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**There Have Always Been Monsters at the Stamford Hotel**

**By Brit E. B. Hvide**

Breathe it in, sweet girl. A man in a white chef’s hat—more hat than man—refills the steamer basket of fat char siew bao, oily dumplings and prawn siu mai. Another lays an array of cucumber and egg salad sandwiches, each uniformly ruled at three centimeters square, and miniature curry puffs on a sterling silver tray. Concentric circles of pandan cakes, sliced strawberries, scones, and clotted cream. Plumes of steam. Snap of white linens. High tea at the Stamford is not so much a meal as a choreographed symphony of heat and color and smell. Clang of symbols.

Is it everything you ever wanted? Good. Now, over there. At that table in the corner. No, don’t wave. Just listen.

“Champagne or Prosecco?” the server asks her table. She’s a surly young Singaporean named Eunice with a plastered smile, unkempt hair, and black hollows for eyes. They really shouldn’t let her work in a place like this—ruins the ambiance—but at least she doesn’t try to make chit-chat.

“Champagne will be lovely. Three all around.” Lottie gestures a long, jeweled finger at the other women ringing the table. She’s an angular collection of bones with a crisp British accent and thick, blonde eyelashes, pale as twin ghosts. Before the server has turned out of earshot she says, “Prosecco? At the Stamford? Who orders Prosecco for tea?”

“You know, I’m not even sure what Prosecco is,” Alexa replies.

“Italian, I think?” Lauren says, her own posh, British accent as fake as her dewy skin and smooth forehead. Time is kind to women like us. Money is kinder.

Lottie’s voice dips low, but not low enough to be a whisper—why would she whisper? She’s not ashamed.—“It’s champagne for people who can’t afford champagne.”

Cascades of laughter. “Stop it!” “Horrible!”

“Well it’s true,” she says, showing her teeth. Of course, she’s right. She hovers a protective hand over the Birkin bag in the seat next to her—ostrich, taupe—as the server returns with the champagne. The other women mimic her as the bottle makes its way around the table, though poor Alexa needn’t have bothered—Louis Vuitton, vintage. Don’t worry. You’ll catch on to these sorts of subtleties soon enough.

Alexa fidgets with her fork. They all cheers.

“Chin chin,” says Lauren. And down they go. Light fizz, tickle through the throat, glaze of sweat on forehead. Dab it away.

None have risen from their seat to partake in the buffet. Lottie calls the server back with a crooked finger—did you forget her name already?—and soon after a thick steak appears before her, oozing bloodily.

“Isn’t Marie joining us?” Alexa asks.

“No.”

Lottie saws at her steak as she explains—an act that is both delicate and violent, like an owl gutting a mouse in flight. Raw strings of meat falling from her lips to the plate below, a Jackson Pollack: Red 13.

“So you see the issue, now,” she says. “Marie’s flouted the rules.”

“Of course,” Lauren choruses. “There simply can’t be another member at this branch. We’ve always been four.”

“Lucky number four.” Alexa laughs, twisting her napkin in her lap. She’s never been subtle about these things.

“Lucky four indeed, and now a fifth! Without even consulting us. It’s like she’s lost her mind. Gone rogue! How does she think we’re going to explain this to the board? And, you know, I only found out because Marguerite called my house.

I thought we were going over things for the home tour, but no, she came right out and asked me about it. ‘Who’s Jackie?’ and ‘What’s she doing?’ and ‘Did the board approve of her making?’ and all I could do was stammer. I managed to throw her off and said I’d get back to her but this is totally unacceptable. If they catch on this wasn’t planned, we may have our membership revoked.”

Over the course of their second drink, the crowd thins out around their table, a protective bubble, a circle of salt. The Maitre-di, an elderly man with a tightly lined face and an upper-class Singaporean accent, has been with the Stamford long enough to know their type—our type. He pulls over the server and whispers something in her ear. She nods. Brings them another round of champagnes; “On the house.”

