

Excerpt:

Never give up working to defeat your enemy. Master his fate. Exploit his unpreparedness and attack him when he is unaware.

Art of War, Sunzi (ca. 544—496 BC)

Stir the water to catch the fish – benefit by creating chaos

Thirty Six Stratagems, collection of popular ancient Chinese proverbs on outwitting your enemies. First mentioned in Southern Qi dynasties (479-502 AD)

So long as my body is still here, so will be my love for you.

Li Shangyin (ca 813-858), Tang dynasty poet

Prologue

It all happened because I was considered perfect material to be a spy – beautiful, smart, and most important, an orphan.

I am well aware of what people call me behind my back:

Skeleton Woman!

Actually, this does not bother me a bit. Let others feel spite, jealousy, hatred for me. At times I feel a secretive, ticklish glee.

I am a woman who can turn men into skeletons under my touch, though it was light as a petal and as tender as silk.

My name is Camilla. At nineteen, I'd already become the lead singer at Shanghai's most popular and elegant Bright Moon Nightclub. It was through powerful connections that I got this position at my young age, with the bonus of being the object of desire of many men, and

the jealousy and hatred of countless women. And then there were Shadow and Rainbow Chang.

They were the *other* skeleton women.

But unlike me, Rainbow and Shadow were not nightclub singers. Rainbow, Shanghai's most popular gossip columnist, made her fortune by digging up secrets and dirt for the *Leisure News*. Though she had a woman's name, she exuded the charm of both sexes as she rode the waves of in-between. Short haircut, silk tie and outrageously expensive and impeccably tailored suits contrasted with white-powdered face, rouged cheeks, pink lips, silvery-pink eye shadow, and long, lush, artificial lashes. Rainbow neither dressed like a woman, nor looked like a man. Exposing everyone else's secrets in her column, for herself she chose camouflage, in sex as well as in life. But why? It was yet to be found out.

If Rainbow Chang presented herself as mysterious, then Shadow was absolutely unfathomable. Everything about her was staged like a magician's stunning feats – jumping into thin air; escaping from locked chains under water; cutting a volunteer into multiple pieces, then restoring her in seconds. Carried out in a skimpy dress, enhanced by snake-slick movements, with an expressionless, stunningly beautiful face. Who was she? I was dying to find out.

We used artist's names; no one knew our real ones. With our own agendas, we were the three most pungent ingredients in this boiling cauldron called Shanghai. Men went crazy for a taste of us, while women sought our elusive recipe.

People admired or hated me as the ultimate femme fatale. But I myself had no idea who I was. I was a nobody, literally. An orphan, I was adopted by a man and his gang for their own purposes. Later I learned that the man was Big Brother Wang and his gang the Red Demons. Under their constant watching and fussing over me, and strict discipline, by fourteen I'd grown up to be a water-melon-seed-faced, full-bosomed, slim-waisted, long-legged beauty, possessing everything desired by men and envied by women.

Of course I had not been raised and disciplined just to be a refined, well-mannered lady to be married off to the son of a rich family. Instead I was groomed to lure Master Lung,

head of Flying Dragon Gang. I had quickly figured out that I'd been given a roof over my head, fancy clothes to wear, and gourmet food to consume for a reason.

I was raised and trained to be a spy.

I was to be the Red Demon Gang's secret weapon in a meticulous plan to topple its bitterest rival the Flying Dragons. For nineteen thirties Shanghai was the battleground for relentless wars among the triads, a war in which I was to be a pawn.

And what a life that was.

Having been scheming for most of my nineteen years in this dusty world, I'd already turned a few men and women into skeletons dangling in hell – literally or otherwise. I didn't feel any guilt. This was the only job, only life I knew.

This is how they trained me – to have no attachment, no feelings, no conscience. I was the woman who would, when needed, reduce any men and women to a skeleton at the blink of my mascaraed eye.

Until the day I met Master Lung's son Jinying, and his bodyguard Gao. But that was not part of the Red Demons' plan for me....

Chapter One The Naked Girl Jumping Toward Eternity

Against the sapphire blue night sky, a young woman was pacing along a ledge atop the Shanghai Custom House tower like a circus girl treading a tight rope.

Except she was stark naked.

The Shanghainese say nothing will surprise them, that they've seen it all. But now they were surprised. No one watching had ever seen anything like this.

Not even my new lover, Master Lung, head of the most powerful black society in Shanghai, the Flying Dragons, nor his slew of bodyguards scattered among the crowd, alert for danger, and shoving anyone who seemed about to get too close to their boss.

Lung's and my eyes had stopped staring licentiously into each other's, and were directed skyward -- to the clock tower of the Customs House with its fake European styling, far above the Bund and the Huangpu River.

The crowd held its collective breath. Their probing, lascivious eyes glued to the muscular, round-bosomed naked body above, expecting at any moment she would jump to her death. I imagined the onlookers agitated thoughts:

Is she really going to jump?

Why doesn't she want to live?

Jump! I want splashing blood, crashing flesh, crackling bones!

What a pity, a beautiful girl soon to turn into a puddle of vomit.

