would know all about the White Flowers, wouldn't you?"

The curtain had come down. When Rosalind spoke, her real voice came out, French-accented and sharp.

Mr. Kuznetsov set his spoon down with a grimace. "The funny thing is, the surviving White Flowers also have enduring connections that feed us warnings. And I was long prepared, Miss Lang."

The door to her left swung open. Another man emerged, dressed in a Western suit, a simple dagger in his right hand. Before Rosalind could move, he was in position behind her, a firm grip on her shoulder keeping her in the chair and the dagger positioned against her throat.

"Do you think I would travel without bodyguards?" Mr. Kuznetsov demanded. "Who sent you?"

"I told you already," Rosalind answered. She tested whether she could crane her neck away. There was no chance. The blade was already piercing into her skin. "The Scarlet Gang."

"The blood feud between the Scarlet Gang and the White Flowers ended, Miss Lang. Why would they be sending you?"

"To make nice. Didn't you like my gift?"

Mr. Kuznetsov stood up. He put his hands behind his back, lips thinning in annoyance. "I will give you one last chance. Which party sent you?"

He was trying to feel out the two sides of the civil war currently moving through the country. Gauging whether he had landed on the Nationalist lists or if the Communists were betraying him.

"You're going to kill me anyway," Rosalind said. She felt a bead of blood trickle down her throat. It ran along her collar, then stained

the fabric of her qipao. "Why should I waste time on your questions?"

"Fine." Mr. Kuznetsov nodded to his bodyguard. There was no hesitation before he switched to Russian and said: "Kill her, then. Bystreya, pozhaluysta."

Rosalind braced. She took a breath in, felt the blade whisper a benediction to her skin.

And the bodyguard slashed her throat.

The initial shock was always the worst—that first split second when she could hardly think through the pain. Her hands flew unbidden to her neck to clamp down on the wound. Hot, gushing red spilled through the lines of her fingers and ran down her arms, dripping onto the floor of the train compartment. When she lurched off the chair and fell to her knees, there was a moment of uncertainty, a whisper in her mind telling her that she had cheated death enough and there would be no recovery this time.

Then Rosalind bowed her head and felt the bleeding slow. She felt her skin knitting itself back together, inch by inch by inch. Mr. Kuznetsov was waiting for her to keel over and collapse, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

Instead, she lifted her head and moved her hands away.

Her throat had healed over, still stained with red but looking as if it had never been cut.

Mr. Kuznetsov emitted a strangled noise. His bodyguard, meanwhile, whispered something indecipherable and advanced toward her, but when Rosalind held a hand out, he complied, too stunned to do anything else.

"I suppose I'll tell you now," Rosalind said, slightly breathless. She wiped the blood from her chin and rose onto one foot, then the other. "Haven't you heard of me? The Nationalists need to do a better job of their propaganda."

Now it was dawning on the merchant. She could see it in his eyes, in that expression of disbelief to be witnessing something

so unnatural before him, connecting it with the stories that had started spreading some few years ago.

"Lady Fortune," he whispered.

"Ah." Rosalind finally straightened upright, her lungs recovering. "That's a misnomer. It's just Fortune. *Catch.*" In a smooth motion, she retrieved one of her gloves to clasp the lip of the vase and swipe it off the table. The bodyguard caught the vase quickly when she tossed it at him, likely preparing for some attack, but the vase only landed in his palms softly, nestled like a wild animal made of porcelain.

Fortune, the rumors whispered, was the code name for a Nationalist agent. Not just any agent: an immortal assassin who could not be killed despite multiple attempts, who didn't sleep or age, who stalked the night for her targets and appeared in the guise of a mere girl. Depending on how much flourish was added to the stories, she was specifically a menace for the surviving White Flowers, going after them with a coin in hand. If it landed on heads, they were killed immediately. If it landed on tails, they were given the chance to run, but no target had yet managed to escape her.

"Abominable creature," Mr. Kuznetsov hissed. He lunged back to give her a wide berth between them—or at least he tried. The merchant had yet to take three steps before he crashed abruptly to the floor. His bodyguard stood stock-still in shock, freezing with his hands around the vase.

"Poison, Mr. Kuznetsov," Rosalind explained. "That's not such an abominable way to die, is it?"

His limbs started to twitch. His nervous system was shutting down—arms going soft, legs turning to paper. She took no pleasure in this. She did not treat it like vengeance. But she would be lying if she said she didn't feel righteous with each hit, as if this was her way of sloughing away her sins layer by layer until she had answered entirely for her actions four years ago.

"You . . ." Mr. Kuznetsov heaved in. "You didn't . . . touch the . . . tea. I was . . . I was watching."

"I didn't poison the tea, Mr. Kuznetsov," Rosalind replied. She turned to his bodyguard. "I poisoned the vase that you touched with your bare fingers."

The bodyguard tossed the vase away with a sudden viciousness, smashing it to pieces by the four-poster bed. It was too late; he had been holding on to it for longer than Mr. Kuznetsov. He lunged for the door, perhaps to seek aid, perhaps to wash his hands of the poison, but he, too, crumpled swiftly to the floor before he could make it out.

Rosalind watched it all with a blank stoniness. She had done this many times. The rumors were true: she did sometimes carry around a coin to give the Nationalists fuel for their propaganda. But poison was her weapon of choice, so it didn't matter how far they ran. By the time her targets thought they were being let free, they had already been hit.

"You . . ."

Rosalind walked closer to the merchant, placing her gloves into her pocket.

"Do me a favor," she said dully. "Send Dimitri Voronin my regards when you see him in hell."

Mr. Kuznetsov stopped wheezing, stopped moving. He was dead. Another assignment had been fulfilled, and the Nationalists were one step closer to losing their country to imperialists instead of Communists. Moments later, his bodyguard succumbed too, and the room fell into a hollow silence.

Rosalind pivoted for the sink by the bar, spinning the faucet as far as it would go and rinsing her hands. She splashed the water down her neck next, scrubbing with her fingers. All this blood was her own, yet disgust was bitter on her tongue when she saw the sides of the sink staining while she cleaned, as if specks of a different