**The Jade Monkey Laughs**

She’s not sure which is her favourite. Sometimes it’s the monkey. The face carved with such detail that she imagines the animal is watching her as she cleans the room. Making sure that she dusts thoroughly. That she doesn’t miss anything. Other times it’s the rooster, which is her sign. He has an erect tail with beautifully detailed feathers. This is not some humble farmyard bird; this is a proud creature confident of its place in the world. She can almost hear it crow. An authoritative call making sure that everyone knows who’s in charge.

They sit in a glass cabinet in the lawyer’s study. Twelve jade animals corresponding to the zodiac. They’ve been there longer than she has worked for Senhor Almeida and that’s a long time. So long that she has to sit down for a moment to stop and work it out. She’s seventy-three this year so that makes it…what, fifty-five? No, fifty-six years since she left Lam Fung’s house and came to work for the Almeida family, one of Macau’s oldest. Fifty-six years. She wonders where the time has gone. She would have had grandchildren by now, great-grandchildren even, if things had worked out differently. Fifty-six years soon to come to an end. It was ten years before she was even allowed in this room. She was only a kitchen maid then and it wasn’t until the housekeeper died that she started coming into this inner sanctum. Even then she didn’t have a key to the cabinet.

She had to steal that.

Six o’clock and the front door opens. Senhor Almeida comes home from his chambers at exactly the same time every day. It doesn’t matter if it’s summer when the oppressive air is full and heavy, or whether the gutters and drains fill and threaten to overwhelm the streets. At six o’clock she is standing by the door waiting for him. She takes his briefcase from the young assistant who helps him home these days, and – if he is carrying one – his umbrella. Sometimes she takes Senhor Almeida’s arm and guides him into the entrance hall. *Good evening, sir* – she will say and he will reply in kind. He will not ask about her day. He no longer asks about her day the way he did once. When things were different. She will bring his dinner at seven and then, after he has eaten, Senhor Almeida will retire to his study and she will not see him again until morning.

The snake was the first one that she stole - carved from a jade disc so that it coiled in on itself. She didn’t mean to steal it, that’s what she tells herself, not at first anyway. She was just curious. It seemed harmless when she took the key from the desk and removed the delicate jade carving from the cabinet. She turned the snake over in her hand, admiring the intricate craftsmanship. She wondered how old it was? That was all she wanted to know when she took it to the antiques dealer on the Rua de Santo Antonio.

‘Where did you get this from?’ the dealer asked when he had finished examining the snake with his eyeglass.

‘From my mother.’ She didn’t know why she lied.

The dealer moved to the door and turned a sign from open to closed.

‘It’s lucky you came to me and not to somebody less honest. Do you have any idea of how old this is?’

‘No.’

‘This is late Ming. Four hundred years old. Give or take a few decades.’

She was silent as she took this in. There was of course another question that she had to ask. He answered before she spoke.

‘You want to know what this is worth? I couldn’t say, I could only guess, but collectors would pay a lot.’

Later, with the snake safely returned to its place in the cabinet, she looked at the jade animals with renewed interest.