Tonight the air was balmy, but the naked girl playing the tug-of-war with death hundreds of feet above chilled us all, both those appalled by an innocent girl about to plunge to her death and those perverts who secretly thirst for the morbid sights of splattered blood and scattered human pieces. I bit my lip, my hand tightly clutching Master Lung's arm while my heart pounded like a tribal drum trying to scare away demons.

Not that a smashed face and broken limbs would have bothered me much. For I had been trained since my teens to wipe away all human emotions. I had been molded for one purpose and one purpose only: to be a spy. Though, ironically, I earned my living singing sentimental songs in a nightclub.

As I continued to watch, the two hands of the clock merged into a single one pointing north, setting off the imitation Westminster Chimes to suddenly flood us with an eerily cheerful melody. But then, in the midst of the clear sky, thunder cracked and lightning flashed....

And the naked figure jumped!

The onlookers gasped collectively, their expressions ranging from horror, to sorrow, to unabashed thrill....

All heads dropped down to gape – some of the women through cracks between their

many-ringed, red-nailed fingers. A pause, then another shock. There was no body. Only a pair of red high heels in the middle of a pool of blood!

“What happened?! Where is she?!” A collective question burst in the night air.

A group of policemen arrived to inspect the scene, accompanied by a few reporters snapping pictures and asking dazed onlookers questions no one could answer.

Nothing was happening now, except for an excited buzz from the crowd. Master Lung gave my elbow a tug. “Let’s go, Camilla.”

“You don’t want to find out where she’s gone?”

“She’s probably dead.”

“Then where’s the body?”

“Maybe you’ll find out in tomorrow’s *Leisure News*. Their gossip columnist Rainbow Chang knows everything.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I’ve seen it all.”

Of course. Master Lung had seen it all – he headed *the* most powerful black society in Shanghai. Not only had he seen it all, he’d also performed it all – shooting, stabbing, strangling, poisoning, decapitating, and other acts I’d rather not imagine. And that’s only ways to kill. Before the final moment there were tortures: beating, electric shocks, finger crushing, eye gauging, flesh slicing, tiger feeding, stuffing inside a snake-filled cage, nailing inside a coffin in a ghost infested cemetery....

As the onlookers began to disperse, a young couple ogled us, probably recognizing me as the famous singer. Immediately one of Lung’s bodyguards approached them and lifted his jacket to show his gun. The two ran off as if they’d been accosted by the ghost of the naked girl who’d just jumped. Just then Master Lung’s driver pulled up. We climbed into the huge black car and went back to his mansion on Junfu Lane.

Soon I was sipping his wine next to him on the sofa, the question still swirling in my mind: Who was this beautiful but mysterious jump-and-disappear girl? My spy’s training to dig out secrets just wouldn’t leave me alone.

Lung cast me a stern look. “Camilla, what’s inside your head now?”

I stared at the scar which divided his right brow into two lizard-like halves, "Master Lung, the girl who jumped, what happened?"

"You're still thinking of her?" He smirked. "Why are you so curious?" Lung stuck his fat cigar inside his thin mouth and puffed, making a heavy, asthmatic sound.

"Master Lung, and you're not?"

He studied me with his protruding eyes set into his monkey face. "I have much more serious matters on my mind, not trivialities like this."

Those serious matters, was what I, the spy from his rival gang the Red Demons, were trying to find out.

But I asked, "A girl jumping off a roof is trivial to you?"

"Yes!" He took a big gulp of his expensive whisky, then slammed the glass down with an intimidating thud. "Unless that girl is you, my little pretty. So, will you stop your little thinking and come to bed now?"

Early next morning, I left Master Lung's house and snatched up a copy of *Leisure News* from a street urchin. Standing on the sidewalk, I impatiently flipped through the pages until I saw the big headlines:

Naked Girl Jumping to Her Disappearance

Last night at the Customs House along the Bund, the crowd was startled to see a young, naked woman pace on the ledge of the clock tower and then jump. But strangely, no body was found, only splattered blood and a pair of red high heels. The police are investigating this mysterious, inexplicable incident.

Some say this was an attempted kidnapping, but that she escaped. No one can explain where she went. Others say she killed herself – but no body.

But now more and more are saying that the girl was in fact a ghost. They say that before the Customs House was built, that same spot was a cemetery where the bodies of women raped and murdered were dumped by black society members.

The police claim they are working hard to solve this case to appease peoples' fear of a ghost's vengeance.

Meanwhile, girls from my Pink Skeleton Empire and I have our own sources.

More to follow....

Rainbow Chang

After I finished the article, I almost burst out laughing. It was certainly strange. But a ghost?

Naked Girl was definitely not a spirit, but a spirited human.

That was worse than if she'd been a ghost because now there was a woman who could outdo me in getting headlines from Rainbow Chang. I was used to being the center of attention as the most celebrated singer in Shanghai's most famous Bright Moon Nightclub. Yet none of my patrons or customers knew anything about me besides my singing, my body, and my name Camilla – which was fake anyway. For since my early teens, I'd been trained to be in the public eye, but keep my real intentions secret.

Now my place in society was under challenge. Someone had stepped into my well-guarded territory. For I didn't buy it that she was dead. She was somewhere and I had to find out where, and how she'd pulled it off. Even though I had no idea who this girl was, I knew she was my enemy.

Thus thinking, in the chilly air, it was time to hurry back to Lung's house to warm his bed.