“Oh you didn’t have to, that’s so sweet. Thank you,” Lottie says, all mock surprise because—take note—even the very rich don’t forget their manners. “Let old Victor know that we recognize his offering.”

“Tell him we’ll let him live as long as these keep coming,” Lauren adds with a wink. Raucous laughter. “So bad!” “You’ll give him a heart attack.”

The server hurries away. Eunice. That’s her name, by the way. Usually we wouldn’t care, but she’s doing something strange with her hands as she walks from the table. Counting. An old habit she reverts to when she’s nervous, 一, 二, 三, 四. It’s not meditation, just deep breathing. A version of something her mother taught her as a child to keep her calm before exams: deep breath in, 一, deep breath out, 二, deep breath in, 三, deep breath out, 四.

But she’s not taking an exam.

Eunice scurries into the kitchen, out of sight.

“You’re not proposing… no,” says Alexa, foolish, nervous woman that she is. She doesn’t look it, but she’s younger than them. Only 74. “And Marie too? We can’t. That’s savage!”

“Then you’ll tell the board about our little mistake? About Jackie?” Lottie’s voice is full with scorn accumulated over centuries. Alexa shrinks back.

Lauren speaks. “It’s the only way. Kill them now before anyone else finds out. The city can’t sustain five of us. The crime rate’s too low. People would catch on.”

“Can’t we send Jackie to some third world slum? Let her feed on the poor. There’s always another serial killer popping up in Russia isn’t there? I don’t think they even keep track,” Alexa says, putting air quotes around the word “serial killer.” How very American of her. Sigh. At least she’s trying.

“The club would find out.”

“What if another group took her in…”

“No.”

“Maybe Jackie could…”

“Shut. Up. Alexa.”

Lauren gasps. She’s never heard Lottie swear. Not in hundreds of years. Swearing is for lesser creatures, the uneducated ones, the provincial riffraff, the Bugis men and night terrors.

“I smell something.”

The air is still. You notice it too because of course you do, but everyone else seems to freeze—a still life, your pulsing adrenaline rendering everything in sharp pointillism: Seraut, The Vampires. The salt circle, you realize. The bubble. Not protection. A target.

It’s Eunice, a jewel encrusted dagger in her hand. The dagger looks out of place with her wrinkled uniform, but matches the flashing darkness in her eyes perfectly—14th century, Khmer Empire, The Vengeance Blade. I’ve only seen it a few times before.

It takes you a second, but as you look around, you remember what Eunice was doing earlier. Counting. Counting them. Counting you?

Death strikes the three women in a flash of steel. 一, 二, 三. Red blood on ostrich skin, its nubbly flesh ruined—what a shame to waste something so beautiful. You know, the wait is at least six months for another? We’ll have to get you on the list soon.

But you remember the server counting a fourth. You remember it distinctly. Lucky number four. 死.

Eunice glances at you, wiping her dagger on a white napkin. You want to reach a hand back to finger the twin puncture wounds at the nape of your neck—thank god chokers are so fashionable this season—but don’t. Instead you stay frozen, stay hidden. You clutch your glass, careful not to let the bangles on your arm clatter together—Van Cleef and Arpel. Hope she doesn’t smell the death in your lungs. The blood in your hair.

Isn’t it exciting, Jackie? Beauty and ugliness; hatred and blood and Italian leather. Doesn’t it make you feel alive? It’s the only thing that does it for me anymore. I wave as Eunice walks away. She’s not my favorite, but we have an agreement of sorts.

Oh… Sweet girl, don’t cry. You chose this life, remember? A little blood for a little gold, just like the colonists, just like your ancestors in their itchy woolens and creaking boats, their malaria and dengue fever and food poisoning, their wild animal bites and poisoned wounds—they died for this too. You didn’t think our prey would roll over and take it, did you, Jackie? This is the price of tea at the Stamford Hotel.