

THE TOMB OF RAMSES VIII

by

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Imperial Grand Hotel, Macau

The acrid smoke from three cigars hovered above the baccarat table. One man savored no tobacco but held a glass of absinth with a single sphere of ice. His drink never seemed to empty, and, if any of the other four players were asked, they likely could not recall his sipping once of the green spirit.

“Player wins,” the croupier announced in Chinese. She wore a crisp white shirt with a black tie.

Among the players—two women and three men—one of each muttered in loss, while the others collected their winnings.

“Next bet.” The croupier made a sweeping gesture to the table.

Dressed in a tapering, slim-fitting suit of Italian design in dark blue, the absinth-clutching man slid chips valuing forty thousand yuan to the “Player” betting area of the table.

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The woman to his right shifted in her seat to glance at the man. She drew on her Mayan Sicar, savoring the unique flavor profile of the cigar that was as much delicacy as cultural antiquity, and blew the smoke into the man's face.

The gray fume swirled about his wan, angular, clean-shaven countenance, and left a smile upon his pale lips in its passing. Without so much as a symbolic cough, the man said in fluent Chinese, "Such childishness, Miss...?"

The woman, wearing a diamond-studded choker above a princess necklace set with cabochon rubies, returned his condescending smile with apricot lips and answered in French, "You always bet on 'Player.'" Beneath the smoke, she smelled of lavender and rose.

The man matched her language in his response. "I always bet on myself." He extended his thin-fingered hand. "I am Lord Ruthven."

The woman turned away and slid a matching pile of chips to "Dealer."

The croupier drew an ace and a three of clubs—

"If everyone will kindly remain seated and leave your hands visible on the table." The man, wearing a functional gray suit, spoke English with a Scottish accent.

Accompanying the man were two stiff-backed officers, whose badges depicted five stars above the Tiananmen Gate, within a circle of grain ears, all upon a shield above pine branches.

The man's gaze moved over the five players and came to rest on Lord Ruthven.

Ruthven met his look with a gray-eyed stare. In an almost bored tone, he said, "Investigator Barclay."

"Lord Ruthven." The Scot ran a hand through his close-cropped red hair. "I would like to ask you some questions."

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Ruthven tilted his head in a show of amusement and answered in flawless English, “Interpol has no jurisdiction here.”

“That is why I have the officers of the Public Security Police with me.” The investigator’s tone was crisp, formal. “What are you afraid of, Lord Ruthven?”

Ruthven smiled and spread his hands, palms up, indicating that he had nothing to hide. “I am flattered you would come all this way, Investigator.” He delivered the comment with no hint of mocking.

“I wouldn’t be if I were you.” Before Ruthven could offer a rejoinder, Investigator Barclay continued, “Tell me, where were you between the hours of midnight and two a.m.?”

“Oh, what has happened?” Ruthven asked, his expression opening to match the curiosity in his tone.

“I suspect you know very well what happened. *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Great Ladies* by the great Chinese painter Gu Kaishi, which was on temporary display at the casino, went missing. Now, where were you between twelve and two?”

Ruthven nodded solemnly. “Yes, I knew the painting was on display, and I even had occasion to view it—a singular work, indeed—but I was here nearly all evening, as everyone here can attest.” He picked up his full glass of absinth.

“Nearly—” Investigator Barclay began.

Ruthven continued, “I do recall returning to my room, briefly, as I’m sure the security cameras will confirm, but I did not go anywhere else, and I certainly was nowhere near that masterful piece during that time.”

The investigator stared at Ruthven for some time as if engaged in some silent contest. Finally, he exhaled, and his shoulders sagged, “I did check those cameras. But regardless of what

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they show—or didn't show—we are onto you, and it is only a matter of time. I trust you will not mind if we search your room, Lord Ruthven?"

Ruthven set down his unsipped glass. "Of course. However, Investigator, I will expect an official apology when your search comes up empty."